Grief, Loss, and Bereavement

Most people will experience loss at some point in their lives. Grief is a reaction to any form of loss. Bereavement is a type of grief involving the death of a loved one.

Bereavement and grief encompass a range of feelings from deep sadness to anger. The process of adapting to a significant loss can vary dramatically from one person to another. It often depends on a person’s background, beliefs, and relationship to what was lost.

GRIEVING THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIORS

Grief is not limited to feelings of sadness. It can also involve guilt, yearning, anger, and regret. Emotions are often surprising in their strength or mildness. They can also be confusing. One person may find themselves grieving a painful relationship. Another may mourn a loved one who died from cancer and yet feel relief that the person is no longer suffering.

People in grief can bounce between different thoughts as they make sense of their loss. Thoughts can range from soothing (“She had a good life.”) to troubling (“It wasn’t her time.”). People may assign themselves varying levels of responsibility, from “There was nothing I could have done,” to “It’s all my fault.”

Grieving behaviors also have a wide range. Some people find comfort in sharing their feelings among company. Other people may prefer to be alone with their feelings, engaging in silent activities like exercising or writing.

The different feelings, thoughts, and behaviors people express during grief can be categorized into two main styles: instrumental and intuitive. Most people display a blend of these two styles of grieving:

Instrumental grieving has a focus primarily on problem-solving tasks. This style involves controlling or minimizing emotional [expression.Intuitive](http://expression.Intuitive) grieving is based on a heightened emotional experience. This style involves sharing feelings, exploring the lost relationship, and considering mortality.

No one way of grieving is better than any other. Some people are more emotional and dive into their feelings. Others are stoic and may seek distraction from dwelling on an unchangeable fact of living. Every individual has unique needs when coping with loss.

MODELS OF GRIEF

Grief can vary between individuals. However, there are still global trends in how people cope with loss. Psychologists and researchers have outlined various models of grief. Some of the most familiar models include the five stages of grief, the four tasks of mourning, and the dual process model.

Five Stages of Grief

In 1969, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified five linear stages of grief:

Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance.f

Kubler-Ross originally developed this model to illustrate the process of bereavement. Yet she eventually adapted the model to account for any type of grief. Kubler-Ross noted that everyone experiences at least two of the five stages of grief. She acknowledged that some people may revisit certain stages over many years or throughout life.

Four Benefits of Mourning

Psychologist J. W. Worden also created a stage-based model for coping with the death of a loved one. He divided the bereavement process into four tasks:

-To accept the reality of the loss.  
-To work through the pain of grief.  
-To adjust to life without the deceased.  
-To maintain a connection to the deceased while moving on with life.

THE PROCESS OF RECOVERING FROM GRIEF

Everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time. Some people recover from grief and resume normal activities within six months, though they continue to feel moments of sadness. Others may feel better after about a year.

Sometimes people grieve for years without seeming to find even temporary relief. Grief can be complicated by other conditions, most notably depression. The person’s level of dependency on the departed can also cause complications.

The grieving process often involves many difficult and complicated emotions. Yet joy, contentment, and humor do not have to be absent during this difficult time. Self-care, recreation, and social support can be vital to the recovery. Feeling occasional happiness does not mean a person is done mourning.

Grieving the loss of a loved one be a difficult process, whether the loss is due to death, a breakup, or other circumstance. One of the hardest challenges is adjusting to the new reality of living in the absence of the loved one. Adjusting may require a person to develop a new daily routine or to rethink their plans for the future. While creating a new life, a person may adopt a new sense of identity.

BEREAVEMENT AND CULTURE

Certain aspects of grief are virtually universal. Most cultures have rituals of mourning after a death. Crying is common, regardless of a person’s origins. However, the bereavement process can vary dramatically depending on one’s culture. Cultural values may affect a person’s:

Attitude toward death: Many Western cultures display death-denying traits. Death is often depicted as something to fight or resist. Eastern cultures, meanwhile, tend to characterize death to be a part of life. Death is often considered more of a transition than an end. Research suggests people in death-denying cultures tend to have more anxiety around death than people in death-accepting [cultures.Remembrance](http://cultures.Remembrance) of the deceased: Some cultures, such as the Hopi or Achuar peoples, grieve by attempting to forget as much of the deceased as possible. It may be taboo for loved ones to say the person’s name or to touch their belongings. Rituals are done to sever connections with the dead. Other cultures mourn by sharing memories of the deceased. People in the Akan region of Ghana often hold elaborate funerals which may cost a full year’s income. The deceased are typically placed in “fantasy coffins” personalized with symbols of their life. Emotional Displays: Social norms can differ regarding how much emotion is “appropriate” to show. A 1990 study compared bereavement norms in two Muslim societies. Mourners in Egypt may be encouraged to grieve for an extended period of time. A person might display their love for the deceased through displays of unrestrained emotion. Meanwhile, Balinese culture tends to pathologize overt sorrow. People are encouraged to put on a happy face in front of others and to cut ties with the deceased.

When analyzing grieving behaviors, context matters as much as the symptoms themselves. Bereavement trends which are typical in one culture may be stigmatized in another. When working with individuals in grief, therapists may need to keep cultural influences in mind.

DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

Disenfranchised grief occurs when a person’s mourning is restricted in some way. Society may stigmatize a person’s mourning process or refuse to acknowledge their loss. Grief may be disenfranchised for several reasons:

-Society devalues the loss. The loss of a pet often garners less sympathy than the loss of a human relative. Others may say “it was just an animal” and accuse the person of being too emotional. Yet research shows the mourning period for a pet is about the same length as for a human family member.

-The loss is ambiguous. An adopted child may grieve the loss of their birth parents, even if said adults are alive. If a loved one has late-stage dementia, family members may feel as if the person they knew is gone.

-Society stigmatizes the circumstances of the loss. Pregnancy-related loss is often considered taboo. Women who undergo a miscarriage may feel guilt and shame. They may avoid telling others about the loss to avoid being blamed.

-Society doesn’t recognize the person’s relationship to the deceased. A co-worker or friend may mourn a person, but they will likely receive less support than a family member. The same is true for ex-spouses, even though they used to be family. In societies with systemic homophobia, same-sex partners may also have disenfranchised grief.

-Others do not consider the person capable of grief. When young children experience loss, adults may misinterpret signs of bereavement. They may believe the child is not capable of understanding the loss or have prolonged feelings about it. People who have cognitive impairments or intellecutal disabilities may also have disenfranchised grief.

Disenfranchised grief can interfere with the bereavement process. If society does not recognize a loss, the person may have trouble accepting it themselves. They may try to repress or deny their emotions. Shame and secrecy can make the symptoms of grief more severe.

Social support is often vital to recovery. A community can provide emotional and financial aid when people are vulnerable. Mourning rituals can offer closure. If a person is forced to grieve alone, they may have a delayed recovery.

If you have lost someone or something precious, you may wish to find a therapist. Therapy can help with any sort of loss, whether society validates the grief or not. Therapy is an opportunity to explore your feelings and memories without judgment. No loss is too big or too small to warrant support. You do not have to endure your grief alone.