

Managing Emotional Wellness During Grief and Loss

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Abstract

We are presently facing one of the biggest challenges in our lives in the form of the COVID-19 Pandemic. As we face losses of several kinds, it is easy to get stuck in grief and pulled down into pain, anger, bitterness, and denial. However, if we can manage to find meaning in the most senseless loss, we “can do more than get unstuck” (Kessler, 2019). The article shares five insights that can help nurture emotional wellness at the time of grief and loss.

Keywords: Emotional Wellness, Grief and Loss

Introduction

There is a tendency to view grief as something ‘to be fixed,’ implying that the person feeling grief is somehow ‘broken’ or has a mental health issue that needs to be rectified. However, grief is a natural process and is a part of everyone’s life. Over the past year, the world faced a global pandemic COVID-19 which has left a devastating mark in the lives of people around the world. The human mind and body were not prepared to face the level of grief and cumulative loss we presently face.

Loss can be experienced in different forms like losing loved ones, connections, the safety of our workspace, the fun of going to universities and schools, interacting with friends, and so on. The COVID context of dying presents a situation of converging factors that greatly aggravate the possibility of sustained and confounding grief in its aftermath (Menzies, Neimeyer, & Menzies, 2020). Everyone worldwide is

affected by the Pandemic including the healthcare workers, frontline workers- providers, and receivers of physical and mental health care. Nobody was prepared for the pandemic situation. We are predominantly a grief-illiterate society and a culture that doesn't know how to grieve (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). COVID-19 presents a unique challenge of putting everyone under a constant reminder of death (Newton-John, Chambers, Menzies, & Menzies, 2020). Social isolation protocols limit both available social support and meaningful engagement of family members (Lee & Neimeyer, 2020), which can be stressful to make matters even more difficult. Emotional numbness can be a symptom of severe stress and we can experience the inability to experience emotions or empathy. This psychological numbness can be interpreted as not being sensitive to the loss of our loved ones. However, we also know that we are not used to the kind of losses we are facing now and are unprepared for multiple ongoing losses. The following reflects some of the most common questions we face as we experience loss based predominantly on the work of grief educators like David Kessler (2019) and Robert Neimeyer (2017).

Is there a Time to Stop Grieving?

This depends on the expectation of the person and the society. It is better not to give in to the expectation of grieving for a particular period and then bouncing out of grief. Everyone goes through the grief process differently and it is a subjective experience. There are different ways of grieving loss which can depend on several factors. The nature of COVID affecting people leading to demise has a certain improbability about it. For instance, people with underlying medical conditions or comorbid conditions are likely to succumb to the virus (Sanyaolu et al., 2020). And, the inability to make sense of loss through unexpected, sudden, or violent deaths differentiates those whose losses are more anticipated in the context of serious or terminal illness (Currier, Holland, Coleman, & Neimeyer, 2008). Therefore, the nature of grief is tied to the nature of our relationships and the nature of our losses and there is no particular formula for how long one must grieve. As long as we love the person, we will grieve the loss of the person.

Grieving Process is Unique

There are various models of grief (Five Stages of Grief- Kübler-Ross, 1969; Dual-Process Model of Grieving- Stroebe & Schut, 1999) which depict grief in stages, but not everyone goes through the steps the same

way. At times, one may not go through the stages at all. Moreover, one can't completely understand what an individual is feeling when they are grieving. Therefore common responses such as "you will get over this", or "be strong and courageous" are unlikely to help.

Historically, the stage theory ascribed to Kübler-Ross (1969) - shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance- was documented in her observations of the changes she observed among dying patients. Later Kübler-Ross herself extended the application of the stages to the situation of a bereaved person. However, there was widespread criticism and attention to adopting the stages by mental health professionals and healthcare workers, citing a lack of solid evidence. Neimeyer (2000) commented on the concerns about using such 'suspiciously simplistic models' by researchers and grief counselors. There was a general caution about taking grief as a "linear process with concrete boundaries but, rather, a composite of overlapping, fluid phases that vary from person to person" (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993).

Kessler (2019) upon reflection of his work with Kübler-Ross and reflection of his experience through grief, reflected that acceptance of the loss in Kübler-Ross's stages did not have the finality to the process of grief that he expected. He proposed a sixth, profound, crucial and ongoing process of grief called 'meaning' which allows the person "to transform grief into something else, something rich and fulfilling" (Kessler, 2019). Making meaning of grief implied reflecting on what the loss meant to the person rather than thinking about what they could have done better. Those who can find meaning in the grief that they are going through are able to have an easier time grieving than those who don't. Meaning can take many forms:

"finding gratitude for the time they had with loved ones, or finding ways to commemorate and honour loved ones, or realizing the brevity and value of life and making that the spring-board into some kind of major shift or change" (Kessler, 2019).

In this stage it may be helpful to think and reflect about the person we lost, and what role that person played in our life, and how we can honor that person in our life.

Initially, we might do things that others think are not necessary or we might do things to cope with the situation- For example, distracting oneself by immersing ourselves in work, withdrawing, replaying the loss, reflecting the memories that we shared with that person, watching

television to forget for a while and more. These are unique responses and it's acceptable to do some of these for a while. Later on, as we drive we may move into the stage of asking ourselves what our loss means to us.

Acknowledge Our Pain

Pain in the context of grief is associated with feelings of bemoaning and the grieving individual may avoid situations, events, or relationships which may bring the pain into their awareness. Often less meaning and acknowledgment are given to grief compared to suffering since grief puts focus on feelings of extrinsic loss which occur within a person to a situation that has long passed. In contrast, suffering can be made meaningful when the person is able to acknowledge it as a reaction to a present and painful reality (Das, 1971). Blame, worry, and guilt are normal parts of human life, but it can lead to suffering when left unattended. The main function here is to avoid the full impact of pain which if experienced would be suffering.

While grief is a reflection of our loss, suffering is a mental act of blaming. For example, most grieving individuals inflict negative thoughts about what they could have done and endure the feeling of regret and suffering. 'If only' thoughts can sometimes lead to suffering for the rest of our lives. Another example is the 'I wish' thought. 'I wish I was a better person, wish I had done something different.' However, a part of life, prolonged feelings of suffering due to the pain of the loss can lead to impaired mental and physical health (Lannen, Wolfe, Prigerson, Onelov, & Kreicbergs, 2008). It goes a long way to help the individual realise that the pain is a part of the loss and they are not alone in experiencing it (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). To be emotionally well during times of loss helps by acknowledging pain and not letting ourselves suffer. It helps to focus on the memories that connected us to our loss rather than getting into a spiral of self-blame and worry. There has been a shift in understanding bereavement from 'letting go' of the one who was lost and towards recognizing the role of continuing symbolic bonds (Hagman, 2001).

Surround Yourself with Community

Psychologist Cormier said it was essential to recognize that "we're in the middle of this collective grief. We are all losing something now" (Weir, 2020). Human Community and society are meant to be connected communities. Social restrictions and isolation can restrict

being able to physically gather and meet. There are various ways in which one can surround oneself with people, and build relationships even through online platforms and social media.

Not everyone may be understanding and supportive. It is essential to connect with people willing to understand and hold your hand through these things.

Focus on What is in Our Control

COVID-19 sent the world in an epidemiological and psychological crisis, and downward economic spiral to name a few. In a Harvard Business Review interview with David Kessler explains how people are feeling “different griefs” (Berinato, 2020). Kessler also mentioned the presence of anticipatory grief which is the feeling about what the future might hold for us given that we are uncertain. It is possible to feel that things are widely out of control and unpredictable. Differentiating between things that are inside and outside our control can help. Things outside our control can include things like medical care, political decisions, other people’s behaviour, people’s responses to us, and the future. Things in our control include following COVID-19 protocols, maintaining social distance, avoiding exposure, eating healthy, exercise and time, control over watching the news, control over our thoughts, and seeking support. In grieving, it helps not to focus on what is outside our control.

Keep yourself Connected with who we have Lost

Keeping the person ‘alive’ by honouring the life of the person through rituals is a helpful response. Neimeyer (2001) considers meaning reconstruction in response to trauma and loss as a central healing process. One of the ways to go through the process of healing is by asking oneself if there is something about the person you have lost that you want to embody, and if so, to reflect if our lives would be different if we embody that quality. Neimeyer (2005) said that grieving can be as much a social process as it is an individual process and more attention is required into how families and other social groups can support or even hamper the adaptation of the members.

The three R’s of processing grief are, according to Neimeyer (2017) are retelling the story, rebuilding bonds, and reinventing our lives. The process of retelling the story is about telling what had happened, What the loss of the loved one was like, and how life was with the loved one. The point is to repeat the story until it changes to reveal new meanings

and possibilities to the life that extends beyond the loss. Rebuilding bonds with loved ones rather than relinquishing it is another helpful process. Grieving can be more than a process of letting go. It can be a process of finding new ways to hold on and conserving the feeling of love with the loved one. Reinventing our lives or ourselves in the context of our lives is something we do after realising that life after a loss can never be the same. Embracing life after loss as an opportunity that can include both sadness and hope is a challenge of bereavement. There is a need to expand research in the area of grief and how the meaning-making process occurs in a time of continual period of loss and grief. There is a need for a deeper understanding of multiple sources of resilience as grief response (Neimeyer, 2005).

Implications for the Church and Mental-Health Workers

These reflections on grief provide a broader understanding of the crucial and ongoing process of grief and grieving. Rather than focusing on stages of grief and connecting to see if the grieving person has finished going through the stages of grief, focus can be provided on providing support through networks, practicing rituals or ceremonies commemorating the loved one, and sharing the journey of the meaning-making process. With the broader and deeper felt grief during the Pandemic, Church pastors and mental health workers can use opportunities to reflect and conduct sessions focusing on collective grief.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that we are not broken, and that grief reflects the loss of 'our' world. Grieving is unique to each of us and we grieve better when we acknowledge our pain and see it as an expression of love. Surrounding ourselves with Community helps us walk through the grief and not sidestep it. Supporting the self emotionally by taking care of physical health. Taking into consideration things that are in our control and letting go of what is not in our reach can make it easier to manage the stress of the Pandemic. Keeping continued connections with who we have lost by honouring their memories and meaningful rituals is a valuable means of an effective grief process. Finally, treat oneself with kindness, be compassionate to others and ask for help.

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