

Grief, Loss and the Quest for Meaning

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Darla's Dilemma: Symptoms, suffering, and the search for significance

I. Trajectories through Bereavement

A. 5 patterns of symptomatic adjustment to loss

Prospective study of 276 older bereaved couples across first 18 months (Bonanno, Wortman & Nesse, 2004):

"Common" grief (11%): depression increases, then decreases; associated with good coping, positive memories

Resilient (46%): low depression throughout; little search for meaning; low avoidance, good adjustment overall

Chronic grief (16%): depression peaks after death and remains high; intense search for meaning, regret, history of dependency

Chronic depression (8%): depression precedes loss and continues; high avoidance, many life difficulties, low comfort, poor coping

Depressed-improved (10%): prior depression remits after loss; low avoidance, good coping, benefits of widowhood

B. A call to clarity

There is no single set of stages or tasks in adapting to loss, but instead qualitatively distinct paths through bereavement that call for a closer understanding of both patterns of complication and resilience.

II. The storied nature of human life

A. Beliefs as "building blocks" or themes of a life story

1. Cognitive science has demonstrated that we organize events using "story schemas" or "extendures" (Barsalou, Mandler), imposing a plot structure on them with a beginning, middle & end.

2. Self-narrative: “an overarching cognitive-affective-behavioral structure that organizes the ‘micro-narratives’ of everyday life into a ‘macro-narrative’ that consolidates our self-understanding, establishes our characteristic range of emotions and goals, and guides our performance on the stage of the social world” (Neimeyer, 2004)
3. Voices of bereavement: Beyond the pain of sundered attachment, there is:
 - The need to process a disequilibrating life transition
 - The need to grieve not only the death of a loved one, but also the changed life of the survivor
 - The need to reestablish a life worthy of passionate reinvestment
 - Disruption of continuity of the fabric of a life woven together with that of another
 - Recruitment of support for a recognizable self
 - Acknowledgement of alternative pathways through loss, some straightforward and rapid, others more tortuous and extended

B. Narrative disruptions are of three types (Neimeyer):

1. disorganized narratives and the loss of coherence (e.g., trauma)
2. dissociated narratives, silent stories (e.g., incest, suicide)
3. dominant narratives and stories that constrict (e.g., depression)

III. Loss and the Reconstruction of Meaning

A. Death as an event can validate or invalidate the beliefs on the basis of which we live

1. Loss of the assumptive world (Parkes, Janoff-Bulman)
2. Losses entailed in bereavement, at existential and practical levels
3. Sense-making mediates impact of violent bereavement on complicated grief (Currier, Holland & Neimeyer)

B. Grief is a personal process, one that is idiosyncratic, intimate, and inextricable from our sense of who we are

1. The continuing bond and Two-track model (Rubin)
2. Symbolic conversations: Field, et al. find that self-blame in “empty chair” monologue at 6 months post-loss predicts grief, whereas “other blame” predicts depression, anxiety & somatization.
3. Sense-making mitigates loss of bond (Neimeyer & Baldwin)

Clinician's Toolbox: Life Imprint (Vickio, with modifications by Neimeyer)

In a sense, we are all “pastiche personalities,” reflecting bits and pieces of the many people whose characteristics and values we have unconsciously assimilated into our own sense of identity. This “inheritance” transcends genetics, as we can be powerfully or subtly shaped not only by parents, but also by mentors, friends, siblings, or even children we have loved and lost. Nor are these life imprints always positive: at times, we can trace our self-criticism, distrust, fears, and emotional distance to once influential relationships that are now with us only internally. Take a few moments privately to trace the imprint of an important figure in your life, and then, at your discretion, discuss your observations with a partner.

The person whose imprint I want to trace is: _____

This person has had the following impact on:

My mannerisms or gestures:

My ways of speaking and communicating:

My work and pastime activities:

My feelings about myself and others:

My basic personality:

My values and beliefs:

The imprints I would most like to affirm and develop are:

The imprints I would most like to relinquish or change are:

C. *Grieving is something we do, not something that is done to us*

1. Dual process model of bereavement (Stroebe & Schut): Loss-oriented and restoration-oriented processes
2. Naming the loss

D. *Grieving is the act of affirming or reconstructing a personal world of meaning that has been challenged by loss*

1. Constructive processes in bereavement
2. Post-traumatic growth: The silver lining

E. We construct and reconstruct our identities as survivors in connection with others

1. Contexts affecting grieving: Self, family, and social systems
2. Sharing acknowledgement of the loss: including marginalized mourners

F. Adaptation to loss involves restoration of coherence to the narrative of our lives

1. Why people tell us their stories of loss
2. The gift of witnessing

Clinician's Toolbox: Guidelines for Therapeutic Journals

- Find a private place where you will not be interrupted
- Focus on one of the more traumatic experiences of your life
- Write about those aspects that are most difficult to acknowledge
- Shift between external event and your deepest thoughts and feelings
- Abandon a concern with grammar and syntax: Write only for yourself
- Write 20 minutes a day, for at least four days
- Schedule a "transitional activity" to return to life as usual
- Have a support person or professional available in case of need

Note: if used as an adjunct to therapy, integrate into session through reading selected passages aloud, rather than as material for therapist to read between sessions.

Recommended Readings

- Attig, T. (2000). *The heart of grief*. New York: Oxford. [Practical philosophical exploration of role of sustained ties to lost loved ones]
- Bonnano, G. A., Wortman, C. B. & Nesse, R. M. (2004). Prospective patterns of resilience and maladjustment during widowhood. *Psychology and Aging*, 19, 260-271.
- Beder, J. (2004). *Voices of bereavement*. New York: Brunner Routledge. [Clinical casebook with research informed discussion of a broad range of bereavement experiences, from death of a disabled sibling to loss of a same-sex partner in a plane crash]
- Center for the Advancement of Health (2004). *Report on bereavement and grief research*. Special Issue of *Death Studies*, 28, 6. [Official update and analysis of last 20 years of research on bereavement and health, covering such topics as health and mental health outcomes, impact of loss on health care professionals, efficacy of interventions, and a research agenda for the next decade.]
- Field, N. P. & Friedrichs, M. (2004). Continuing bonds in coping with the death of a husband. *Death Studies*, 28, 597-620.
- Lester, D. (2004). *Katie's diary: Unlocking the mystery of a suicide*. New York: Brunner Routledge. [Rare publication of the diary of a suicidal young woman, analyzed by leading exponents of various psychological theories of suicide and psychotherapy.]
- Martin, T. & Doka, K. (2000). *Men don't cry...women do*. Philadelphia: Brunner Routledge. [Discusses and transcends gender stereotypes in grieving]
- Nadeau, J. (1997). *Families making sense of death*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [Qualitative research on meaning-making as interactive process in families]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2006). *Rainbow in the stone*. Memphis, TN: Mercury. [Original poetry on loss and life, with themes of meaning-making.]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2004). *Constructivist psychotherapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. [Full length video featuring meaning making interventions in grief therapy with a bereaved mother, complete with conceptual introduction to the approach and post-session discussion.]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2002). *Lessons of loss: A guide to coping*. Memphis, TN: Center for the Study of Loss and Transition. [Written for professionals and

- patients or lay readers, presents research-grounded new models of grieving and practical applications to grief counseling and psychotherapy]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (Ed.) (2001). *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss*. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association. [Multifaceted scholarly and applied contributions to bereavement theory, research, and practice, including considerations of post-traumatic growth]
- Neimeyer, R. A. & Mahoney, M. J. (Eds.) (2000). *Constructivism in psychotherapy*. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association. [A broad scholarly presentation of impact of constructivism for counseling and psychotherapy]
- Neimeyer, R. A., Prigerson, H. & Davies, B. (2002) Mourning and meaning. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46, 235-251. [Consideration of meaning making model of traumatic grief and post-traumatic growth]
- Neimeyer, R. A. & Raskin, J. (Eds.) (2000). *Constructions of disorder: Meaning-making frameworks in psychotherapy*. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association. [Non-pathologizing conceptualizations of psychosocial disorder and their implications for psychotherapy as a meaning-making process]
- Parkes, C. M. (1996). *Bereavement*. London: Routledge. [Thorough discussion of determinants and dynamics of grief from a research standpoint]
- Rosenblatt, P. (2000). *Parent grief*. Philadelphia: Brunner Routledge. [Qualitative research on impact of child loss on couple, with special focus on the parental relationship]
- Stroebe, M. Stroebe, W., Hansson, R. & Schut, H. (2001). *Handbook of bereavement research*. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association. [Comprehensive compendium of all aspects of traditional grief research, from issues of assessment to coping literature.]
- Tedeschi, R. & Calhoun, L. (2004). *Helping bereaved parents*. Philadelphia: Brunner Routledge. [Practical handbook for fostering growth through grief associated with loss of a child.]

Clinician's Toolbox: Meaning Reconstruction Interview

Entry Questions

- What experience of death or loss would you like to explore?
- What do you recall about how you responded to the event at the time?
- How did your feelings about it change over time?
- How did others in your life at that time respond to the loss? To your reactions to it?
- Who were you as a person, developmentally, at the time of the loss?

Experiencing Questions

- Close your eyes and visualize a scene connected with your loss (take a few moments to find the image). Who or what is in the focus of your attention? Who is on the periphery? What is happening? If you are in the picture, where are you placed?
- What feelings, if any, do you notice in your body as you vivify this loss? What form do these take? Is there movement associated with them? If so, in what direction? If not, is there any blockage of this movement?
- What was the most emotionally significant part of the experience to you?

Explanation Questions

- How did you make sense of the death or loss at the time?
- How do you interpret the loss now?
- What philosophical or spiritual beliefs contributed to your adjustment to this loss? How were they affected by it, in turn?
- Are there ways in which this loss disrupted the continuity of your life story? How, across time, have you dealt with this?

Elaboration questions

- How has this experience affected your sense of priorities?
- How has this experience affected your view of yourself or your world?
- What lessons about loving has this person or this loss taught you?
- How would your life be different if this person had lived/this loss did not occur?
- What metaphor or image would you use to symbolize your grief over this loss?
- Are there any steps that you could take that would be helpful or healing now?