

Denver Estate Planning Counsel

Working with the Grieving

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Introduction

Thesis: I believe that it is possible to have a powerful and even life-changing impact on your clients who are grieving loss, while maintaining your professional and ethical standards.

Background: WHY (I believe deeply in the dignity of every human being) - I have been a counselor and coach since 1992 and my doctoral work has been in the area of counseling and working with those suffering from unforeseen challenges and set-backs in life. For the past 26 years, I have worked with people are grieving all kinds of loss—the loss of loved ones, relationships, physical, financial, and even the loss of their freedom.

Approach: Instead of totally overwhelming you with a lot of statistics and research pertaining to working with those who are grieving, I would like to make this as personal as possible. Since it is a given that suffering loss is ultimately a reality in everyone's life, I would like to ask, "How many of you here have suffered significant loss and have gone through the grieving process?"

What was that like? What helped? What didn't help?

What is Grief?

Most of you are probably familiar with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' ground-breaking work on dying, death and grieving that changed the way we talk about end-of-life issues and about grieving.

You may also be familiar with the *five stages of grief*—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance—concepts that were developed by Kübler-Ross and have been adopted by many health-care professionals world-wide.¹

One of the key things most people don't know about those original five stages, is that Kubler-Ross was writing about people *confronting their own death*, not the death of a loved one...Over the past 15 years, a much richer body of work has revealed a variety of different understandings and conclusions. The most important of these is that grief is: a) a highly individualized process, b) has no specific timetable, and c) many people find that their lives are actually *better* after going through grief, due to something referred to as "post-stress growth."²

¹ *Finally! A Grief Definition That Makes Sense*, Love Lives On, <https://www.loveliveson.com/thank-you-a-grief-definition-that-gets-it/>, accessed 12/3/18.

² Will Meek, "Real Stages of Grief: Moving From Kubler-Ross to Sidney Zisook", *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/notes-self/201210/real-stages-grief>, accessed 12/3/18.

Canadian psychologist, Will Meek, summarizes a new understanding of grief that is emerging from recent research out the University of California San Diego:³

One of the most influential researchers on grief and bereavement is Sidney Zisook. His work has shown that there are 4 major components of grief that show up in various forms depending on the person and the unique circumstances of the loss:

1. Separation Distress: this is a soup of feelings like sadness, anxiety, pain, helplessness, anger, shame, yearning, loneliness, etc.
2. Traumatic Distress: this includes states of disbelief and shock, intrusions, and efforts to avoid intrusions and the spike of emotions they produce
3. Guilt, remorse, and regrets
4. Social withdrawal

People may also experience some symptoms that are similar to depression such as loss of interest in pleasurable activities, disruptions in sleep and appetite, low energy, irritability, and depressed mood.⁴

While gaining a better understanding of grief is helpful, it still begs the questions: what makes grief so difficult? Or perhaps, why can't we simply "get over it" and move on with our lives? While there are obviously many factors and variables that impact the answers to those questions, I believe that the following are worth your consideration, and they are actually quite interrelated:

1. Grief Is Intensely Personal

As I mentioned earlier, grief is an intensely personal journey. And while each of us possess different levels of empathy—the simple reality is that *true* empathy is merely a myth as "the heart knows its own bitterness and no stranger shares its joy."⁵ That is what makes the sincere statement, "I understand" one of the most resented statements we can possibly make to someone that is grieving—simply because we don't.

2. Grief Is A Learning Process

As I mentioned earlier, while the grieving process has no specific timetable and many people find that their lives are actually *better* after going through grief, due to something referred to as "post-stress growth." Why is that? Why is it that some are completely destroyed by grief and others actually become better people?

Rhawn Gabriel Joseph has written an extremely helpful, yet somewhat technical, article on the neuroscientific research that gives us some insight into this learning process or growth. Research indicates that the answer lies in understanding two regions of our brains—the limbic region and the neocortex.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Proverbs 14:10, English Standard Version.

The limbic system/region is what we commonly experience as our “gut” and many people mistake it as intuition. The explanation for that is that the limbic part of our brain does not have “the capacity to meaningfully communicate in grammatical word sequences.”⁶ The neocortex region is where we process and develop our capacity to express our thoughts and ideas—in other words put actual “words” to those ideas.

Nonetheless, at birth, our limbic system does possess what scientists call “limbic language”—the ability to utter sounds like crying when we are upset or screaming when we are frightened, or cooing and laughing when we are happy. It isn’t until the neocortex matures that we are able to associate meaning to words and use them to express our thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

The implications to the grieving process are significant in that 1) we are experiencing something that is new and intensely personal, and 2) our limbic system is fully functional—it’s actually even giving utterance to feelings that are expressed in our cries, screams, and even groans. Yet, it isn’t until we process it and put it into “words”—which requires the engagement and function of the neocortex—that our brains can establish any type of coherence. To put it simply, merely talking about and finding the words to express our feelings, thoughts, and ideas is incredibly important and significant in the healing process.

Perhaps this helps to expose the naivety of the old but often used phrase, “Time heals all wounds.” Time actually doesn’t heal anything in and of itself. However, it does take time for the things that heal our grief to take place.

What is Essential to the Process?

While each person’s journey through loss and grief is unique, my work with others has caused me to believe the process ultimately requires three essential elements:

1. Loss – Not only surviving the event that caused the loss, but actually processing it. (Ray Dalio – *Principles* – Formula: Emotional Pain + Reflection = Progress)⁷
2. Identity – This step is significant as it enables one to see themselves in the light of the loss and thereby develop a new “sense of self” – i.e. A woman without a husband, A husband without a wife, Parents without their child, etc.
3. Vision – This step is perhaps the most transforming as it enables a person to see a new person in the future—someone they want to become as opposed to someone who has merely succumbed to the external forces of life.

⁶ Rhawn Gabriel Joseph, “Limbic Language: Social Emotional Development and Infant Speech: Hypothalamus, Amygdala, Septa Nuclei, Cingulate”, (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 2000). Retrieved from Brainmind.com, <http://brainmind.com/LimbicLanguage.html>, accessed 12/18/18.

⁷ Ray Dalio, *Principles*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

Some Practical Do's & Don'ts

1. **Referrals** – Do some research, talk with your associates or other professionals to identify solid and dependable professionals who can assist the people you work with that need support.
2. **Maintain a Learner's Mindset as opposed to a Knower's Mindset** – In counseling and coaching professions this is absolutely essential. A Learner's Mindset is one that is humble enough to recognize that you really don't know. It allows you to be curious, to listen, to ask questions, and even just "say what's there" without feeling like you are going to be exposed. A Knower's Mindset on the other hand will cause you to come across quite literally as a "know-it-all" which oftentimes causes people to conclude that you lack humility, concern, and sincerity.
3. **Don't Assume That All Grief is the Same** – For example, someone who loses a loved one after a long and expensive battle with cancer might even feel a sense of relief that it's finally over. Another person who loses a loved one in a sudden and tragic accident or suicide might experience incredible grief. Here's a simple yet effective way to evaluate what your client is experiencing: does the grief or sense of loss appear to be mild, moderate, or acute. Simply attaching a note to a file to remind you of that assessment can be extremely helpful in your ongoing interactions.

What Are Proper Boundaries for Professionals?

1. **Recognize a Very Serious Tension** - On the one hand, professional and ethical standards tell us that you must not cross the lines and assume the role of psychological and even spiritual advisors. However, on the other hand, our humanity and compassion for our neighbor compels us to try to help another human being in their sorrow, grief, and even misery. There simply isn't a "hard-and-fast" rule that can navigate that tension as it is a matter of wisdom rather than mere knowledge.
2. **The Obvious Thing - Condolences** - "I'm sorry for your loss", "I'm so sorry to hear that you are facing...health, financial, relational, and even emotional problems in this difficulty"
3. **The Not so Obvious - Ask** - How he/she is doing, what he/she is feeling and thinking, what kind of support he/she is receiving? What are you doing that's helpful? What are you doing that isn't helpful? Those are all great questions that are oftentimes helpful, but help express your compassion and concern.

After my brother was killed, my sister-in-law founded a non-profit to help other widows called The Paisley Project. The thing that upset those women the most, was when people felt so awkward they wouldn't mention it or even tried to avoid all together. They oftentimes told me that caused a deeper sense of isolation and a stigma.

Of all that I've said today, I think the most significant aspect may be the tension. We are each human beings and human suffering is an inevitable part of life in this world. Therefore, we must embrace that reality rather than avoiding it. If we recognize the tension between our

professional lives and our humanity, we will indeed be able to navigate those situations with humility, compassion, and love. This makes it possible to have a powerful and even life-changing impact on our clients who are grieving loss, while maintaining our professional and ethical standards.