The Grieving Process Revisited

Grieving the death of a loved one can mirror our own frailty when another being close to us endures a finite, unchangeable fate less fortunate than our own. Their permanent separation from our lives leaves us with an unfamiliar process of recovery known to be “grief”.

The grieving experience has traditionally been categorized into the following five stages of reaction: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler, Ross). Identifying these stages can serve as a means of comfort for the grieving individual to know that their experiences, emotions and perceptions are valid and acceptable. However, this traditional approach to grief has been challenged by scholars over the past decade. As the “study of death” has expanded, Western cultural assumptions on how people should react to the loss of a loved one are being redefined. As these assumptions are redefined, societal treatment of grieving individuals can potentially be significantly altered (Wortman & Silver). Researchers Wortman and Silver have defined these Western assumptions of grief and have analyzed the extent of truth these assumptions hold within our society.

Assumption #1
It is assumed that following a loss, individuals will go through a period of intense distress where negative feelings prevail and positive emotions are absent.

Assumption #2
Individuals who fail to experience these intense emotions of distress indicate that they have a problem and their feelings of grief will emerge later in life in a “delayed grief reaction.”

Assumption #3
Successful adjustment to the experienced loss requires an individual to “work through” their feelings. This is primarily accomplished through vocalizing their experiences and emotions.

Assumption #4
Continued attachment to the deceased is considered unhealthy and therefore requires that ties with the deceased be broken. This is considered an important part of the mourning process.

Assumption #5
Recovery of the loss is assumed within a year or two of the loss after which the bereaved is expected to resume to earlier levels of functioning.

Discussing the Assumptions

Assumptions 1&2: While analyzing each of these assumptions, it is important to emphasize that every person’s grieving experience is individually tailored according to his or her circumstances, personality and relationships. Feelings of intense distress may be present in one person while feelings of dysphoria (an extended period of feeling sad and void of all interest and pleasure in things previously enjoyed) may be present in another.
Although it is impossible to lose someone you have been deeply attached to without experiencing some level of pain (Worden, p.13) assumptions 1 and 2 can potentially evoke unnecessary intensified immediate distress in order to meet societal expectations. For example, Worton & Silver found that individuals who had cared for a loved one who died from illness experienced feelings of relief when their loved one’s suffering was over. Emotions such as relief and mild depression are not traditionally associated with the initial stage of the grieving process but for some people, these emotions are dominant in the initial period of “realizing” the loss.

Assumption 3: The importance of one “working through” grief is usually associated with verbal expressions of emotion. People in the grieving process are encouraged to openly express their negative thoughts and feelings. While it is true that pain must be confronted and experienced, a number of new studies have addressed the assumption that it needs to be confronted externally. According to Worton & Silver’s study, no clear support has shown that people actively confronting their thoughts about the loss show better long term adjustments than those who cope quietly. While it is common for the bereaved person to repeatedly dwell upon thoughts of the loved one and the circumstances of his or her death, some people may prefer to internalize these thoughts, while others may verbalize story-upon-story of their loved one. Again, every circumstance and person is different. The purpose of proposing both external and internal means of grieving is merely intended to dispel the myth that something is wrong with those who take more time in externalizing their grief.

Assumption 4: Desiring to maintain some sort of attachment to the deceased is common practice, not only within our culture but among cultures around the world. Some find comfort by holding on to pleasant memories, some cling to possessions belonging to the deceased, and to some the graveyard is the primary place the bereaved experience feelings of attachment to their loved one. Although there are different forms of attachment, some forms of attachment further the grieving process, while some hinder the individual from stepping away from emotions of intense distress for a vast period of time.

Assumption 5: The word “recovery” associated with grief easily implies closure and a once-and-for-all solution to a problem. For most people, there does come a time in which they can encounter reminders of their loved one with less severe emotional pain. However, placing a time frame on how long it will take to get to that stage can, again, confine the person in grief to feel bad if they still experience intense feelings of loss after a year, or two, or three.

Dealing with the reality of grief unfortunately does not provide short cuts to “arrive” back at a pre-loss state. Neither a list of “myths” nor a set of grieving stages can alter the intensity of emotion that loss can bring. However, dispelling the myths that assume the “right way” to grieve can allow ourselves and others the freedom of reflection and expression to experience an undefined period of grief. May this journey lead to cultivated reflections of hope and expressions of life.

Reference:

“The Myths of Coping with Loss Revisited.” Camille B. Wortman and Roxane Cohen Silver, p. 405-429