

Grief and Loss

During this shared time with you, I will explore how normal feelings of grief and loss, if left unchecked, can have a negative impact on your mental health and wellbeing within the workplace and home setting.

I also will share how you might manage feelings of grief and loss more effectively, and unpick some common misbeliefs on how we should respond when someone displays feelings of grief and loss.

Personal response to grief and loss will vary from person to person, and such feelings will also have a number of variables that include beliefs, expectations, personal pressures, sexual orientation, relationships, type of loss, and whether there has been any previous personal experience of loss. What is important, is that you are able to recognise when grief and loss become unmanageable, and when positive strategies and interventions require to be sought out and implemented. The challenges of dealing with grief and loss require careful management as we progress through and beyond the Covid19 pandemic.

What is Grief

In answering the question , *What is Grief?* , you will probably respond stating that it is a feeling of mourning or bereavement. In fact grief, bereavement and mourning are commonly used to mean the same thing. However, these terms have distinct definitions.

Bereavement is the 'act of loss' of someone or something that you treasure or love, this triggers feelings of grief. The loss of someone could be a relative, relationship or marriage breakup, a friend, colleague, or even a pet. The loss of something could be changes in the makeup of a school community, change in employment (including being furloughed with employment being changed or terminated), change in personal 'at home' or 'at work' circumstances.

Mourning, is a social expression of grief (the duty and response within a cultural setting). However mourning is, more often or not, independent to the personal circumstances of the individual concerned.

Grief and mourning are a natural response to bereavement. Some colleagues have a resilience level that supports the adjustment to such life events, whilst other colleagues become overwhelmed whereby grief can intensify beyond normality thus leaving them unable to cope.

Symptoms of Grief

The characterisation and symptoms of grief are experienced in four different ways:-

Emotional - feeling sadness, anger, anxiety, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness, shock, numbness and yearning

Thoughts - feeling of confusion, disbelief, preoccupation, hallucination, a sense of presence of what is no longer present.

Behaviours - absent mindedness, disruption to sleep and/or appetite, sighing, social withdrawal, crying, treasuring objects or places.

Sensations - feeling of hollowness in the tummy, tightness in the chest, breathlessness, weakness, lack of energy.

Not all characterisation and symptoms of grief are experienced by an individual at the same time or with the same intensity, but more likely to be an uneven mix based on the level of previous grief experience.

The Grieving Process (Bowlby 1998)

There are four stages that have become established in relation to the grieving process...

The first is the denial stage, where an individual experiencing loss cannot understand or believe the circumstances that have happened, so the loss seems surreal. The individual seems to demonstrate an appropriate response, but the related emotional response can be suppressed, which in turn increases the level of emotional tension.

The second is the sensation of loss. This is where distress associated with loss leads to helplessness, frustration and numbness. It can trigger feelings of injustice or anger, with involuntary weeping when the loss is recalled.

The third is restitution. This is where mourning begins and concepts about the loss are revisited. There can be feelings of guilt or a preoccupation with the loss, but in this stage there is considerable sorting of ideas and memories which often carry powerful emotional responses. Opportunities to discuss feelings are crucial during this stage.

The fourth is resolution. This is where there is increased interest in other people and a reconciliation of the facts surrounding the particular loss. This can take between six to twelve months, but it is not unusual in lasting up to two years.

Take a few moments to reflect on your own context within the current virus pandemic.

Consider the four stages of the grieving process and note what you might identify with each stage. Consider your response within the wider context of loss, which could be focussed on changes to learning and teaching contexts; changes in a school community; changes in employment; the process of being furloughed, health challenges etc.,

If you require additional time to complete the reflection you may select pause at the end of the music, then press play again.

There are no right or wrong responses to your personal reflection and your response will be different from other colleagues. The four stages are often supported by well

intentioned friends, colleagues and relatives making comments like...."give it time", as if grieving will be resolved by the passing of time, thus implying that an individual is required to take some form of action. However, time alone does not resolve grief, it is what is completed and achieved within such time that influences a positive outcome.

What is important to realise is that although the cause of grief may be different from person to person, the fact that feelings of grief are experienced is enough to trigger monitoring of self and others.

Normal Grief

When you or a colleague experience a significant loss (such as a death) you or they will naturally grieve. This is referred to as normal grief. The degree of grief experienced and subsequent personal impact will be affected by a number of considerations.

- was the significant loss sudden or over time
- what was the cause of the significant loss
- what was your relationship with the significant loss
- what age was the significant loss

Anticipatory Grief

If either you or a colleague are aware of someone that has a life-limiting condition (such as in some advanced cases of the CoVid19 virus, or cancer, or a degenerative neurological condition), this is known as anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is experienced by both those with the life-limiting condition and by the friend, colleague, relative or partner of the person concerned. Anticipatory grief shares the characteristics of a significant loss, including the full range of emotions; anxiety; sadness, disappointment, denial, anger, resentment, guilt, and also a fear of change to future identity and role.

Abnormal Grief

When the level of grief reaches a stage where someone feels overwhelmed and then remains forever in a state of grief without progression to a positive conclusion, this is known as abnormal grief. There are four classifications of abnormal grief:-

Delayed Grief - this is where there is an emotional reaction at the time of loss, but this is not proportionate, There may even be an outpouring of grief over some loss not related to the original grief at a later date, with this outpouring being excessive.

Chronic Grief - this is where there is an excessive duration of grief that seemingly has no obvious conclusion. Those who suffer from chronic grief normally know that they are not moving on to a positive conclusion.

Masked Grief - this is where an individual may be unaware that symptoms related to a grief reaction are being displayed, but physical symptoms such as depression and other odd behaviours are present.

Exaggerated Grief - this is where an individual is so overwhelmed by a significant loss that clinical depression, panic or phobias develop.

Take a few moments to reflect further on the signs that you, a colleague or another person might demonstrate if experiencing abnormal grief within the workplace or home setting.

If you require additional time to complete the reflection you may select pause at the end of the music, then press play again.

There are no right or wrong responses to your personal reflection and your response will likely be different from other colleagues. What is important to acknowledge is that you instinctively want to help others who experience grief and loss, as others would wish to help you. In reality many will say or do little, and in some cases do nothing at all. However, the successful approach is one where consistently being empathetic rather than sympathetic will ensure that gains are emphasised and reinforced.

Supporting those who experience Grief and Loss

Should someone experience feelings of grief and loss, then the following might help to provide a framework for developing support:

- (i) Feelings are normally expressed in the way we act, so be prompted by the behaviour displayed
- (ii) Individuals react differently so demonstrate patience and understanding
- (iii) A person may not be the 'son of' or 'sister of' someone, or their role may have changed in the workplace, so be 'with them' in their personal search for a new identity
- (iv) Denial is a common issue and the outward expression of grief can take months or years if left unchecked
- (v) A listening ear is a positive ear when caring about how an individual may be feeling
- (vi) Reassurance that it is OK to cry or be angry.
- (vii) Talking through a significant loss may help an individual to reach a positive outcome
- (viii) In order to offer help and support, workplace colleagues need to know about the significant loss experienced. Workplace settings can offer tremendous relief from an otherwise different atmosphere within a home context.

Grounded Interventions (Heron 2001)

Although teachers are not specialist grief and loss counsellors, they are in a position to engage with simple interventions that will help others begin moving towards to a positive outcome. These interventions are sometimes referred as 'Grounded Interventions', and the type and style of these can either be *authoritative* or *facilitative*.

Authoritative Interventions include:

- prescriptive direction and advice for the person experiencing grief and loss
- providing informative guides on what can be done when experiencing grief and loss
- confronting (positively and constructively) the attitude and behaviour of those who experience grief and loss

Facilitative Interventions include:

- Helping an individual overcome thoughts and emotions (known as Cathartic)
- Helping an individual reflect and become more self-directed (known as Catalytic)
- Helping an individual by boosting their confidence (known as Supportive)

So although teachers are not therapists, there are aspects within our learning and teaching experiences that can translate over in applying the principals of grounded interventions.

Vicarious Trauma

It would be remiss of me not to draw attention to the common 'silent' personal effects of vicarious trauma to which teachers are unaware. Vicarious Trauma is where teachers experience change as a response to someone who may have experienced personal grief and loss or trauma. The symptoms that develop in teachers who suffer vicarious trauma include lasting feelings of grief, anxiety, sadness, feelings of isolation, increase in alcohol or substance consumption, altered eating habits, and difficulty sleeping. These symptomatic changes can impact on teacher personal mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing, as it is impossible for a teacher to change the significant loss of any individual (i.e. bring back someone who has died), or for the learner or colleague to ease a teacher's mind by demonstrating that they have been helped in some way. You require to be vigilant and always be aware that vicarious trauma is something that should not to be ignored, as it can creep up on you suddenly. Support is available for you to manage this effectively and 'be there' for learners and colleagues.

We are all affected by grief and loss, and although a natural occurrence, an individual's response is personal, and it is a response that should not be inhibited. Recognition of the symptoms of grief and loss, along with an understanding of the cause is crucial if the more severe effects are to be avoided. There are interventions and specialist support that can be accessed should anyone feel they have become overwhelmed and symptoms become severe or persistent. Colleagues can provide valued support for one another within the workplace. Early intervention solutions are accessible and you can be part of that solution.

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References

Bowlby, J (1998) *Attachment and Loss: Volume 2. Separation, Anxiety and Anger*. London : Pimlico

Heron, J (2001) *Helping the Client - A Creative Practical Guide (5th Edition)*. London: Sage Publications

Resources

Child Bereavement UK for Schools [www.childbereavementuk.org]

Cruse Bereavement Care [www.cruse.org.uk]

Winston's Wish [www.winstonswish.org.uk]

NHS - Grief after Bereavement or Loss [<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/coping-with-bereavement/>]

Bereavement and Loss - Mental Healthy schools
[<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/mental-health-needs/bereavement-and-loss/>]