



Understanding Grief

As a clinical psychologist for 30 years, I have witnessed grief in its rawest form. Navigating grief is a universal human experience, but each death launches a unique journey for the surviving loved ones. Suffering occurs after various losses; divorce, loss of a job, receiving a life-changing diagnosis, "empty nest," etc. These losses are usually resolved with time, or the person makes accommodations to regain hope and move forward with their life. The grief I will be addressing is that which occurs after the death of a loved one. The finality of death evokes some of the most challenging emotions that people endure. For many people, the experience can be overwhelming and, at times, frightening.

There is often no formal training in grief counseling in the traditional graduate curriculum. When my mother died (20 years ago), Hospice was an integral part of her care. I was touched by the gentle comfort they provided to both my mother and our family. I decided to volunteer for their agency and eventually took their mandatory orientation course. The information was helpful both as a volunteer and in my role as a therapist. Most importantly, I learned the value of one's presence, sitting with someone dying or losing a loved one. There is nothing to change or fix, but providing validation and normalizing their concerns and experience can be extremely helpful.

After retiring from a practice where I saw many patients with various presenting issues, I established a small practice where I work with grieving patients. During the pandemic, I took coursework to help individuals with complicated grief (now called prolonged grief). Additionally, I have returned as a volunteer at Home Health and Hospice. I have had the great fortune to pair up with one of their social workers to bring grief work into nature. We have had two grief sessions at a local conservation area. I am looking forward to developing this program further.

The pandemic forced people to cope with loss in isolation. The suffering has been immense. There has been a scarcity of therapists, and not all therapists are adept at grief counseling. The competent grief counselor is comfortable with the uneven path of healing; no road maps here. Sitting with someone in real life (whenever possible) and imparting the silent but powerful message, "we can do this together," is a good beginning. One of the rewards of this work is watching the person leave that first session with a bit more lightness and hope.

Through my own personal and professional experiences, I have learned what is helpful and what, though well-meaning, is not beneficial. There is no linear formula or timeline for grief. Bearing witness to suffering and listening with a compassionate heart allows healing as people come to terms with life absent of their loved ones.

Future essays will expound on the above as well as address specific topics relevant to grief.

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