

Grief and Loss – Understanding Attachment and Bonding

By Justin Stum, LMFT
Licensed Therapist and Counselor



Most individuals experience loss at some level at some point in their lives. Loss of a friend who has moved away or

of a pet that passes is a common experience for children as they grow and develop. What makes loss difficult is primarily due to the attachments or bonds that are created when we relate and become close to others. These bonds help us feel safe and secure. Over time we develop a sense of normalcy as we interact with individuals that we are attached to.

I recently sold my home and moved out of a neighborhood my wife and I both loved. The neighbors and our family were very tight-knit. The kids often played together and goofed around as young children do. I drove by after we sold the home and felt a longing and sense of loss having moved away from friends and an area we had become attached to. Neighborhood parties, kids riding bikes, parents mingling out in front yards, and children's toys scattered about the neighborhood were common. As a family, we moved through a process of loss. Grieving was short but nevertheless it was a loss to past attachments to friends, memories, and a sense of safety.

Grief and loss are closely associated but different elements of mourning. Loss occurs when we lose or become distant from someone or something we have a significant attachment to. Loss does not only occur at the death of a loved one or when we move away.

Loss can occur when expectations are not met or attachments are severely weakened.

Some time ago I was working with a teenage boy who had a long history of loss and grief he was not fully aware of. He was living with his father after his parents divorced. His mother and father fought often and ended up ending following years of discord and fighting ending the marriage. The conflict between his parents was fueled most often by his mother's drinking. This young man developed some negative ways of coping with this loss, the loss of his mother. He did not and could not at that age interpret and sort out his own loss and confounding grief. He was aware of the discomfort and heartache around the divorce in his own soul but had little ability to process and make meaning from what was occurring. He attempted repairing his hurt feelings and in an attempt to avoid that pain and repair it all fantasized about how much she loved him and that things were in fact "ok". Often in sessions he would make excuses about how she is just 'busy' and can't be around for him. In time he began to see the depth of her problem with alcohol. He could not rectify these fantasies of her being present and loving in his life since he could also see that in reality she was emotionally and physically absent. As he grew he started smoking marijuana with peers to 'chill out' in an attempt to deal with this loss and the reality that was settling in, the reality that his life was hard, would likely continue to be hard, and that his mother wasn't in a position to offer the love he need and wanted to much.

Some common responses to loss and grief include anger, avoidance, fear, isolation, relational conflict, shallow relationships, difficulty bonding with others, challenges with closure, etc. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, is one of the primary and classic authors that has researched and taught much about grief and loss, in her book, "On Grief and Grieving." [1] She describes in detail the stages of grief and loss. These are not linear, meaning they don't happen one after another, but people can

move around in them depending on contextual factors and the nature of the loss. Her stages below can assist you in understanding what typically can happen when loss and then grief occur.

1. Denial — "I feel fine."; "This can't be happening, not to me."

Denial is usually only a temporary defense for the individual. This feeling is generally replaced with heightened awareness of situations and individuals that will be left behind after death.

2. Anger — "Why me? It's not fair!"; "How can this happen to me?"; "Who is to blame?"

Once in the second stage, the individual recognizes that denial cannot continue. Because of anger, the person is very difficult to care for due to misplaced feelings of rage and envy. These misplaced feelings get projected or 'thrown on to' others as resentment, jealousy, or bitterness.

3. Bargaining — "Just let me live to see my children graduate."; "I'll do anything for a few more years."; "I will give my life savings if..."

The third stage involves the hope that the individual can somehow postpone or delay death. Usually, the negotiation for an extended life is made with a higher power in exchange for a reformed lifestyle.

Psychologically, the person is saying, "I understand I will die, but if I could just have more time..."

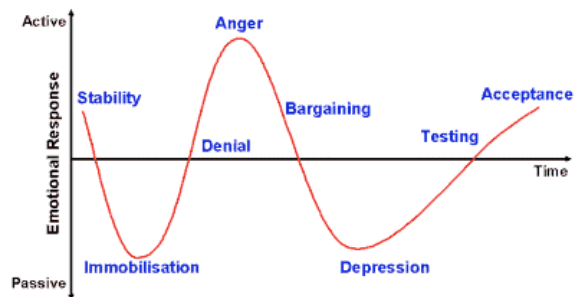
4. Depression — "I'm so sad, why bother with anything?"; "I'm going to die . . . What's the point?"; "I miss my loved one, why go on?"

During the fourth stage, the dying person begins to understand the certainty of death. Because of this, the individual may become silent, refuse visitors and spend much of the time crying and grieving. This process allows the dying person to disconnect

oneself from things of love and affection. It is not recommended to attempt to cheer an individual up that is in this stage. It is an important time for grieving that must be processed.

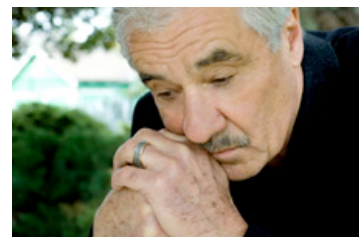
5. Acceptance — "It's going to be okay."; "I can't fight it, I may as well prepare for it."

This final stage comes with peace and understanding of the death that is approaching. Generally, the person in the fifth stage will want to be left alone. Additionally, feelings and physical pain may be non-existent. This stage has also been described as the end of the dying struggle.



Healing and closure come when individuals work through the 'Acceptance' stage. Finding meaning, cherishing memories, honoring the loss, and reframing the event in the larger picture of ones life is key to working through the last stage.

Grief should not be rushed. Some might add, "Hey, just move



forward. It is over. You can't change it." While this may be true it does not account for the pain and struggle due to the attachment piece. The old adage, 'pull yourself up by your boot straps' doesn't really apply since individuals that are dealing with loss in a maladaptive or unhealthy ways usually don't have the strength emotionally to simply put it

behind them and even if they did it would be unresolved and likely creep back at some other chapter of their life. I had a woman in my office that was separated from her husband. He was struggling with a sexual addiction and she was really hurting. Their marriage ended as a result of his infidelity and the betrayal she felt. She said she often drove by his office just to see his car after they divorced. She asked me if she was still in love. I simply asked her if she still loved him. She replied, "No, I don't love him. He really hurt me and I can't figure it out, why do I drive by his office still?" We had an enlightening dialogue about attachment and love, two connected yet different elements. She was attached and still dealing with the loss of a husband she did not love. Love or not, she was still dealing with the loss and it took her some time to resolve that loss and reach closure.

I typically recommend for clients to author their own experience. They need to start actively facilitating their own healing. It typically won't just happen on its own. Time alone does not heal. I have worked with clients that have hurt for years due to the faulty logic that time will make or help it heal. Time merely helps you heal, work must occur on the part of the individual with the loss over time in order to find healing.

- Draw comfort from your faith and relationship with God.
- Talk and spend time with loved ones and friends. Discussing the nature of the loss and leaning on others for support can really aid the grieving process.
- Joining a bereavement or grief support group. Groups are available in almost all cities and are usually associated with hospice and hospitals. These are solid forums where you can connect with others that have also experienced loss.
- Talking with a licensed therapist. They can lead you through the journey

and help you find peace and closure while still treasuring the memories and moments prior to the loss.

Individuals that struggle with the grief process should seek a counselor. Unresolved grief and loss can contribute and/or create depression, obsessive-thinking, fear, struggles with closures, suppressed sexual libido, anxiety, and overall unhappiness with one's life. Hope and healing is possible. One need not think that the pain will stay. You can find peace.

Recommended Books:

Hickman, M. (1994) *Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations For Working Through Grief*, William Morrow Paperbacks.

Random, T. (1991) *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*. Bantam.

Noel, B. & Blair, P. (2008) *I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping and Healing After the Sudden Death of a Loved One*, Sourcebooks.

References:

1. Kubler-Ross, E. (2005) *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*, Simon & Schuster Ltd.

Copyright: No part of this article in section or full may be reproduced without permission from the author Justin Stum, MS LMFT. The one and only exception is for educational purposes and only if the contact information below for the author is fully cited here in article. Justin Stum, MS LMFT, 640 E. 700 S., Suite 103, St. George Utah 84770 435-574-9193, <http://www.justinstum.com>