

## **Tasks of Grieving**

*Based on the work of J. William Worden and Therese Rando*

### **Accepting the reality of the loss**

- ∞ Numbness and disbelief protect from initial pain after the loss.
- ∞ Intellectual vs. emotional acceptance
  - We may know in our minds that our loved one is gone, but feeling it emotional more difficult.
- ∞ Obsessional review
  - Because letting go can be very difficult, sometimes people play an endless film memories, trying to hold our loved one in the present. This happens most often a few months.
  - It is not unusual to see or hear the deceased during this time. This typically does not mean that you're hallucinating or even seeing "ghosts." Paying attention to how you feel about the loss is important to understand its meaning. Sometimes it can be a comfort to say goodbye.
- ❖ Part of this task is to allow yourself to feel the pain, which makes the loss real. Very often the energy we expend trying to prevent ourselves from feeling the pain only serves to feed the pain and make it worse. When we stop pushing it away, it loses some intensity. For most people, experiencing the pain is not nearly as difficult or traumatic as the fear of it.

### **Doing one's duty to the deceased**

- ∞ Guilt
  - Many people feel as though they failed during their loved one's life, or could have prevented the death in some way.
  - Others feel guilty for being happy, or even laughing after the death.
  - The adage "don't speak ill of the dead" leaves many people idealizing their deceased one, and may feel guilty remembering negative things about them.
  - Some may also experience "survivor guilt," feeling that they should have died or in addition to the deceased.
- ∞ Hindsight bias – "I should have known!" Some people overestimate what they could have known and feel guilty for missing it. This includes being aware of illnesses before doctors, preventing loved ones from participating in an activity that was involved in the death, feeling that they should have known when or how the deceased would die.
- ∞ Duty to suffer – Along with not speaking ill of the dead, some people feel that they cannot possibly experience joy when their loved one isn't there to experience it also. It can feel like grieving is a duty to suffer, as though it is inappropriate to return to an enjoyable life. The work here is to allow the past to be the past, and to move forward in life in a way that honors the deceased without being chained to the associated suffering.
- ∞ Doing one's duty can also be productive, in continuing work that the deceased had started or volunteering for a cause important to the loved one.

### **Taking or Letting Go of Control**

- ∞ Confronting helplessness
  - One of the most challenging things to accept can be that we don't have control, particularly over death. This can feel like we then have control over nothing, a

giving up on everything.

Erin E. Emery-Tiburcio, PhD  
Rush University Medical Center  
© 2019

- Part of the work on this task is to examine what we do actually have control over (our own behavior), and start to be more flexible with everything else.
- ∞ Making creative, meaningful choices
  - While we certainly can't control everything, or even most things, we can make choices that are meaningful. This may include ways of honoring the deceased at holiday events (e.g., a rose on a chair at the front of a wedding for a deceased parent). This may also include making choices to care for ourselves, help others, or help the community.

### **Finding a sense of purpose**

- ∞ As humans, we are hard-wired to try to make sense of even apparently random events. We do our best to make sense of the loss even if it doesn't make sense. We ask, "why now?", "why me?" or "what did I do wrong?" because the death seems senseless or we rarely get answers to those questions.
- ∞ We need to move from sense-making of the death to sense-making of the life. This involves looking at the life of the deceased and our own life. We may never know why someone died, or why they died the way they did. But we can examine what the deceased brought to our lives and the lives of others. We can consider what purpose we would like our own life to have before we die.
- ∞ When a loved one dies, some people feel wronged, or robbed of their loved one. It can feel like a right that was taken away. Shifting from thinking about life as a right to thinking about it as a gift can be helpful in using that gift to the furthest extent possible for ourselves and possibly for others.

### **Relearning the World**

- ∞ In its simplest form, this task can include learning how to do some of the things that they had done in your daily life. This could include managing investments, setting the alarm, or navigating around town.
- ∞ Establishing new relationships based on new views of self and world
  - It can be very difficult to engage in new relationships with the fear that the new person will just die also. We need to accept that people will come and go from our lives. We can enjoy and learn from them while they are here. It can feel like risking loss, but are we losing by insulating ourselves from the world?
  - Changing nature of the relationship to the deceased. When a loved one dies, our feelings for them live on. In that respect, the relationship doesn't end, but it changes. We can develop a new relationship that is fulfilling in a different way.
- ∞ Embracing new life perspective – when life changes, we have opportunities to shift how we see the world or remain stuck in our previous habits.
- ∞ What can I count on? Part of this task is figuring out what we can count on, and focusing on the choices we have in this moment. The work involves remaining in the present to prevent depression (getting stuck in the past) and anxiety (getting stuck in the future, or "what if" thinking).

### **"STUG" reactions**

- ∞ Sudden Temporary Upsurge of Grief
- ∞ We may be going along well in the grief process when suddenly we experience an enormous upsurge of grief that appeared to come from nowhere. *This is normal.* Not everyone has it, but many people do. Having a STUG reaction doesn't mean that you're back at square one in the process. It doesn't mean that you'll be experiencing these regularly and never be able to move forward.

forward. Most people who experience STUG reactions only have a couple of them, and then with decreasing frequency and intensity over time.

Erin E. Emery-Tiburcio, PhD  
Rush University Medical Center  
© 2019