



HOW TO COPE WITH OUR LOSSES?



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„Mourning requires full devotion, until the heart-rending pain transforms into something more manageable.“

OUR LOSSES

„It is one of the mysteries of our nature that a man, all unprepared, can receive a thunder-stroke like that and live. There is but one reasonable explanation of it. The intellect is stunned by the shock and but gropingly gathers the meaning of the words. The power to realize their full import is mercifully lacking. The mind has a dumb sense of vast loss—that is all. It will take mind and memory months, and possibly years, to gather together the details, and thus learn and know the whole extent of the loss.“- Mark Twain’s Autobiography (on his adored, 24 year old daughter’s sudden death)

During our life every now and then we lose, leave and let go others. Loss inevitably accompanies human life. By loss we not only mean a closely related person’s death, but also the end of a relationship, the ruption of an important friendship, the permanent deterioration of our health condition, the loss of a pregnancy, or even moving, changing school or workplace.

We need to cope with emotions, pain and grief coming from our losses in order to be able to continue living psychologically healthy. Dealing with tough emotions is a process, which is greatly needed. In fact, mourning is a natural reaction to loss. Even Freud wrote down that grieving process is extremely difficult, slow, painful and it is a work consisting of tiny steps, which will result in us being capable of letting go the lost person or situation.

If we can not mourn, it can lead to vast of negative consequences, various physical or psychical disorders may come up. Mourning is actually beneficial, it is a way to reduce pain. Amongst the above-mentioned losses maybe the most difficult is the death of a loved one. On one hand, it is because there is the fact of irreversibility, the final end of the relationship, on the other hand, because in this case we are forced to face our own perishableness as well.

In everyday life most of us think little about how our life will come to an end with death, but in these situations our death-related anxious thoughts can easily arise. Beside the activation of death-related fears, the death of a loved one provokes very often a sense of guilt in the relatives, since they are alive, but the loved one isn’t. It can occur that they feel guilt because they continue their daily activities in the same manner as before, or even because they feel good or laugh freely from time to time.

THE RITUALS OF MOURNING

In former ages, mourning had punctual rules. For example, black clothing was a sign to the bereaved person's environment that he is going through a difficult period in life, so others should pay attention to him, spare him. Nowadays unfortunately most of the rituals of mourning have worn out. However, the formalities, the ceremonies and rituals of mourning are the ones which facilitate the relatives' ability to let the lost person go little by little.

Burying the body, the burial-feast, mourning, keeping the mourning period, all these help the remaining people to experience their emotions, to weep their eyes out, to get support from their environment, so that they will be able to reach the state of resignation, acceptance. Mourning collectively, telling anecdotes of the deceased enhance the feeling in the bereaved person that he is not alone with his pain.

In these days there are many cases when the deceased doesn't even have a tomb, however in the terms of relief, it is very important to have a place which one can visit habitually. In modern societies very often the bereaved has to go through alone this tough period. Oftentimes the bereaved people feel that they have to seem strong and disciplined, that they need to cover up their natural pain from the world, which considerably aggravates the work of mourning.

Firstly, it means a lot, if there is at least one person beside the bereaved in whose company one can freely cry and can seem to be weak and low-spirited. Secondly, the bereaved himself can create individualized rituals for his own sake, which help him to remember the lost person.

Rituals are not only significant in cases of death-related mourning, but they promote moving forward when relationships break up (whether romantic, whether friendly), if we give a chance to say goodbye personally or even to write a goodbye note. When a relationship has been cut off suddenly, without any discussion, its processing becomes extremely tough, and it can have a longlasting mark on one's heart.

THE STAGES OF GRIEF

Following loss, grief reaction can run its course approximately in a year. This time is necessary to be able to adopt to a new situation, which has convulsed our former life. Naturally, there can be huge personal differences in this, but it is worth being aware that what we go through is not a permanent state, but is the part of a process, which we need to get over and which will once come to end. There are severely burdensome circumstances which can explain if grief lasts even for 2-3 years. This is the case when a parent loses his child, or when the deceased is a victim of a violent crime, or when because of a catastrophe (for example a bus accident) the person loses several people at the same time.

Even after the grief period has passed, the family occasions, birthdays, all souls' day, the anniversary of the death all recall the crisis again and again, the bereaved have to create

new habits without the lost one.

During the period of mourning there can be various individual types of reaction, this is why it is important to emphasize the uniqueness and diversity of mourning. However, whether it is a death, a breakup or losing a workplace, we can observe certain tendencies regarding the course of the process. There are multiple models which describe the stages of grief. János Pilling separated 6 stages in grief, which we will introduce down below by the example of a closely-related person's death.

1. ANTICIPATORY GRIEF:

In case of a long lasting, chronic illness we can talk about 'anticipatory' grief, when family members have time and opportunity to say goodbye to the dying person, in fact they start to engage in the thought of passing, and prepare for mourning. In certain cases this can support the process of coping with loss.

2. SHOCK:

In the next couple of hours or days following the happening, practically speaking any kind of reaction may occur. Many people first react by denial, indifference, paralysation, which might mislead their environment. In other cases they may respond with intense physical symptoms (sickness, shortness of breath, throat tension, digestive system-related problems), crying, wailing, uncontrollable emotions. The waves of grief alternate with flabbergasted incomprehension.

3. CONTROLLED STAGE:

The bereaved gets into a more organized state due to the necessary tasks (for example arranging the funeral) he needs to carry out. On one hand, he may realize that he has to deal with issues alone (without the loved one), on the other hand, in this stage he may get huge support from his environment. Some experience helplessness, the decrease of self-confidence, because these must-do tasks require an enormous amount of effort. Others may show increased activity in order to distract their attention from their negative feelings.

4. APPERCEPTION:

This is the most difficult and longest stage of grief. Emotions burst out uncontrollably, they overwhelm the bereaved. In addition to sorrow and helplessness, powerful emotions, guilt and self-accusation can appear. The relative may experience intense anger towards the deceased (or the abandoning person), because he „left“ him here. Nevertheless many times bereaved people don't let themselves to be angry with the deceased, but they idealize him, and instead of him, the anger is vented towards the environment or those people who were directly or indirectly present at the death (for example doctors, participants of the accident).

Self-accusation might develop due to mistakes which have been made in the relationship with the deceased while he was living, or even because the bereaved himself has stayed alive. The person who was left here might feel lonely, abandoned,

his sense of security, his ability to feel joyful may decrease. Still, if he feels joy or laughs freely, it might be mixed with bitterness, because he is no longer able to share these joyful moments with the loved one. However, besides negative emotions, a sense of relief can also come up in cases when for example death made an end of a long-lasting illness causing severe disintegration.

In this period the bereaved person's most thoughts connect to the lost person, person-related memories may arise in any moment – whether about a death or about a breakup. It may be common to innerly dialogize with the lost person or to meet him regularly in dreams. Temporarily there can be perceptual disturbances, when the bereaved is convinced to hear the lost person's voice or to see him in the crowd on the street. If these phenomena last for a short period of time, they are occasional and solely related to the lost person, then they are not considered pathological.

Nonetheless the bereaved might feel an emerging fear of going insane because of the weird, so far unexperienced phenomena. One can expect not only perceptual disturbances, but also physical symptoms as tight chest, dizziness, headache, weakness, lack of sleep, muscle pain, digestive system-related problems, loss of appetite and decreased sexual drive. Generally, withdrawal from social life, decelerated motions, decrease in mimicry, inability to make decisions can be observed. The person may become irritable, impatient, introverted in his relationships. His ability to perform, his working capacity decline, during his work or studies he can get absent-minded, paying attention requires a lot more effort than before.

5. REVISION:

In this phase it is still the remembrance of the deceased which fills the major part of the bereaved person's thoughts, but the emotions are more bearable, physical symptoms are moderated. He still cries, and is longing for the lost person, but starts to develop strategies to adaptation. The bereaved begin to accept rationally the fact of the loss, he remembers back to the loved person more and more consciously, and positive memories come to the front. Fantasizing and remembrance help the permanent imprinting of the person-related memories. The ritual of remembrance is being established as well, and in this context, the bereaved is able to create personal habits. When he finds his specific, unique way how to face the loss, then the work of mourning is near to its end. This stage isn't sharply separated from the previous one. It can occur that the bereaved falls back to the previous stage and the chaotic state recurs. The shifts between the two stages can last for months.

6. ADAPTATION:

In the last stage, emotions are taken back which doesn't mean that the lost person must be forgotten. It means that the bereaved doesn't think of him as living in the present anymore, but the deceased person's memory has become internal, the bereaved has built in his values, a part of his personality and carries those on within him. In addition to this, he will be able to turn his attention to everyday life again. He thinks back to the lost person no longer with intense pain, but he is able to think of him with joy, can speak of him without being drowned in sorrow and despair. During weekdays he is able to feel good without guilt. Physical symptoms disappear,

life gets back on track, the bereaved is capable of looking at the future and making plans again. He can open towards others (instead of having a narrow-minded state), and focus on everyday issues. He is becoming able to reorganize his life adapting to the loss, and to change his behaviour, his self-definition, perhaps to create new roles. Processing of the loss draws to a close when the experienced disaster starts making sense in the person's life, the world can be reconstructed and the given event infiltrate into the development of personality.

COMPLICATED MOURNING

We speak of complicated or pathological mourning reaction if the grieving process differs from the above described, normal process in its length, intensity or form of appearance.

We talk about prolonged mourning if somebody sticks in the intense, inconsolable grief, and is incapable of continuing his life. It can occur, that the occupation with the lost person, the angry protestation don't stop, the grieving process is stuck, and it is like grief itself kept the lost person alive. It can be also a warning sign, when the bereaved is not able to get rid of the deceased person's clothes or objects, but instead he preserves everything in the same way he left those in his life. Some believe that clinging to the grief is actually loyalty to the deceased, and giving up grief is like a betrayal.

If the bereaved shows excessive liberation, activity or even excessive discipline, it refers to a mourning reaction which differs from normal. This forced, accelerated regeneration can lead to suppressed emotions appearing in the form of physical illnesses, or it can flip over later resulting in delayed, prolonged sorrow, mood disturbances. In rare cases it can happen, that somebody is so incapable of facing the reality, that he escapes to a so-called psychotic state, losing his connection to reality, in order to „save“ himself from the unbearable pain of the loss.

It can also happen that the remaining person identifies himself with the deceased to such an extent that he wants to die with him, in such case self-harming behaviours (excessive smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs, having an accident, self-harm) or severe suicidal risk may arise. In such situations it is definitely essential to get help from a psychologist or psychiatrist.

There are several factors which can lead to the derailment of a natural grief process. The work of mourning is greatly aggravated if the loss of the loved one or object (workplace, home) happens in a sudden, unforeseen way, because at such times there is no opportunity to say goodbye, to close the relationship. It particularly burdens the bereaved person if he lost his loved one due to a murder or suicide. In this case anger, confusion, incomprehension, guilt or even fear can be attached to the pain caused by the loss.

Grief becomes more likely pathological, prolonged, if the relationship with the lost one was conflicted, or there was a too close dependent relation between the two of them. In this case normal grief can easily be transformed into a clinical depression, followed by huge mood and anger fluctuations. It is especially a risk factor, if the bereaved has earlier suffered from depression, or if the year before the loss he has also gone through a crisis. For example when on the top of a chronic, irreversible illness somebody loses his workplace, and after that his marriage breaks up. Crisis which shows up at multiple life areas can burden the person to such a degree, that the earlier functioning coping mechanisms are no longer enough to process the events.

The length and process of grief greatly depend on the person's personality, earlier psychical disorders, actual psychical state, available external and internal resources and on the losses occurred in previous life stages. It can happen that the bereaved is not capable to cope with the actual loss and get through the work of mourning, because in a previous life stage (for example in childhood) he has already undergone a severe loss, which he wasn't able to cope with. In this case the new loss can activate the older, not yet processed loss too. That is why it is possible, that from the environment's point of view the person responds to the actual loss inexplicably, in an exaggerated way.

It is an important factor what somebody experiences in his childhood, how the environment- especially the parents -mourn, how much they are able to go through and express emotions, to cope with a situation adequately. A child's personality is not mature yet to be capable of doing the work of mourning independently after a severe loss. He is able to cope with his negative emotions optimally only if his parents or a close loved one provide emotional security, acceptance for him and they involve him in their own grief, teach him the way of mourning. Oftentimes it happens, that there isn't such a person in the child's environment or the parents don't have the skills and resources to do the work of mourning and to help the child in it.

In these cases it is possible, that the loss becomes conserved, it remains in the soul as an inclusion, and even after many years the person still has a feeling like he was carrying heavy burdens. Even in adulthood being stuck in grief can result in mood- or anxiety-related, physical symptoms or in relationship problems. The good news is that it is never too late to do the work of mourning. Whether decades has passed since the loss, there is point in working with it, but in this case, it is worth turning to a psychologist/psychiatrist or to a therapeutic group for help.

A loss which has happened in a previous life stage but was successfully processed can be a resource as well, as on one hand the person has already an experience that he is able to deal with a tough, burdensome situation, and on the other hand, he may also have an evolved toolkit, which can help him to endure difficult emotions.

THE FRUIT OF GRIEF

As we mentioned it above, loss can also be an event which facilitates the growth of the personality. It is possible, that after the transition of the grieving process, the person's personality goes through a considerable positive change, so-called posttraumatic growth. Mourning actually offers an opportunity to carefully examine the relationships and the life lived so far. At such times, many people re-evaluate what is really important in life, they pay more attention to the care of their relationships. Their relationships may also improve because they become more accepting, emphatic and tolerant towards other people, as well as they value more the support received from others.

Via successful coping the person's self-confidence increases, he mobilizes new kind of inner resources within himself, his attitude to life changes. There is the opportunity to value life more, to deal with daily problems and stress more effectively, to experience gratitude and joy more frequently. Regarding the course of life, an accepting approach can be born within them. They are living rather in the present moment, than ruminating on the past or future. They look at the course of life as a circulation, they accept that change and passing are natural parts of life. With the completion of the work of mourning the loss makes sense and becomes a promotive factor.

WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU HAVE JUST LOST SOMEONE?

Because mourning- as we have already written down above- is a natural reaction, it doesn't necessarily require involving a psychologist/psychiatrist per se. However, if you feel that you can not cope with this burden alone, or you can not find adequate support in your relationships, you can ask for professional help, even from the psychologists working at the BME Student Counselling Department (<https://hszi.bme.hu/tanacsadas/pszichologia/>).

Many times thematic grief support groups can be sufficient (gyaszportal.hu), where you can meet people who are going through a similar painful period as you, so you can experience that you are not alone with your difficulties.

IF THERE IS A BEREAVED PERSON IN YOUR ENVIRONMENT...

What you shouldn't say to the bereaved person:

The environment – understandably - is often clueless how to help the bereaved. In spite of all our good intention, it can happen that we give such advices to the bereaved person which only put greater burden on him and prevent the natural course of mourning. We shouldn't say the followings to a bereaved person:

- You have to be strong!
- Don't cry, don't be sad!
- Get over it, life goes on!
- You will find somebody else!

HOW YOU CAN HELP THE BEREAVED PERSON:

You can do the followings, if you would like to help a bereaved person in your environment:

- **Just be present!**

Maybe it doesn't seem to be big deal, but many times what helps the most is to make the bereaved person feel that he is not alone, he can count on you, you are beside him. Even if he only needs you to sit silently next to him.

- **Listen to him!**

During the work of mourning it is natural, that the bereaved person's every thought is centered around the lost person. It can happen, that he tells the circumstances of death or breakup again and again. It is a good thing, because it facilitates the processing of the events, the gradual release of the loss. Sometimes to the audience it can be tiring to listen to the same stories repetitively, but the best you can do is to listen to him patiently without giving your opinion or advice.

- **Accept his feelings!**

As we mentioned above, the bereaved person goes through an extremely wide scale of emotions, and in order to be able to let go his loss later, it is important that he may experience his feelings. With your accepting presence you can make him feel that he is allowed to cry, to be angry, desperate, and he doesn't have to feel guilt either for joy.

- **Give him time, don't make him hurry!**

As we described earlier, processing loss has a long course, it can last from a few months even to a year. The length and the nature of mourning depend on several factors. Thus the biggest help is to let him go through this tough period in his own pace.

FIND SUPPORT:

- Visiting the gyaszportal.hu website, you will find constantly beginning grief support groups.
- You can apply to our psychological counselling:
<https://hszi.bme.hu/tanacsadas/pszichologia/>



Book recommendations:

James, J. W. and Friedman, R. (2009). *The Grief Recovery Handbook, 20th Anniversary Expanded Edition: The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses including Health, Career, and Faith*. New York, NY: Harper-Collins Publishers.

Bonanno, G. A. (2009). *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Devine, M. (2017). *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*. Canada, Sounds True, Inc.

Kübler-Ross, E. and Kessler, D. (2005). *On grief and grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*. New York, NY: Scribner



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