



Family and Caregiver Education

BEREAVEMENT

Understanding Secondary Losses in Grief

Loss forever changes the world of the bereaved. It's a new environment, personal and social, an environment where the lost object is no longer present. An ending has occurred that demands new beginnings. Before that happens, a period of transition takes place. During this time, the bereaved closely examines what has been lost and what has been gained as a consequence of the ending. What has actually changed? What continues the same? What is new? What experiences, roles, expectations, values, opportunities, fantasies are to be given up? What new ones must be assumed?

All of the current and potential losses that follow as a result of the loss are to be identified. Each identified secondary loss requires its own grief response. Unfinished business that involves the loss is also to be identified. Appropriate ways to adjust and accommodate are sought out. It is often difficult for the family and friends of an individual who has recently experienced the loss of a loved one to understand why the grieving process lasts so long. Family and friends want to see their loved one be happy and "get on with life." It is important, therefore, to be aware of the many secondary losses that can accompany grief. This awareness may help the grieving person, as well as others who care about this individual, to be more patient and move more gently during this period of grief – which often can last at least two to five years.

The following are some of the many different losses a person may experience after the death of a loved one:

1. Loss of the Loved One – the loss that is obvious, and consequently considered by many to be the only loss.
2. Loss of a Large Chunk of Self – the part of the self that was given to the other person in love, and that at death seems to be violently wrenched from one's being.
3. Loss of Identity – the "roles of service" used in the relationship: the feeling of wholeness that is lost when the other person is no longer present and the role is no longer played.
4. Loss of Self-Confidence – the failure to recognize one's own personal wholeness, leading to feelings of inadequacy, of not being able to do anything right.
5. Loss of Chosen Lifestyle – being forced to begin a new way of life despite one's personal wishes or choice (e.g. being single again; being childless again).

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6. Loss of Security – the uncertainty of not knowing what to expect, what will happen next, or how one will emotionally react or respond.
7. Loss of Feeling Safe – the vulnerability of feeling exposed to the cold winds of life all alone.
8. Loss of a Known Family Structure – the instant change in family composition.
9. Loss of the Familiar Way of Relating to/with Family and Friends – the avoidance of family and friends stemming from their not knowing how to respond to the bereaved's changed interests, as well as the sadness and anger that often are felt by the bereaved.
10. Loss of the Past – despite the support and acceptance of new friends and acquaintances and their lack of a sense of the bereaved's past journey of his/her history with the deceased.
11. Loss of the Future – the fear of thinking ahead, of imagining next year or next month or next week without the loved one; the fear that whatever future there is will be as painful as the present moment.
12. Loss of Direction – the sense that nothing seems to matter anymore, that there is no purpose in life.
13. Loss of Dreams – the disappearance of all those plans: for “spending the rest of my life with the person I love,” of “seeing my child grow up,” of “having my parents be grandparents.”
14. Loss of Trust – the insecurity that interferes with trusting oneself, and makes trusting anyone else nearly impossible.
15. Loss of Sharing with a Loved One – having no one (a best friend, a confidant) to listen to the little things (and the big events) of day-to-day living, or to share in the “growing-up years” of a child.
16. Loss of Ability to Focus – the difficulty in focusing on what seems to be the “non-essentials” of the rest of life because one's entire being is so affected by the loss.
17. Loss of Ability to See Choices – the sense that the bereaved has no control at all over his/her life, since the new lifestyle was not a conscious choice.
18. Loss of Ability to Make Decisions – the insecurity and lack of trust in oneself that leads to the looking to others for direction and advice (“What should I do?”), followed by confusion and indecision because everyone gives a different answer.
19. Loss of A Sense of Humor – the failure to see anything as funny because one of the most important people in one's life is no longer around.
20. Loss of Health – the physical problems resulting from the emotional stress and strain of grief work: nausea, migraine headaches, muscle knots, back problems, etc.
21. Loss of Inner Happiness and Joy – the difficulty in recognizing happiness in one's own life coupled with the normal tendency to look outside oneself for a source of inner happiness.
22. Loss of Patience with Self – the desire to feel better now coupled with feelings of inadequacy and failure, as the feelings of grief normally last for two to five years.

It is very important to note that some individuals may experience additional losses not mentioned in this list, and some of the losses listed might not be experienced by everyone who is grieving. This list is presented to help all of us (grievers, friends, relatives and helpers) understand why nothing can replace the grieving process: the period of time it takes for the wound of loss to become a scar, and for the darkness of grief to become the light of life.