Navigating loss and grief across the lifespan - An interdisciplinary perspective.

Drew University
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Faces of loss and grief across the life span

Unpleasant
Painful
Unavoidable
Universal
Normal
Necessary
Important
Full of potential
Grief reactions

**Emotional**
- Despair, powerlessness, hopelessness
- Sadness, anxiety, fear
- Guilt, self-blame
- Anger, irritability
- Numbness, emptiness
- Loneliness, yearning, longing

**Cognitive**
- Altered sense of reality
- Occupation with loss/deceased
- Problems with memory and concentration
- Sensory changes

**Physical**
- Increase in stress hormones
- Dysregulation of breathing, appetite, sleep
- Decreased energy, fatigue, tension
- Somatic complaints: dizziness, nausea, pains and aches
- Immune response fails

**Social**
- Crying, restlessness
- Hyperactivity
- No interest in social contact
- Search behaviors
- Isolation, avoidance
- Rituals
- Challenges with communication

**Spiritual**
- Why me/us?
- Is it my fault?
- Who am I now?
- What do I want to do with my life?
- What is the meaning of my life?
- Which values are important to me?
- What is my purpose?
- Do I live my life as I want to?
Models in understanding death or grief

**Stages of dying**  
(Kübler-Ross, 1969)
- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

**Stages and tasks of grief**  
(Freud; Cullberg, 1980, Worden, 1984)
- Accept the reality
- Process the emotional pain
-Adjust to the new reality
- Embark on new life

Grief closure/reactions are put behind us
Continuing bonds  (Klass, Silverman & Nickman 1999)

We don’t let go.  
We look for ways to continue  
the relationship through  
memories and rituals.

It is helpful to find a way to  
emotional connectedness with  
the lost.

Connectedness supports the  
person’s self understanding  
and finding a way forward
Dual process model  

(Stroebe & Schut, 1999)

Loss

Grief work
Intrusion of grief
Letting go – relocating bond
Avoidance of restoration

Restoration

Attending to life changes
Learning new things
Distraction/avoidance of grief
New roles/identity/relationships

Every day experiences

Oscillation back and forth

Avoidance of restoration
A narrowed understanding of grief

1) Not all losses are acknowledged and researched
2) Dominant grief models are from one single discipline: psychology
3) The existential dimension of grief is underdeveloped
4) The different dimensions of grief are not integrated
The Integrative Process Model of loss and grief

- Saunders (1967): Total pain
- Yalom (1980): Ultimate concerns
- Bowlby (1980): Phases
- Worden (1991): Tasks
- Stroebe & Schut (1999): Dual Process Model
- Leget (2012): Diamond model
- Guldin (2018): Grief facilitation model
Grief always honors a loss. A grieving person is trying to show us what the loss means to them.

If we can meet the grieving person in their struggle, we can provide support and prevent further suffering.

"Where is sorrow, there is holy ground”
(Oscar Wilde)
We are not looking for a way to get away from grief. We are looking for a way into the grief. When we can be in contact with our grief, we can learn to live with the losses in our life.
We develop with grief and grow to integrate grief in our lives, thoughts, and emotions. Some persons even feel existential transformation.
Grief as an existential experience

“Living an authentic and free human life, in honesty and connectedness with yourself and other beings”
Death – Freedom – Isolation - Meaning

Four ‘ultimate concerns’

The “givens of existence,” or an “inescapable part” of being human, that every person must come to terms with through active choices to realize their individual potential (Yalom 1980)
GRIEF

Ultimate concern:
- Isolation
- Freedom
- Freedom
- Death
- Transcendence

Existential tension:
- Being open to resonance (aesthetical, ethical, religious), finding new meaningful goals

Central task:
- Finding ground again, connecting to self and vulnerability
- Emotion regulation, contact with grief, care for self
- Understand and be aware of your grief, honor and express it meaningfully
- Being open to resonance (aesthetical, ethical, religious), finding new meaningful goals
- Continuing bonds, seeking support, letting go

Embracing life Accepting death

Reflective awareness
- Embodied awareness
- Undergoing
- Taking responsibility

Meaning
Meaninglessness

Aloneness
Connectedness
**Integrative Process Model**

**Cognitive**
- What is my grief about?
- How can I get acquainted with my grief?
- How can I grief this loss meaningfully?

**Emotional**
- How can I practice self-care?
- How/when do I connect to my grief?
- How can I honor my grief?

**Physical**
- How can I stabilize my body?
- How can I live with the reality of the loss?
- How will I get acquainted with loss and death?

**Social**
- How can I continue the bond?
- How can I let go of/change the bond?
- How can I reach out to others and connect?

**Spiritual**
- How is this loss changing my understanding of life?
- How can I find meaning again?
- What are my revised goals in life?

**Aloneness**
- Connectedness

**Being**
- Responsibility

**Reflective**
- Embodied awareness

**Embracing life**
- Accepting death

**Meaning**
- Meaninglessness
Messages for an informed practice

• Loss and grief come in many shapes and forms during our lives
• Grief is a form of love and a testimony of a meaningful connectedness (“Where is sorrow, there is holy ground”)
• Because of its meaningfulness grief can be a window to existential awareness
• Navigating loss and grief across the life span, is an invitation to face the ultimate concerns in life: death, freedom, isolation, meaning and transcendence
Thank you for your attention