

After the Floods: Living with Grief

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Grief and Our Humanity

When human beings experience a significant loss, they grieve. That applies to all races and all cultures, and as far back as historical records go. To quote a wise person who was challenging prejudices, "We all bleed the same colour." Joys and sorrows, laughter and tears are part of our human existence, and when we don't allow ourselves to cry and feel our sorrow we also inhibit our ability to laugh and feel joy.

It is the nature of mammals (including humans) for the mother to provide nourishment both before and after a baby is born. To ensure the survival of the baby, there is a part of the brain that enables the formation of a bond or attachment between mother and child. For humans, this process is then extended to both parents and family members. This attachment to family and to wider groupings supports emotional and physical growth and development of personality.

While the formation of attachments serves a healthy purpose, attachments can be broken – people die, people leave, treasured objects get broken, jobs end, homes are lost. These losses can have a powerful impact and healing is necessary so that new bonds can be made and emotional health restored.

Grief as a Healing Process

Rather than seeing grief as an illness to be cured or as something to be got over as quickly as possible, grief can be regarded as an essential healing process. Just as the human body has natural healing powers that can be supported, grief is another such healing capacity that has its own timetable. It takes as long as it takes. When a bone is broken, it heals better if there is support and stability. The healing happens from within but the support helps.

Similarly, grief is a natural process that can be assisted with appropriate support. Such support will assist the person to feel their feelings and will avoid 'cheer up' messages that try to speed up the process.

This takes some practice, as it is not easy to see someone else in pain, and especially children. So there is a tendency to want to make people feel better. At Paradise Kids, we say that we are not there "to make children feel better but to be better at feeling." Going into the feelings, even when they are painful, actually helps the grief process.

For a person grieving, and for those providing support, it can be helpful to be aware of factors that are natural components of the grief process. These will vary greatly depending on the significance and the circumstances of the loss for the particular person, unique in both personality and prior experiences.

The Impacts of Grief

Attachments are formed in the part of the brain that has to do with relationships and emotions. The experience of loss, then, leads to the release of chemicals into the blood stream. All of a person's body is affected, and grief is a whole of body experience that has physical, emotional, mental and behavioural impacts. These are similar to the flight-or-fight reaction triggered by severe stress or as an accident.

Physical: Pain in the heart, tightness in the throat, chest and stomach, oversensitivity to noise, breath-

lessness, lack of energy, dry mouth, susceptibility to illness, sense of disconnection from surroundings.

Emotional: Sadness, anxiety, anger, insecurity, loneliness, helplessness, shock, yearning for who or what is lost, numbness, relief, guilt, self-reproach.

Mental: Disbelief, confusion, preoccupation with the past, sense of the presence the one lost, anxiety about going crazy, fear that crying will never stop.

Behavioural: Disturbances of sleep and appetite, absent mindedness, withdrawal from others, dreams of the past, searching and calling out, sighing, restlessness, crying, treasuring objects, seeking or avoiding reminders of who or what was lost.

These are all examples of normal grief reactions, although the range and extent can vary greatly from person to person and at different age levels.

Tasks of Mourning

In supporting others or reflecting on one's own grief experience, the four Tasks of Mourning identified by William Worden can be helpful. While his focus was on loss through death, the same tasks can be applied to other significant losses, such as a relationship ending, loss of health, a child leaving home, losing a job, and loss of a home through fire, flood or other hardship.

William Worden suggests four tasks through which grieving people resolve their grief and move on:

- 1. To Accept the Reality of the Loss:** To fully face the reality of what has happened and to understand that reversal of the loss is not possible. This may take weeks, months or even years.
- 2. To Work through to the Pain of Grief:** To get the grief work done requires acknowledging and feeling the pain of grief, both physically and emotionally, with a wide range of normal feelings. Anything that allows the person to avoid or suppress this pain can prolong the course of mourning.
- 3. To Adjust to an Environment without Who or What has been Lost:** Despite feelings of helplessness, this involves and major changes in roles, in the sense of self and of the world, and in life values.
- 4. To Emotionally relocate Who or What has been Lost and to move on with Life:** This doesn't mean giving up the past but finding an appropriate emotional place for it, then growing into a new life, putting time and energy into new people and things.

The Role of Paradise Kids

Paradise Kids is a Division of Hopewell Hospice Services Inc., which commenced on the Gold Coast in 1994 to provide palliative care in a home-style setting for people unable to be at home at the end of life.

Paradise Kids supports children and their families through painful experiences of grief, loss and illness. The Centre at Arundel serves the Gold Coast, and the Greenslopes Centre serves Brisbane. Also, rural families with seriously ill children are provided with a Gold Coast holiday and counselling support.

In the Paradise Kids programs, grief and illness are recognised as powerful life experiences. With support, a person's natural healing capacities can help them get through the experience. They can even be enabled to learn and grow, becoming better able to deal with such experiences in future.