

**OVERCOMING GRIEF:  
A KEY TO RESILIENCE**  
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Grief is an emotional response to a loss. It usually involves several stages, which include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Although many people go through these stages in a fairly predictable order, there is considerable overlap among the stages. Working through the stages of grief can eventually lead to the positive outcomes of recovery, resolution, and resilience. However, these outcomes are like a distant shore when one is drowning in those first powerful waves of grief.

In understanding the journey from bereavement and grief to resolution and resilience, it may be helpful to understand some of the processes involved. *Bereavement* refers to the state of being that results from a significant loss. It encompasses a wide range of reactions--emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physical, and spiritual. *Grief* refers to the internal process of regaining equilibrium. It requires reorganization on both emotional and cognitive levels, and includes a re-evaluation of spiritual concerns. *Anticipatory grief* refers to grief that occurs prior to the loss. While it does not prepare one for the loss, anticipatory grief does allow time for resolution of some issues. For this reason, the sudden death of a loved one is particularly difficult for the survivors because it does not provide any time for anticipatory grief. *Mourning* refers to the public expression of grief, including religious rituals, which can vary considerably by culture. Whereas the experience of grief is internal, private, and individualistic in nature, the process of mourning is more external, public, and cultural in expression.. *Anniversary reactions* refer to experiences of the grief response at certain significant times, even after there has been resolution of grief.

In his classic article, Engel (1961) posed the question, "Is grief a disease?" Grief is not generally considered a disorder but rather is viewed as an adaptation to a loss. In this respect, the process of grieving is similar to the process of healing. It involves working through the stages of grief. The tasks of grieving include experiencing the pain of grief, accepting the reality of the loss, adjusting to an environment in which the loved one is missing, and withdrawing one's emotional energy and reinvesting it in another relationship. Failure to complete these tasks can result in *impacted grief*, which is a prolonged type of grief associated with depression. Impacted grief can block further growth and development. For example, the absence of family or social support during bereavement can complicate the process of grieving. Some of the early warning signs of unresolved grief are as follows:

- Avoiding the funeral, not visiting the gravesite, or not participating in other rituals.
- Not being able to talk about the lost loved one without experiencing intense grief.
- Experiencing an intense grief reaction triggered by some relatively minor event.
- Noticing that themes of loss seem to come up frequently in casual conversations.
- An inability or unwillingness to move material possessions belonging to the loved one.

- Feeling compelled to imitate or take on habits or personality characteristics of the loved one.
- Developing physical symptoms like those experienced by the deceased person before death.
- Developing self-destructive thoughts or, conversely, developing a fear or phobia about illness or death.
- Making radical changes in lifestyle, such as excluding one's friends, family members, or activities associated with the lost loved one.
- Experiencing unexplained periods of sadness, holiday blues, or "anniversary depression."

The resolution of grief requires accepting the reality of the loss, cognitively and emotionally, and reorganizing the facets of life in spite of the loss. However, resolution is not a return to the "old self." One never really returns to his or her former self. Instead, one incorporates the experience into what eventually becomes a new self. Reaching resolution requires working through grief, which takes time. As the old adage goes, "Time heals all wounds." Although the time required for healing may vary from person to person, the process of grieving involves several basic tasks (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999). The tasks described below can occur in a more or less orderly manner, although there is considerable overlap among the tasks.

**Experiencing emotional pain of the loss.** In the first sentence of *A Grief Observed*, published from the private diary of a husband whose wife had died, author C. S. Lewis (1961, p. 15), observed, "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear." The pain and suffering of grief are not overcome by avoiding pain, but

rather by experiencing and working through the pain. Although one's first response to a tragic loss may involve numbness or feeling nothing at all, one's first main task involves the simple but seemingly insurmountable task of experiencing the pain of the loss.

**Talking about the loved one and the death.** Sooner or later, experiencing the pain of loss involves talking about the loved one who has been lost. It is often a story that must be told over and over again. Yet there is a painful paradox to grief. Sometimes the family and friends that one has counted on the most in life are not even available, yet acquaintances and even strangers that one does not count on at all may seem to be the most ready to listen. In any event, having contact with those who care, particularly those who also knew and cared about the loved one, facilitates the process of sharing.

**Integrating the positive and the negative.** At first, the lost loved one may be idealized so that the survivor remembers only the positive, whereas life without the loved one may be empty, lonely, and bleak. There are many paradoxes in the experience of grief. For example, the most wonderful memories of the past suddenly become the most painful reminders of the loss. At other times, one's recollection of difficult times in the past may bring an unexpected smile. As one continues to share the stories, and begins to experience a different type of life, the sharp contrasts of black and white will eventually merge into more realistic shades of gray. Eventually, the wonderful memories of the past can become comforting reminders of hope and joy.

**Accepting the reality of the loss.** Although there is no timetable, the shock of losing the loved one will eventually start wearing off, and the reality of loneliness will begin setting in. In what has been described as one of the 10 most influential books ever written, Rabbi Harold Kushner emphasizes that the process of

recovery involves getting over the *why* questions that focus on the past and the pain: “Why did this happen?” Instead, we need to ask the question that opens the door to the future: “Now that this has happened, what shall I do about it?” (1981, p. 137). As one continues to plod along the path toward recovery, taking small steps toward creating a new life again, acceptance of a new reality slowly begins to emerge.

**Finding meaning in the experience.** Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl once wrote, “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering” (1969, p. 106). Frankl’s understanding of suffering was forged out of his survival of three years in four different Nazi concentration camps. Upon liberation from the death camps, when he returned to his native home of Vienna, he learned that his wife, his brother, and both of his parents had been killed in the camps. Frankl found redemption in suffering by finding meaning. In an interview shortly before his death at the age of 92, Frankl noted that he was still receiving an average of 23 letters each day, mostly from those thanking him for writing a book that changed their lives (“Frankl dies”, 1997). Frankl’s lifetime achievement was not only his monumental book, but also the fact that his suffering was forged into an instrument of redemption that changed the lives of millions. His life is a story of redemption, the process of transforming suffering into a meaningful purpose in life. As Frankl concluded, “Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way in the moment that it finds a meaning” (1969, p. 179).

**Letting go of the pain.** For many people, suffering is the most difficult thing to let go of. Paradoxically, there is often a strange comfort and familiarity associated with holding onto suffering. Over time, recovery from grief involves holding on to the memories—and letting go of the pain.

**Gradual lessening of the emotional pain.** One goes on living until one becomes alive again. At first, the waves of grief are very powerful, often knocking one down in what may seem like a soul crushing defeat. Over time, the waves become smaller and smaller, while the periods of calm become longer and longer. Eventually, there will come moments when the waves are a gentle memory.

The painful experience of grieving a loss can eventually lead to the positive outcomes of recovery, resolution, and resilience. *Recovery* involves the conscious process of working through the stages of grief. *Resolution* refers to the eventual outcome of accepting the reality of the loss, cognitively and emotionally, and reorganizing the facets of life. *Resilience* refers to one’s positive capacity to cope with future crises and even catastrophe.

Following the death of her husband of 39 years, writer Anne Roiphe (2008) observed, “Grief is in two parts. The first is loss. The second is the remaking of life” (p. 4). While many people complete the tasks of grieving on their own, the process of recovery can often be facilitated by talking with a psychologist who has training and experience in grief counseling. Although there are no short cuts, there are some effective ways of working through the stages of grief and discovering positive outcomes that are hardly imaginable when one is drowning in those first powerful waves of grief.

## References

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Gratitude and contentment are parts of overcoming grief and bereavement, but not necessarily the key: It's true that being grateful for what you still have helps redirect your focus away from the pain of sorrow. Looking at the positive side of life is beneficial; it gives you a sense of hope for the future, like, hey, at least I still have other things to be happy about, right? The key to dealing with grief is facing it head on. You are a soldier under attack. It's dark. Some even overcome the grief within days. What drives these people forward? What holds the others back? In the study, published in February in the Journal of Experimental Psychology, they found that some mourners are more emotionally resilient than others, and those who overcome their grief more quickly all have something very important in common. Following the loss, they performed what the researchers refer to as "rituals" in the study. My journey to the Grief Recovery Method began after the death of my three-year-old son, Eddie Ryan, in September of 2010. At the time, I was a Detective with the Sheriff's Office; he was shot with my backup gun. Four hours later I would hear the words no parent should ever hear, "I'm sorry, but your son is dead." People often talk about having, or developing, resilience in order to overcome the difficulties or losses we face in life. The key to this is having the right tools and the courage to take the actions necessary to heal. I wish I had had the tools of GRM back when I was in the military or as a law enforcement officer. The men and women who put on the uniform walk out the door not knowing if they will return when their shift is over. ABSTRACT Grief seems to affect everyone in some way over the course of life. This research conducted a thematic analysis using grounded theory methods to understand the process in which Christians overcome grief when losing a loved one. A total of six participants volunteered to be able to share their stories. The questions to be answered included: "What is the process of growing resilience among Christians who experience grief due to losing a loved one?" and "How does one's faith impact this process of overcoming grief?" Utilizing Strauss and Corbin (1990), the data collected in this study was used to understand how Christians overcome tragedy and ensure that future generations survive and are strengthened by the hardships they endure. The Linking Human Systems (LINC). Resilience "a key topic in clinical science and practice" still lacks a clear conceptualization that integrates its evolutionary and human-specific features, refrains from exclusive focus on fear physiology, incorporates a developmental approach, and, most importantly, is not based on the negation (i.e., absence of symptoms following trauma). While the case study communities were found to have a high level of resilience to everyday risks, building resilience to infrequent high magnitude events such as earthquakes requires local structures as well as support from local (ward and municipal level) and central government.