
Accommodating Loss: the ebb and flow of relationships after death

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the continuing relationship we have with people after they die. My writing is based on 12 years' experience of working with grieving people, three years of that time concentrated in a hospice. It is also founded in my own experience of grief. The paper emphasises that both in working with others and in our own grief our responses are personal and individual. Because we are all unique, there is no right or wrong way to grieve, just different ways. That is what our grieving clients need to hear.

Introduction

The topic of our last conference started me thinking about the relationship we have with someone close to us who has died. Like me, most of the grieving people I have worked with have wanted to continue loving the person who has died in some way. The person's life is ended but not the relationship.

Not knowing how to continue to love can bring us great pain and anguish. We are often afraid that if we grieve we will lose the love we had. Our difficulty is increased by books - and those around us - talking of the importance of 'letting go', 'cutting ties' and 'moving on'. When we are vulnerable we take all these things too literally, the result often being that we stifle our grief, and the pain and anguish continues.

Often, in my work, I have people come to me wondering what is wrong with them because they still feel sad, or still want to talk about the person who has died. I know that I too will want to talk about my loved ones until the day I die.

In its response to loss and grief our society often fails us. It wants people to be 'okay', whatever that means, to keep to the middle ground. It also wants to set a limit on grief. Many people find it difficult to sit with others' pain. Talking about someone who has died often makes others uncomfortable.

I have watched so many people relax when I ask whether they would like to tell me about the person who has died and see if we can find where they fit in their

life now. 'You mean I don't have to let them go?' I have people come to me years after someone has died, often for a one-off session. 'I just needed to talk about them. Now I'm okay.' It's sad that family and friends are often unable to do that for us.

The lasting impact of loss

When those we love die we embark on a journey of the heart. None of us walks exactly the same path, but we have no choice about whether we will grieve. We only have a choice about *how* we will grieve. We will suffer no matter what path we choose.

We don't become different people in grief. Sometimes how we were becomes accentuated. Some of us cry. Some of us don't. We all remember in different ways.

The world changes when those we love die. We are thrown into chaos. We ache and we long for the one who has died. We have no joy and have a feeling of hopelessness. Often we wonder if we will survive. I know for myself it was as if I survived in spite of myself. Years went by before I really believed that I could and would survive.

For a long time I thought I could never feel pleasure or joy again. When I realised that I could move between happiness and sadness, that it didn't have to be one or the other, that was when I stopped fighting. I accepted that I would always feel some sadness when good things happened. How could I not when there were two people missing to share the pleasure with?

Grieving is a journey that I believe teaches us to love in a new way. Consciously remembering those who have died is the key that opens our hearts. It is our memories that help us carry our loved ones into the future. The more we remember the more effectively we reconnect with the reality and meanings of their lives. Death does not obliterate this connection. Although my own heart is still broken I know that the memories I have are an essential part of what keeps me going.

C.S. Lewis puts it this way: '... and suddenly, at the very moment when so far I mourned H. least, I remembered her best' (1961:39). It took me a long time to believe or accept that that might be possible.

Grief ebbs and flows but it never ends. Our grief is triggered by a variety of things for the rest of our life. When I don't fight this I manage better.

The spectrum of grief

From my work with others I could write pages of examples of the ways relationships are continued with the person who has died. Here are a few.

A. A little girl was talking about her uncle who had died. 'He was my favourite uncle. No, he still *is* my favourite uncle,' she said, in a way that dared anyone to challenge her. 'Death ends a life, not a relationship', in the words of Morrie Schwartz (Abom:1998:174).

B. A woman who had a difficult relationship with her second husband was adamant that she was going to sever all ties and let go totally. A few years later she came to me and said: 'Although my relationship was not a good one it has shaped my life. I now realise I can't just throw it away. There were some good things in the beginning.'

C. A woman whose little girl had died at three months came to me saying: 'I need her to be close to my heart. No one will let me talk about her now, not even my husband'. This little girl had been a very difficult baby. This was acknowledged. She wasn't put up on a pedestal: her mother needed to be real. It didn't change the love she felt.

D. The opposite of this was an elderly woman who came to me telling me how wonderful her husband had been. It was two years before she told me how awful he had also been. 'Now I am being real I can love him again.'

Understanding grief

What I have written is based on my own experience and the experiences of the many people I have worked with. In understanding the impact of loss I find Bowlby's attachment theory and of Self Psychology's selfobject theory helpful. There are similarities and differences between the two approaches.

Most of Bowlby's work was with children. His attachment figure comes very close to what Kohut calls the selfobject. Both are seen to provide part of normal functioning i.e.: soothing, holding and security. It makes sense that the loss of this function may give rise to anxiety, anger, depression or sadness. The main role of attachment to a selfobject is to provide security and protection. Such relationships give us a secure base to explore from. They are not only a

childhood need, but a requirement throughout life.

Bowlby's view of grief was conceptualised as a form of separation anxiety. It is interesting that in his earlier work he used the word 'adaptation' for the final stage of grief, although this was somehow later changed to 'detachment'. Parkes, whose work was based on Bowlby's theory, believed getting through grief means breaking the attachment. He held this view even when his studies began to show that widows were maintaining a continuing bond with their husbands. His theory was not changed to fit this unanticipated data. Those who follow Parkes' theory continue to define the resolution of grief as severing the bond rather than establishing a changed bond.

My own preference as a term for the final stage of grief is Piaget's 'accommodation': it fits my experience better than 'detachment', 'closure', 'recovering' or 'resolution'.

Many others have written about grief and loss. William Worden, Bev Raphael, Elizabeth Kübler Ross are among the better known. What they write makes sense, but we have to take care not to be too literal in accepting what is written. I have found that when people are vulnerable they want answers and may take as gospel what they read. If it doesn't fit for them they may feel guilty or that they have failed.

An example of this: A woman came to see me. She had been doing really well and felt she was beginning to manage her life again after the death of her husband. She told me that she became very distressed after reading that you could not move forward until you had taken off your wedding ring. Her words were: 'I am living again, but I don't want to take off my wedding ring'. The book had actually said that taking off your rings sometimes helped people. She had taken this statement more literally than the writer intended, and took it to mean that she wasn't 'doing it right'.

Conclusion

What this paper set out to do was to encourage us to think about how we live with our own grief and losses and how we let others live with theirs. The biggest challenge as we grieve is learning to love in a new way. Nothing is more difficult and nothing is more important.

References

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