

FELT NEEDS

Understanding Grief & Loss

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+ **gloo**



What is Loss?

A simple definition for loss is when we have something, and then we don't. Obviously, this happens many times a day in small ways. I had a bowl of ice cream and now I don't. I have some money, but after spending it, now I don't. I had a great weekend of activities and fun, but now it's Monday. My daughter came over for dinner, and now she's gone home. As we navigate through childhood and adolescence, we learn better ways to handle loss by understanding nothing lasts forever and most things are only temporary losses. Sometimes the loss of significant elements has a greater impact on our lives. This kind of loss generates a deep intense emotional suffering we call grief. Sometimes losses build on each other and a present loss awakens memories of earlier losses that were never fully grieved. So, the response to the present loss is exaggerated because it now includes the suppressed emotions from past losses. Losses can also be intensified at certain times of the year – anniversary dates of the loss or family times when that person's absence is more glaring.

What is Grief?

Grief is most often associated with the death of a loved one, but many other losses generate grief, such as divorce, life transition, disaster, or misfortune. Grief is not enjoyable, it is often painful, takes energy, and effort. In fact, some people never completely get through the process of grieving a significant loss, so anger, depression, and resentment are lifelong companions. Sudden losses – especially deaths or marital affairs and physical disabilities – can be more difficult to grieve because there is no warning and no chance to say good-bye to the former normal and prepare for the loss. Grief is a process, a healing journey that can last several

months to several years, and for some, a lifetime.

People who are grieving may experience their loss psychologically through feelings, thoughts, and attitudes; socially, as they interact with others; and physically, as it affects their health. Often friends don't know how to help someone who is grieving and may try to "cheer him up" or "get her mind off the loss." These well-meaning efforts actually add to the burden as the grieving person has to either avoid friends or "fake it" rather than share their true uncomfortable feelings. Someone who is grieving may experience intense feelings of guilt for aspects of the relationship with the person who has died. The grieving person may also feel as if he or she is being punished for some transgression.

God and Loss

Christians who are experiencing a time of loss can be really lifted by having a relationship with God. The Bible is full of passages to help a person have a more Godly perspective of the loss, to be thankful for the time with the lost object. We often feel entitled, meaning since we had a certain element today, I am entitled to have that same element tomorrow. That element could be our health, finances, looks, job, marriage, relationships, loved ones, working car, house with non-leaky roof, my agenda to go 100% smoothly, my coworkers to like me, etc. Everything we have is by grace and in all things, we should give thanks. God also has peace we can access even in the face of loss or while appropriately grieving.

Even though our spiritual life and Bible help us navigate loss, it is not uncommon to question or get angry with God. Since God is sovereign, many people blame God when they lose something, especially someone or an opportunity that is dear to them. They believe God made a mistake and shouldn't have taken that element away from them without their permission. Perhaps they feel

guilty and believe that God took that element away to punish them for a past sin or mistake.

Stages of Grief

Grief is a complex set of emotions that is generated when we experience a loss – usually a significant loss that is permanent (or seems permanent). All of these emotions are part of our God-given warning system letting us know that something significantly changed, is off, or is wrong. Since loss happens daily and grief is so common, it's been extensively studied with the findings revealing that people experience grief in a series of stages. These 5 stages were originally identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (*On Death and Dying*) and are as follows:

- **Denial:** Usually the person is in shock, totally surprised by the loss, and denies that the loss even happened. Thus, their life moves forward as if nothing has changed. This denial can be cognitive, emotional, or behavioral (making decisions as if the lost object is still present).
- **Anger:** Once the shock wears off, then the person is angry that the lost element was taken from them. Often this anger is released toward others. The bereaved may even get angry with God or beat themselves up emotionally as they blame themselves for not preventing the loss.
- **Bargaining:** When the emotional anger doesn't bring back the lost item, the person's cognitive wheels start to churn, and they scheme to figure out how to re-obtain what was lost. Usually, the bargaining is with their internal self, or with God, but it can also be with others. In the case of impending death, the grieving individual may bargain with God for more time—a time of negotiations.

- **Depression:** Upon realizing the terms are final, and there is no more room for negotiation, the person starts realizing the loss is real and nothing will change it. Even though they have tried to avoid the pain of sadness and loss with denial, anger, and bargaining, they can't run from the pain any longer. As it sinks in, grieving people become preoccupied with memories of what has been lost and may withdraw for a time. During this time, they sometimes feel disoriented or disorganized without the lost element and are unsure how to move on with life without it.

- **Acceptance:** Finally, appreciating the time they had the element, then accepting the reality that the loss is permanent (at least to their knowledge) is the final stage. Expressing their emotions in a healthy way while starting to reorganize their life, adapt to the loss, and reconnect with those around them are all healthy and important facets of the healing process. A key part of this process is the ability to learn how to feel and express the pain more truly without denial and avoidance.

As helpful as it may be to learn about these stages, often they are not neatly packaged states that a person experiences sequentially; a grieving person may experience more than one at a time and/or go back and forth through the stages and even experience elements of a couple of stages at the same time. For example, sometimes we accept certain aspects of a loss, but are still in denial about other aspects.

The goal of grieving is *not to get things back to the way they were*. After a loss, one's life will likely significantly change. Thus, the goal is to be thankful for what they had, accept the loss of it, while finding and accepting a new "normal."

Normal Grief/Loss Often Looks Like

For several days to several weeks:

- Sadness
- Lots of memories, usually more positive ones
- Frustration
- Anger
- Sense of loss
- Crying easily
- Decrease in motivation
- Struggle getting out of bed
- Lack of energy
- Eating too much or not enough
- Feeling like a failure
- Intense sorrow, pain and rumination over the loss of the loved one
- Guilt that you might be the cause of the loss



When Grief/Loss Becomes a Problem

Experiencing loss is normal, as is grieving significant losses. They shouldn't be problematic. Unfortunately, for many, they are. As stated above, the normal grief process can take a dark turn, either from a significant loss, multiple losses, sudden losses, or a present loss that stirs up a significant past loss. *Complicated Bereavement* is the term used in psychiatry to describe when bereavement and/or grief starts to interfere with regular functioning and causes significant distress.

Grief and Psychiatric Diagnoses

Normal grieving is part of life and is not an actual problem. The term *Uncomplicated Bereavement* is used in the psychiatric diagnostic manual (DSM-5 for normal grief, referring to it as a condition that may be a focus of clinical attention, but not an actual diagnosis. When grief becomes complicated and problematic, as described above, it is called *Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD)* and has the following symptoms for more than one year as a result of the loss:

- Intense yearning/longing for the deceased person
- Preoccupation with thoughts and memories of the loved one, or even circumstances of their death
- Identity disruption like feeling as though part of oneself has died also
- Marked sense of disbelief
- Avoidance of reminders of the loss
- Intense emotional pain (e.g., anger, bitterness, sorrow) related to the loss
- Difficulty engaging relationships and activities after the death
- Emotional numbness
- Feeling that life is meaningless
- Intense loneliness

Complicated Bereavement can also lead to several other DSM-5 Diagnoses such as:

- **Depressive Disorder** – Major Depression or Persistent Depression
- **Anxiety Disorder** – Panic Disorder, Agoraphobia, Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- **Trauma Related Disorder** – PTSD or Adjustment Disorder
- **Substance Use Disorder** – if the grieving person uses substances to detach, escape, or distract themselves from the loss

Sometimes Grief/Loss is Physical

Loss and Grief are certainly stressors and stress causes the release of a number of neurotransmitters in the brain, which then cause the release of the stress hormone cortisol, as well as other hormones and chemicals throughout the body. Acute stressors, when intense, usually have some short-lasting physical symptoms. Whereas when a person has been stressed over a period of time, they almost always will have some physical symptoms that can cause some significant distress, damage, and dysfunction. These are some of those physical symptoms:

- Increased heart rate
- Heart palpitations
- Pounding heart
- Elevated blood pressure or hypertension
- Heart Disease
- Type 2 Diabetes
- Faster but shallower breathing
- Sweats
- Dry mouth
- Tremors
- Shaking
- Twitches

- Queasy, upset, or butterflies in the stomach
- Stomach ulcers
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Lightheadedness
- Tingling
- Dizziness
- Rashes
- Shingles
- Tunnel vision
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Teeth grinding
- Stuttering
- Muscle tension
- Frequent infections
- Vague or chronic pain syndromes
- Feeling detached from your body
- Pacing
- Physical agitation
- Restlessness



What an Explorer Might Say

- I'm still in shock.
- I can't believe they're/it's gone/over.
- I'm not sure if I can find my way.
- I was devastated.
- Moving forward is hard.
- I am so alone without them.
- My mind won't stop thinking about it/them.
- I now realize how dependent I was on them.
- It didn't seem like much of a loss at the time, but now I realize it's a huge loss.
- I was in denial for a long time, but I am finally realizing how damaging it is to me.
- My parents divorced when I was a teenager and I still have so much anger and resentment toward my father.
- I am finally realizing I won't have kids and need to grieve that.
- My dreams won't come true. That's hard to swallow.



Wise Connections

- The Explorer who struggles with loss and grief has reached out to you, a total stranger, and has no idea how you will respond. Even though the Explorer is dealing with loss, they are willing to reach out even though they risk making a connection with you and then experiencing another loss when you leave them.
- You want to represent Jesus to them by showing you are a safe person who can provide a caring interaction while sharing hope. So, your interaction with them should be soothing, comforting, and peace-inducing. Not rushed, hurried, intense, judgmental, or condemning.
- Always pray first. Ask God to make His peace and joy clear, tangible, and meaningful to the

Explorer. Ask God to settle your heart and rouse your mind so you can use your skills and equipping to engage, soothe, comfort, and guide the Explorer.

- Resist the urge to fix or immediately fire out a Bible verse. First, you want to let them know they aren't alone, that you are jumping into the problem with them, and that you will hang in there with them until they feel safe enough to navigate this storm with some other helpers or on their own.
- The initial process will be to ask questions about what they feel and think as well as what are the ripples or effects the loss has on them. Then you want to show empathy and acknowledge their struggle while also showing you are right in this storm with them while emotionally and psychologically holding them.

Tips for Responding to Grieving Explorers

- 1. Your voice should be peaceful and soothing.** Talk in a calm, clear voice – softer in volume and slower in cadence. Don't be intense, rushed, or hurried, and don't rush them. Your demeanor should exude God's peace, compassion, and joy that will encourage them and make it easier and desirable to reach out to you the next time.
- 2. Be empathetic.** When they state difficult aspects or consequences from their loss, acknowledge that "what you're going through sounds very difficult" or "it seems like your loss has impacted you in significant ways." You should be able to feel what they are feeling and let them know you feel that.
- 3. Communicate sympathy** with your tone of voice and your comments.
- 4. Avoid "I know how you feel"** or "we're in a COVID pandemic, everyone's lost someone," or "it will go away soon" or "you're lucky 'cause it could be worse."
- 5. Asking questions shows you care,** the Explorer has value, their story is important, and you are listening. It also helps you gather accurate information so you aren't guessing or making assumptions.
 - a. Can you tell me more about your loss?
 - b. It sounds like you've been under a lot of stress lately, how has it impacted you?
 - c. It sounds like the loss has impacted you a lot. Can you tell me how it has impacted your relationships?
 - d. Thank you for contacting me to talk. Do you have any supportive or understanding people to talk to? Tell me a little more about them.
- 6. They might sound like they want answers or reasons why they struggle with loss or grief, but avoid giving those at the outset.** Your focus is to connect, let them know you are with them, and that they can have hope. Once you have a stronger connection, you can tell them some of the loss and grief tips listed in the upper section, and that loss impacts everyone in many different ways. But God has a special peace for them, and they can have hope. Let them know you will be by their side helping them find God's peace. Most importantly, they don't have to navigate this stressful storm by themselves.
- 7. Explorers want to be heard,** so let them know, through reflective and active listening, that you hear what they are saying and acknowledge the feelings they have inside.
- 8. Do not push Scripture** or therapy programs without first building rapport or connection with the Explorer.
- 9. They fear being judged or critiqued so avoid language that can be perceived as judgmental or accusatory.** Don't mention mistakes the Explorer makes or how they could have done things better. You are using the first couple of interactions to connect and build a safe bridge to send more help to them later on. You also want them to feel safe enough to reveal deep and personal information to you.
- 10. You don't need to give a diagnosis,** just understand and let them know they don't have to handle this struggle alone.
- 11. Don't overthink your response** as it doesn't need to be complicated. They most likely don't have the capacity to take in complicated info and you aren't going to have a long conversation to give them complicated information.
- 12. When you can, try to use the words or phrases they use to show you are listening** and to form a stronger connection.

A Great Sample Response

Here's a great example of how to put some of those healthy response tips into practice for a grieving Explorer!

EM

= Explorer Message

CR

= Coach's Response

NDR

= Next Day Response

EM

COVID just doesn't stop! I lost my parent, my job, and I lost contact with some good friends. Now I have to rebuild life and I don't know where to start or what to do.

Hi Nicole, this is Karl. I received your message about the losses you've had to endure the last couple years. I'm so glad you're willing to take a brave step to reach out for some help even though you're struggling.

CR

EM

Thanks. I'm not brave, just verging on desperate. I've tried to figure it out on my own, but not getting very far. It seems like I'm actually getting worse. I've been meaning to reach out for a while but never know where to start.

It is hard to know where to start. So many options. But loss and grief can impact us that way. I am glad you persevered and found this starting point. Do you feel comfortable telling me about some of your losses? You can start with the ones that you want to talk about the most.

CR

EM

Sometimes it's hard for me to talk about these but I will try. I knew it when I was a kid, but not as much as an adult, but my dad has always been there for me. I now realize how much I miss him. I thought I would have a lot more time to tell him some things, but he died so fast.

Your dad sounds like a caring man that really valued you. I can hear you really miss him and his presence in your life. If you are comfortable enough to share, can you tell me more about your dad and some things you would have liked to tell him?

CR

My dad was I would like to tell him

EM

Sounds like he was special to you. And what you said is really warm and sweet. I think this is helping you. If you are interested I would like to get together and continue the conversation to help you navigate this stormy time. Would you like to get together this evening or sometime tomorrow?

CR

Yes, it's helped just getting some of this stuff off my chest. Hopefully I can find time to talk tomorrow. You can call me tomorrow around 9A.

EM

I'm glad you feel better. Talking about what's going on inside is a big step to start your healing journey. I want to help you and I can call you tomorrow at 9A. Thanks for your willingness to continue this journey together.

CR

Hi Nicole, this is Karl following up as we agreed. I just want to tell you I appreciate your courage to reach out yesterday. I know it can be uncomfortable talking to a complete stranger about really personal stuff, but I'm glad you saw the benefits of connecting and starting the healing journey. There's no pressure, but I want to let you know I am here to help you. Where would you like to start today?

NDR

Tips

The example response here is empathetic, showed you were listening, and validated the explorer's feelings. Simply engaging, or offering to engage with people is an important step to building rapport and letting them know you are a safe person to bring into their journey.



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