

**Section I****STAGES OF GRIEF**

There are two exercises in this section. This section describes grief and the grieving process, as well as the nature of grief work. This section provides a three-stage model for understanding the grieving process, and describes each stage in some detail. The primary goals of this section are to provide information to clients and to help clients figure out where they are in the grieving process.

**PURPOSE**

The information provided gives clients a means for understanding the grief continuum and assessing their own place along this continuum. The three-stage model was briefly described previously, but is explained to clients in more detail in the Setting Perspective subsection.

**TYPES OF SITUATIONS FOR WHICH THIS INFORMATION MAY BE MOST USEFUL**

- Helping clients to understand the concept and process of grief work
- Helping clients to think about and explore a framework by which to understand the grief process as a whole
- Helping clients to think about their own emotional condition, with respect to the grief process
- Helping clients to understand the work that may lie ahead, as well as any grief work they've already completed
- Helping clients to think about their own place along the grief continuum

## STAGES OF GRIEF

The process of working through grief—dealing with the emotions and the situations caused by a death, as well as the impact of the loss on mind, body, and spirit—is frequently referred to as *grief work*.

But although grief experiences are intensely personal, there are some fairly typical stages of bereavement. These range from initial shock, to anguish and despair once the realization of the loss sinks in, to eventual acceptance. Within each stage are specific emotional and psychological tasks which must be worked through completely before you can move on to successfully complete the tasks of the next stage.

Although these stages are generally a predictable part of the mourning process, grief doesn't always move in a straight line. The stages tend to flow together and fluctuate, so it's not always possible to tell which stage you are in. Emotions seesaw, and overwhelming feelings pass and then return. Moods wash in and out like the tide. Just when you think you are over it, a sound, smell, or image can send you back into emotional turmoil. This back-and-forth movement may occur over a period of months, or even years. Although varying from person to person, it's not unusual for the active stages of grieving to last 1 to 2 full years or more.

Becoming aware of the stages of grief can help you to work through the necessary grief work, which includes the following tasks:

- Facing the reality of your loss
- Working through painful memories
- Experiencing the full range of emotions associated with loss
- Coping with the situational and lifestyle changes resulting from your loss
- Adapting to the loss, and reconfiguring your life

### THE THREE STAGES OF GRIEF

The goal of grief work is not to find ways to avoid or bypass the emotional turmoil and upsets brought by your loss. Instead, its goals involve working through the tasks and emotions of each stage of grief.

- Stage 1: Acclimation and adjustment
- Stage 2: Emotional immersion and deconstruction
- Stage 3: Reclamation and reconciliation

*Stage 1* is a period of *acclimation and adjustment*, in which the primary issues you face as someone newly bereaved can be broken down into four tasks:

- *Adjusting.* Accepting that your loved one is gone, and making sense of the new set of circumstances in your life.
- *Functioning.* It's a cruel irony that the practicalities of mortgage payments, funeral experiences, insurance claims, hospital bills, disbursement of possessions, or getting back to work hit you at a time when you are least up to facing these issues. But despite your loss, you need to accept that you still have a life to lead, and must continue to deal with your everyday responsibilities.
- *Keeping in check.* The temptation in the face of a tremendous loss is to emotionally shut down, or, at the other extreme, to let your emotions and behaviors flow unchecked. One of the tasks of Stage 1 is to find a way to manage your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.
- *Accepting support.* Often, you don't have to face your loss alone. Learning to accept the kindness, help, encouragement, and support of the friends, family, and others who populate your life is important.

*Stage 2* is a time of *Emotional Immersion and Deconstruction*, and incorporates the most active aspects of grief work. It's not that this stage is any more intense than the first stage—in fact, it's difficult to imagine that anything could be more intense than the period immediately following a loss. But during Stage 2, you're likely to become deeply immersed in your feelings and very internally focused. It's also quite common to undergo a *deconstruction* of your values and beliefs, as you question why your loved one was taken from you. The tasks associated with Stage 2 include the following:

- *Contending with reality.* Once the shock of the death has passed, you must begin to more fully resume your normal life, accept that your loved one is gone, and deal with the life changes resulting from your loss.
- *Development of insight.* Stage 2 is a time for soul searching—the exploration of your place in the world, your current emotional state, and the meaning of your thoughts and feelings.
- *Reconstructing personal values and beliefs.* In the aftermath of the death and the many changes it may have brought, you need to find meaning in the world and establish what is—and isn't—important in your life.

#### 4 STAGES OF GRIEF

- *Acceptance and letting go.* Here the task is to fully accept the death and your feelings about it, find a way to let go of that which has passed, and begin to move toward that which will be.

*Stage 3* is a time for *reclamation and reconciliation*, and is generally thought to be marked by your “recovery” from grief. But the loss of someone close to you leaves a permanent mark on your life, in the sense that things can’t be restored to the way they were before the death. However, you can begin to rebuild, creating a new life for yourself and reengaging with the world around you. As this stage ends, you’ll become reconciled to the death itself, and the changes it’s brought to your life. Perhaps most important, you’ll begin to live in the present, rather than the past, reestablish who you are in the world, and plan a future. The primary tasks of this stage are the following:

- *Development of social relations.* Stage 2 was internally focused, but Stage 3 is externally focused, as you reestablish friendships and renew community connections.
- *Decisions about changes in lifestyle.* The task here is to make long-term practical choices about how to proceed with your life, including where to live, how to spend your time, what to keep from your old life, and what to change.
- *Renewal of self-awareness.* This task involves consolidating the things you’ve learned about yourself and your life through your grief work, and building your daily life around this new self-awareness,
- *Acceptance of responsibility.* The task here is to both maintain your support network and become increasingly self-reliant, taking responsibility for your own happiness, well-being, and life course.

## **STAGES OF GRIEF: GETTING LOCATED**

### **GOALS OF THE EXERCISE**

This is a simple exercise designed to help clients think about and identify their current grief stage, as well as the grief-work tasks associated with each stage.

### **TYPES OF SITUATIONS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL**

This exercise will help clients think about their current grief-work stage, thus helping them identify the sort of emotional, behavioral, and life-management tasks they may have already completed, are facing at the moment, or are yet to face. This is an especially useful exercise for helping therapists and clients identify current concerns and issues, and for setting the pace for ongoing therapy.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH CLIENTS**

- Does the idea that there are stages to grief fit your own experience with bereavement?
- Are you able to identify and recognize your current grief work stage?
- What are the grief-work tasks you most need to work on right now?
- Are you feeling encouraged, or does the grief work ahead seem overwhelming?
- Are you aware of the difference between thoughts and feelings?
- Which tasks seem most pressing right now?
- Which tasks seem the most overwhelming or difficult to think about?

**Exercise I.A****STAGES OF GRIEF: GETTING LOCATED**

Based on the descriptions of the grief continuum and the stages of grief, circle the letter that most closely describes where you are *right now* with each task: A = I'm not ready to deal with this task; B = I'm working on this task; C = I've completed this task.

**Stage 1 Tasks**

Adjusting	A	B	C
Functioning	A	B	C
Keeping in check	A	B	C
Accepting support	A	B	C

**Stage 2 Tasks**

Contending with reality	A	B	C
Development of insight	A	B	C
Reconstructing personal values and beliefs	A	B	C
Acceptance and letting go	A	B	C

**Stage 3 Tasks**

Development of social relations	A	B	C
Decisions about changes in life style	A	B	C
Renewal of self-awareness	A	B	C
Acceptance of responsibility	A	B	C

You're now aware of the stages of grief and how they typically progress, with respect to each of the emotional and practical tasks of grief work. Look at the answers you've circled above:

1. Which four tasks are the most relevant to you *now*, in your current grief stage?

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**EXERCISE I.A**

2. What do the tasks you've picked tell you about your current grief work?

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3. What's your current grief stage? (If it's difficult for you to easily identify your current grief stage, go directly to the next question.)

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4. Was it difficult for you to easily identify your current grief stage? If so, why?

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5. What are your *thoughts* as you complete this exercise?

*I'm thinking*

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6. What are your *feelings* as you complete this exercise?

*I'm feeling*

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*Remember to bring the completed worksheet to your next appointment.*

## IDENTIFYING YOUR FEELINGS

### GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

This is a checklist-based exercise that will help clients identify immediate and significant feelings and concerns, providing important information to the therapist regarding the most pressing issues to be addressed in therapy

### TYPES OF SITUATIONS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL

This exercise will help in understanding the client's current emotional state with respect to grief management and grief work, as well as in differential diagnosis, including diagnosis of significant mental health concerns such as depression, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, and the like.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH CLIENTS

- Are there specific questions you need to answer for yourself before continuing with your grief work?
- Do you have a clear sense of the sorts of issues, feelings, and tasks that you'll be facing in your grief work?
- Have you ever experienced feelings of this sort before?
- Why do you think you're having these particular feelings?
- Are you afraid your feelings will never pass?
- Are the problems you're experiencing so severe or debilitating that you're having trouble functioning in your day-to-day life?
- How did you feel as you were completing the exercise?



**Exercise I.B****IDENTIFYING YOUR FEELINGS**

Check all of the emotional states that best describe how you are generally feeling at this point in your bereavement.

- Afraid**      You're scared of what life will be like now. You may be fearful about your ability to cope emotionally, or you may be uncertain about practical concerns like money, raising the children, or where you'll live. You may just feel afraid, without really knowing why.
- Angry**      Anger often feels like a physical thing. Your muscles tense up, and you may feel like yelling at someone or hitting something. Your rage may be aimed at yourself or your lost loved one, or you may find yourself getting angry at other people, society, or your spiritual beliefs.
- Anxious**      Anxiety is distinct from fear, and is often a generalized feeling. If you're afraid, at least you know what scares you. If you're anxious, on the other hand, you're likely to feel agitated without knowing exactly why. You may experience cold sweats, hyperactivity, or edginess.
- Ashamed**      You may feel that you should be getting over your feelings, or may be ashamed to show them in front of family, friends, and others. You may also harbor feelings about the death, or the fact that you are still alive, that feel shameful to you and are difficult to share with others.
- Bitter**      Life may feel very unjust, and you may feel cheated and disappointed. You may feel jealous and resentful toward others who still have what has been taken from you, and you may feel victimized by fate.
- Confused**      You may be unsure of what you're feeling, or your feelings may change quickly. Your thoughts may be unfocused, and it may be difficult to concentrate; or you may have a hard time knowing what to do and how best to make decisions.

**EXERCISE I.B**

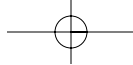
- \_\_\_ Depressed Depression can be a general mood of melancholy, or a full-blown experience that is all-encompassing and seems to have no end. In a major depression your mood, appetite, sleep, memory, and ability to concentrate are seriously impaired. You may feel the impulse to do self-destructive things in an effort to find relief.
- \_\_\_ Despairing Here you feel a sense of futility. It seems as though things will never get better, and the distress caused by the death may feel unbearable. Although you want to, you may not be able to get your feelings out by crying, or you may be unable to stop crying.
- \_\_\_ Detached You feel disconnected from the death and detached from life in general. The experience seems unreal, as if it were happening to someone else. You simply pass through life each day, your actions detached from your thoughts and feelings.
- \_\_\_ Guilty You may feel that you could have done more to help your loved one or to prevent the death. You may feel intense regret about the way you behaved toward your loved one, or promises you never kept. You may also feel guilty about negative feelings you harbor toward your loved one, or mixed feelings about the death itself. It is also common for the bereaved to feel guilty when they begin to laugh and find pleasure in life once again, or begin new relationships. Or you may experience survival guilt—a sense of remorse that you remain alive while your loved one has died.
- \_\_\_ Helpless Things seem out of your control. You may think that if you were powerless to prevent the death, then you can't handle anything. You can't cope with the practicalities of everyday life, and feel unable to control or manage your feelings.
- \_\_\_ Hopeless Life has no meaning. It seems there is no point to anything, and things will never get better. Your feelings and the tasks you face seem insurmountable, and you feel unable to ever overcome your loss.
- \_\_\_ Lonely There is no one that can understand your pain. There seems to be no one to share things with or seek comfort from. These feelings may make you feel like withdrawing even further from those around you, or from the world at large.
- \_\_\_ Lost Everything that you used to believe in is gone. You aren't sure where you fit in the world, or who you are. If you are religious or spiritual, your faith is shaken. If you are not, you feel it unwise to ever have faith in a world where nothing seems permanent.

**EXERCISE I.B**

- \_\_\_ Numb            You are shut down emotionally. You feel nothing. Everything is flat. Although you might be able to function and get through each day, it sometimes seems as if you are sleep-walking through life, unable to feel your emotions.
- \_\_\_ Sad             Sorrow and heartbreak color everything. You feel your loss deeply, and it affects and pervades all you do. It is a mood that simply won't go away.
- \_\_\_ Shocked        You are bewildered and confused. Even if you were prepared for the death, the situation doesn't seem real. The finality of the situation leaves you feeling stunned, and you may not be able to accept that your loved one is gone. You keep hoping to wake up from a bad dream.
- \_\_\_ Overwhelmed    You simply can't cope with the barrage of emotions, thoughts, and changes facing you. You feel like running away, or escaping by using alcohol or drugs. You want someone to come and rescue you, and make it all go away.
- \_\_\_ Preoccupied    You can't stop thinking about your loss. Perhaps you keep replaying certain scenes over and over in your mind, or agonize about who you might lose next. You can't concentrate on your everyday responsibilities or engage in a conversation without your mind wandering. Intrusive memories keep surfacing no matter what you do.
- \_\_\_ Vulnerable     Your faith in your own invulnerability is shattered. You are constantly aware of your own mortality, and the mortality of other important people in your life. You feel exposed, without protection, to whatever destiny or life hands you.
- \_\_\_ Yearning        You long for the deceased. It hurts so much that you feel a constant pit in your stomach. You are constantly aware of the absence of your loved one, and you feel empty. Nothing can fill the void.

Of the feelings you checked off, which three are most intense right now?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_



**EXERCISE I.B**

Complete these five sentences:

1. As I complete this section, I feel like . . .

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2. Right now, I'd like to . . .

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3. Lately, I've been feeling like . . .

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4. My most important current task is . . .

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5. I feel like I most need to work on . . .

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*Remember to bring the completed worksheet to your next appointment.*

