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Dealing with Loss:

How to Handle the Losses that we Experience Throughout Our Lives.

Grief is the pain we experience when there is a LOSS in our lives - not just the loss of a loved one, but the loss of anything that is important to us. For example:

- Loss of independence
- Mobility
- Self-image
- loss of a job/career/role
- Loss of dreams
- Loss of hope
- Loss of energy
- Loss of family, a relationship, a friendship
- Loss of a pet

The loss of a loved one brings with it many other losses, depending on the age of the person we have lost, which can include:

- Loss of your best friend,
- Financial security,
- Your co-parent,
- The person who looked after the home, or the repairs,
- Or remembered birthdays, etc., etc.

What is this pain we feel when there are losses such as these? It is emotional, spiritual, physical, mental, behavioural and even social.

Grief affects every aspect of who we are as human beings because when we experience a significant loss that loss changes us and changes our life. A significant loss changes our world. All the ways that grief affects us are reactions to the way our world has changed.

I am going to share a pretty comprehensive list with you. No one person will experience all of these symptoms. However, they are all possible and it is important to have a really good understanding of what grief can be like. It is different for each person grieving but I want you to be really aware of its possibilities.

We will begin with looking at how grief affects us emotionally. As you go through this material I would like you to think about people you know who have been grieving, real people, to help make this meaningful.

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EMOTIONAL

- Sadness, sorrow, anguish, fear
- Frightened
- Death
- Suffering and the pain they will have to endure
- The unknown
- The pain this is causing others
- The pain of grief
- Forgetting the one who is gone
- Losing another person
- Losing your mind
- and many other things
- Fear often looks like anxiety
- Vulnerability
- Helplessness, powerlessness, hopelessness
- Emptiness
- Anger, at life, at God, at themselves, at old hurts or unresolved issues
- Guilt, (acts of omission and commission), self-condemnation
- Shame
- Regret
- Despair
- Frustration
- Apathy
- Shock and numbness
- Depression
- A broken heart
- Meaninglessness
- Yearning, pining, longing, loneliness
- Separation anxiety, attachment anxiety
- Relief
- A desire for death

PHYSICAL Reactions to Grief

- Crying spells
- Headaches
- Diarrhoea
- Dry mouth
- Nausea , digestive upset, eating problems, appetite changes

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- Dizziness
- Restlessness - fast or irregular heartbeat or tightness in chest
- Tiredness, listlessness, lack of energy, weakness
- Feeling a lump in your throat, difficulty breathing
- Trouble concentrating or sleeping
- Hollowness inside

MENTAL and SPIRITUAL

- Disbelief/denial
- Fret and worry
- Difficulty concentrating, decreased interest, motivation, initiative
- Spacing out, absent-minded
- Losing it
- Wonky thinking – e.g. black and white, or forgetful, disorganized activity
- Catastrophizing, pessimism
- Loss of time and altered time perception
- Dreaming
- Confusion, bewilderment – Why me? Why us? How can this be happening?
- Questions about God, spirituality, the afterlife. Real spiritual pain.
- Preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased which can become obsessive
- A sense of the deceased's presence

Map of meaning of meaning dissolves (more about this later)

BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIAL

- Crying, tearfulness, sighing
- Trembling, shaking, twitching
- Aches and pains
- Irritability, impatience, being overly critical
- Minimizing care of self, perhaps increased use of medicines , alcohol, drugs, cigarettes
- Social withdrawal, clinginess, avoidance of being alone
- Sleep problems
- Doing things out of character
- Restless hyperactivity, searching for something to do, agitation,
- Self-destructive behaviours, acting-out behaviours, impulsive behaviours numbness

Grief is a complex experience and it is different for everyone, and for different losses. Dr. Theresa Rando, a world leading authority on grief and loss says “grief feels like craziness to the person who’s undergoing it.” Some people describe feeling like Martians and they don’t feel like they fit in with others, except other Martians.

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Grief is the emotional experience we most **fear**. For the most part, we don't understand it but we know it **hurts**. We are afraid the pain will overwhelm us, destroy us, or incapacitate us. So we tend to avoid it and yet avoiding it causes more suffering.

So grief is this complex pain. **IT LASTS LONGER THAN WE THINK AND IT IS MORE PAINFUL THAN WE THINK.**

Grief is Normal

We are not taught about grief and for most of us we don't know much about it until we are faced with it. Grief is normal and necessary. Grief is not a sign of weakness. Crying is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign that we care. It can help just to know that grief is normal.

Naming the losses

Grief is the pain we feel when there is loss. Naming the losses helps us understand and helps us be able to anchor the loss in our consciousness so that we can work with it, and take it into our heart.

It is the losses that change the person's world. By looking sensitively, and breaking down the big loss into the many losses it brings with it, we can start to see the ways in which a person's world is changed and how that affects them. This makes it easier for that person to begin to figure out where their life is now and how to begin to build a different life.

In naming and identifying the losses a person can begin to better understand why they are feeling the way they are feelings. This goes such a long way towards alleviating fear, a leading Canadian expert on grief, says that understanding is an antidote for fear.

Map of Meaning

We all have a Map of Meaning. Our Map of Meaning is an internal map that describes the people, relationships, things and activities that give our lives a sense of meaning, purpose and value. Our Map of Meaning includes our values and beliefs. It describes what is important to us.

When we experience a significant loss very often our Map of Meaning begins to dissolve, like a photograph dropped into water. We experience this in different ways. We can feel lost, confused, set adrift, unsure or hollow. Life can feel meaningless and empty. It is a very uncomfortable place to be and we can feel depressed, sad, and even anxious. Life seems to have lost its meaning.

As human beings we need to feel that life, suffering and death have meaning. This is one of deepest most important needs. We are so much more than physical beings, and the need for meaning arises from our non-material being, sometimes called our spiritual self or soul.

We find meaning through:

- Being connected with our essence, our non-material self
- Through not feeling alone
- Through being in relationship, and experiencing authentic, meaningful connection,

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- Through experience of that which transcends, or is bigger than our physical selves

Spirituality refers to taking care of this non-material part of who we are – our essence. Spirituality helps people cope with:

- The uncertainty of life
- Instils hope
- Brings acceptance, comfort and peace
- And supports and resolves existential concerns especially around the fear of death
- Creates meaning

Being in our body

Many of us live our lives from our head, our brain, our logical mind and that is only part of who we are. For many of us, the more stressed and frightened we are the more we are stuck in our rational mind. However, that is only a part of who we are. It is so important to learn how to get out of our heads and connect with the rest of ourselves. One of the most effective ways to do this is to be connected with your body – to consciously put our awareness in our body, not just in our thinking place. "We are the most sane when we are in our body. Our life's work is to integrate our head and heart." (Paul Salzman – Prom Night in Mississippi). When we learn to be in our bodies, and our hearts we are able to feel another reality that our rational mind cannot give us.

There are many simple but effective ways to connect with and stay in your body. Many of the Mindfulness techniques help us to be present to our self. Mindful awareness of your breath immediately connects you with your body.

Another simple, but very powerful way to be in your body is to sit quietly, draw your attention inside and feel your hands from the inside – feeling your energy body, your life energy, in your hands. You may feel this as warmth, tingling, light or simply energy. Once you can feel the energy in your hands, then move your awareness to your feet, then to your body. Taking time to experience this many times throughout the day, helps you to feel grounded, centred, and present.

When we learn to be in our bodies we are able to access a wealth of inner resources not available through our intellect. The most important of these is ...**COMPASSION**

Compassion is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. Compassion is a quality of loving kindness that tenderly accepts suffering. It is respectful, a soft, gentle appreciation of suffering.

Compassion is a human ability we can use to relate to pain and suffering. It is more vigorous than empathy. The showing of compassion is an act, and a powerful act that contributes to the easing and **transformation** of suffering.

Compassion comes from the **HEART, not the head.**

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One of the greatest ways you can take care of yourself is to strengthen your connection to your heart and relate to yourself and others from your head **and** your heart.

In order to manifest effective compassion for others it is first of all necessary to be able to experience and fully appreciate one's own suffering and to have, as a consequence, compassion for oneself. The Buddha is reported to have said, "It is possible to travel the whole world in search of one who is more worthy of compassion than oneself. No such person can be found."

Self-compassion is a powerful way to take care of yourself when you are suffering, especially if you have experienced a loss. Becoming skilful in being aware of your inner life and being able to offer yourself compassion is a powerful healing practice that helps ease suffering, nurture your essence and begin to find meaning again.

There is a link on www.kerrybrook.ca to CDs and on that page you will find a meditation on connecting with your heart and a meditation on mindfulness. I also refer you to Christopher Germer's truly wonderful book, *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*.

Spiritual Care Practices

There are many ways to nurture our essence or spiritual being and in nurturing our essence we create opportunities for meaning and connection.

The key to any spiritual care practice is that it provides a way to shift our awareness from our usual space, which is identified with our rational, logical, intellectual mind, to a different part of ourselves – to the BEING part of ourselves – the part where we can connect with our essence.

Here are a number of effective Spiritual Care Practices:

Meditation: any reflective or contemplative practice that shifts your awareness from the rational mind and the external world, to the realm of your essence, to your essence or to the transcendent. There are many styles of meditation – and many ways to learn to meditate including classes, CD's, books, groups. Meditation is a time-proven technique for expanding your awareness and connecting with your deeper being.

Guided imagery: a particular type of meditation practice using the power of the imagination

Mindfulness: meditation practices which originate in Buddhism, designed to strengthen your pure awareness and the place in you from which you can observe, without attachment or judgement. There are many excellent books and classes to help you learn the basic techniques of mindfulness, a powerful and effective way to nurture your spirituality.

Gratitude: the practice of being thankful, has the power to shift your usual patterns of thinking and reacting and open you to another level of awareness and experience which connects you with the deeper part of you and life

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Art: in its many forms. In order to create we do shift into a slightly altered state and the experience of being in that state changes us, connecting us with something other than our logical, rational mind, with which most of us are identified, most of the time.

Music: creating or listening to music can shift us out of our logical mind, and connect us with something greater,

Time in nature: if we are quiet, appreciative, aware, reflective, can open us to beauty, the powers of creation, the cycles of life, and the transcendent.

Journaling: is a wonderful tool for reflection, for quieting ourselves so that we can hear other parts of ourselves, for slowing down, for awareness

Spiritual direction: working with a spiritual director can be a helpful way to explore beliefs, questions, doubts, and, to find tools and resources to nurture our spirituality.

Pastoral counselling: working with a pastoral counsellor can be especially helpful in dealing with grief, loss, spiritual questions which arise during times of change, suffering and loss

Religious ritual including reading sacred texts: ritual is a powerful spiritual practice. A ritual is a series of specific acts which are filled with symbolic content, and reflect and express the feelings of the participants. Rituals around death have been used by human beings for thousands of years. Rituals allow us ways to share significant events with others. They bring us together and allow us to connect, and through connection find support and meaning.

Rituals provide the opportunity for mutual recognition of what has happened, strengthen social relationships, help us face reality, instruct us, interpret events and help us integrate what has happened in a larger context.

Attending worship: for many, attending familiar worship services provides an opportunity to connect with the transcendent, to connect with their spirit, to be transported by music and prayer, to connect with others.

Prayer: Prayer is the most common spiritual ritual across all faiths. Prayer is the most common method of pain management after medications and is the most common non-drug method of pain management. Prayer is an effective method of relaxation. Prayer can take many forms and can be formal or very informal.

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