



Grief

by David Price

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The experience of loss is a universal condition of humanity, but glbtq individuals may face particular challenges in finding support to help them in their grieving process.

Grief is a natural reaction to a loss. A loss may take many forms and can severely disrupt a person's ability to function in many areas, provoking as it does mental, emotional, and physical reactions as the entire body responds to the loss.

Feelings of sadness, shock, anger, guilt, depression, and despair often wash over the person who has experienced loss. The mind becomes preoccupied with questions of "what if," trying to understand every detail of the event or blaming oneself or others in an attempt to understand the loss. The body reacts with disruptions in sleep, appetite, general discomfort, and agitation.

After the initial blow subsides, the mind and body begin to heal. The healing process is slow and gradual with many ups and downs. With support from family, friends, or a professional caregiver, the process can eventually lead to restoration. A new sense of hope and purpose can emerge. After a loss, the present and future are altered forever, though a new and promising reality can emerge.

When a loss occurs, we may have many reactions. We may ask, "Why has this happened to me?" as we try to make sense out of an event that seems to defy rationality. We may become preoccupied with the past and ask, "Why can't things go back to the way they were?" as we hold on to our idealized memories.

We may also try to avoid experiencing the loss and say, "I need to get my life back in order and I'll be okay." In this way, we hurriedly seek to replace the things we lost, which actually prevents our healing. These reactions are normal responses to an event over which we have no control.

Stages of Grief

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was one of the first to chronicle her observations of the grieving process. She identified a natural progression of denial or shock, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

The initial reaction of denial is associated with the shock felt when the loss first occurs. The mind does not want to accept the loss and reacts against it. The second stage is anger at the loss, though there is often no object to direct the anger towards. Resolving the anger may be crucial to moving on in healing, though this may be a very difficult step.

The next stage is bargaining, when the feeling of helplessness leads to negotiations. The belief that control can be regained if promises are made is a natural response. These promises can be a very positive part of the healing process and are not necessarily senseless. For example, a person who has lost a child may promise to take better care of his or her other children or may promise to volunteer to help children.

The next stage is depression, when the full experience of the loss is felt. The sense of helplessness and loss of control overwhelm the individual, and depression often results. This stage can be one of healing or can lead to self-destructive behaviors as we seek to cope. Though this stage may occur long after the loss, it is the most crucial time to seek professional help.

The last stage is acceptance, when the past is resolved and a new future opens up. Hope, optimism, and a new reality are the outcomes of this acceptance. Hope is more important than any other belief in coping with a loss.

These stages do not always occur in an exact sequence, and individuals may cycle back and forth between stages. Awareness of the stages of grief may help one gauge how he or she is coping with loss.

Grief for GLBTQ Individuals

One of the most difficult losses is the death of a partner. Heterosexual individuals have marriages that are highly visible, and they receive a great deal of support from family and friends when a spouse dies. For many glbtq individuals, however, the loss of a partner can leave them with little or no support. The lack of societal recognition for same-sex partners can result in the survivor's isolation and withdrawal.

Due to prejudices, the death of a same-sex partner is often not acknowledged at all or sometimes only minimally. During an illness of a partner, many glbtq individuals may actually be denied permission to stay with their partner in the hospital or medical facility. Family members of the dying partner may seek to keep the individual from being present and may even seize assets and assume responsibility for medical decisions.

When glbtq individuals seek support, such as in a grief support group, heterosexuals may not view the loss of a same-sex partner the same way they view the loss of an opposite-sex spouse. The bereaved gay man may hear comments such as "How can losing a boyfriend be the same thing as losing my wife?" The result is shame and isolation. This experience is common for glbtq individuals who live in rural areas or small towns, where discrimination may be more open and approved by the wider community as a part of their commitment to "family values."

Even professional grief counselors may not have sufficient experience working with gay men or lesbians to understand the nuances of the pain bereaved members of the glbtq community may be experiencing. Depending on one's geographical location, it can be difficult to find counselors who are knowledgeable about gender expression and sexual orientation, let alone who are glbtq-affirmative in their therapeutic practices.

Some glbtq individuals may also seek religious counseling to help them cope with grief, only to be met with condemnation or condescension or an attempt to "convert" them to heterosexuality.

It is crucial that glbtq individuals suffering bereavement seek help from professionals and friends who have no hidden agendas and who can appreciate without reservation the depth of love shared by same-sex partners.

Grief Recovery

Recovery from grief is a process, not an event. People differ greatly in the ways they heal from a loss. Many have an intense experience followed by gradual healing. Others have ups and downs over many years with a slow healing of their loss.

The following guidelines may be helpful to remember as individuals undergo the grieving process: 1) Give yourself time to heal and experience the changes in your life. 2) Avoid the temptation to try to replace the person or things you have lost. 3) Avoid engaging in destructive behaviors--such as excessive alcohol, drugs, sex, spending, etc.--as a way to cope with or escape grief. 4) Reach out to others for support and express your grief to sympathetic friends and professionals. 5) Be patient and gentle with yourself during the process. 6) Be open to new experiences and discoveries. 7) Find a spiritual--not necessarily religious--way to cope, such as practicing meditation, experiencing art and music, setting goals, and helping others.

Grief is a natural response to a loss, an experience shared by all. Loss is universal and is inherently a part of our humanity. Consequently, loss can allow us to connect with others at our very core. Though life may be different after a loss and can seem utterly diminished, it can in time be once again rich and satisfying.

Grief can bring people together to create a community of healing, as has occurred with the AIDS crisis. Though not readily apparent, losses may also engender gains. In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

The Loss of a Pet

Although we typically think of grief in terms of the loss of a loved person, that is not the only kind of grief people suffer.

The loss of a pet, for example, may be a major blow, especially for people who do not have children or whose children have grown up. Pets often take a prominent role in people's lives similar to that of a child. The bond between a pet and a person can be very strong, and the loss can result in a profound sense of emptiness. Pets love unconditionally and offer a great deal of affection. Even the obligations they impose can provide structure and a sense of purpose to their caregivers.

When a loved pet dies, one may not know where to turn for support. The veterinarian can assist with some arrangements, but he or she usually offers little emotional support in the grieving process.

Many people may not perceive the loss of a pet as seriously as they would the loss of a person. Others may actually belittle an individual who expresses sadness due to the loss of a pet and may minimize the loss. As a result, this loss may not be allowed to heal unless one makes a concerted effort to grieve as one would the loss of a loved person.

Anticipatory Grief

Another kind of grief might be described as anticipatory grief. For example, a person who is facing retirement or who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness or who is facing the break-up of a relationship or marriage may begin to experience reactions of grief even before the event has occurred. Uncertainty is a dominant reaction when the loss is anticipated, and uncertainty can be paralyzing.

But advanced awareness can spur people to prepare. Many individuals facing a terminal illness can plan the details necessary to have closure and care for others. Or one faced with the dissolution of a relationship can prepare to make the break-up as amicable and as equitable as possible.

Legal preparation is especially important for glbtq individuals. A living will offers rights to a partner to make medical and funeral decisions. A will acknowledges the partner's legal rights and assets. An alternative is a revocable living trust, which places the couple's assets in a separate legal entity that cannot be challenged. At the death of a partner, the trust transfers full ownership to the surviving owner.

Legal arrangements protect the couple's assets from others, who may not respect the couple's rights. Assets such as homes, stocks, and bonds can be assigned a beneficiary. Life insurance is also a valuable means of preparation. The knowledge of an impending loss can be an opportunity to make certain that loved ones are nurtured and protected.

Cultural Losses

Occasionally, a loss can be a shared experience of a community or society. Examples are the past experiences of polio and wars in which many individuals died. Recently, the city of New Orleans, as a result of Hurricane Katrina, the collapse of levees, and the inadequate response of governments, experienced a major cultural loss. Many individuals died and more lost their homes in the catastrophe. People were displaced and many experienced a loss of identity. The city itself faced a great crisis of confidence in the face of so many challenges, which were exacerbated by soaring rates of depression and diminished mental health services.

For the past three decades, the glbtq community has experienced many losses due to HIV and AIDS. Prior to the development of effective medications, death was commonplace in the community. One loss could not be fully resolved before another loss occurred. Many gay men at the epicenter of the pandemic saw their entire circle of friends succumb to the disease.

The glbtq community responded to the crisis by developing a network of support services that now provides a model for community reaction to community-wide health crises. For many men and women, this experience of individual and cultural loss is still very fresh. Though a diagnosis of HIV-infection is no longer an imminent death sentence, HIV and AIDS continue to be a reality with which the community must cope.

For many, the loss of sexual freedom as a result of the AIDS crisis has also been difficult to resolve. Some individuals have reacted with denial and continued to engage in risky sex despite the risk. This reaction to grief is a destructive response that has led to even more HIV-infection. Survivor guilt is also an issue for those who have not contracted HIV, especially for those who have lost friends or lovers to the disease.

Losses as Transitions

Loss is universal and is a normal experience of living. Losses often occur with gains as well. For example, retirement is often a very difficult time that some people experience as a loss. However, retirement can open up new opportunities such as volunteer work, increased time with family members, and the development of new interests.

The book *Transitions* by William Bridges discusses the benefits of facing major life changes, including loss. He states that a decision is made either to accept and face the change, or withdraw and refuse to grow. Many life events--including aging, relocating, entering the work force, or saying goodbye to an adult child who leaves home--that are not major losses may nevertheless be experienced as one. Each of these events involves a transition from one stage to another. From this perspective, even major losses such as the loss of a life partner may be more easily accepted.

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About the Author

David Price is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor. He has worked in the mental health field for 26 years and specializes in working with glbtq individuals. At the height of the epidemic, he directed an HIV/AIDs program. He has worked in many different mental health settings. He is currently in private practice, but also teaches college classes and presents on glbtq topics at professional conferences. He is author of *Finding a Lover for Life*, a dating guide for gay and bisexual men who are seeking to develop healthy dating skills. He has conducted dating workshops for gay and bisexual men nationally. He lives in Vermont, the first state in the U.S. to grant civil unions to same sex couples.