

Handout 1

Approach 1: The Dual Process Model

A very good starting place for our understanding of how people grieve is a relatively new 'dance' that has been called the 'Dual Process Model'. Like so many other people working in this field, its authors (Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut) noticed that many people who experience profound loss have a remarkable ability to do two things at once. We may best illustrate this with an example.

Picture a woman who has been recently bereaved. She is at home by herself, in emotional turmoil. She is distressed, disorientated, pottering aimlessly about the house. Suddenly the doorbell rings. Drying her eyes, adjusting her hair and face, she opens the door, and deals with having to sign for a package. Back indoors, she gets on with some household chores – gets upset – and then the phone rings. Putting on a 'brave face' she takes the call, and deals with it in a calm and efficient way.

And so, her day and her week and her months go by. At times she is distraught, on other occasions she is 'more like her normal self' and can get on with things in a practical way. She has good days and bad days.

She is not alone in this, for it is a common experience for many people who are grieving. Stroebe and Schut called this the Dual Process Model because they suggest that all grieving people deal with two quite different processes at one and the same time. The first involves all the horrible feelings which have been stirred up by the loss. At every turn, the person is faced with the implications of their loss – it is LOSS in capital letters and there is no getting away from it. The second is what is often called 'getting on with the rest of your life', or 'restoration', as Stroebe and Schut describe it. It involves all the 101 things that still need to be done, but also moves into the different ways of living which slowly become possible as a new future is faced.

The important thing about this way of understanding is that these two aspects of living – or 'orientations' as Stroebe and Schut call them – go along side by side, and grieving people move from one to the other and back again on a regular basis. In the early days they are likely to be much more in the loss aspect, with occasional moments in the restoration aspect. But, as time goes by, the balance shifts, and at some point a person will find that far more time is being spent with a future focus as they get on with their lives. But – and it is a big but – there will always be moments, often unguarded, when they find themselves back in the loss aspect – feeling the loss. Key dates like birthdays will often trigger these feelings, and it may take many years before the sharpness diminishes.

In this way of looking at the grief and loss, we should expect there to be times and occasions when the grieving person is upset and 'down in the dumps' – it is natural, and perhaps should even be welcomed as a reminder of the ways in which life was enhanced and enriched by the person who has now died.

Handout 2

Approach 2: The idea of stages

Without doubt, this approach is the one most likely to be quoted by a wide range of people, including many professionals, when asked about how people deal with grief and loss. It owes its origin to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross who worked as a psychiatrist for many years with dying and bereaved people, but similar approaches have been suggested by other equally eminent practitioners, such as John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parkes.

This approach was based on observations of many dying and bereaved people, where some common themes were noted. These included:

- ▶ **DENIAL:** an immediate reaction to the news of someone's death is the refusal to believe it is true – it can't have happened.
- ▶ **NUMBNESS:** part of the denial – people can draw into themselves with the shock of bad news – feelings can be too painful, so we 'shut down' and refuse to allow ourselves to hurt.
- ▶ **ANGER:** feelings begin to tumble out of us, without any clear focus or direction – we hurt more than we can say, and we lash out with our tongues at anyone and everyone.
- ▶ **DEPRESSION:** the anger gets turned in upon ourselves – we feel we cannot cope and we may even feel suicidal – life feels not worth living without our loved one.
- ▶ **ACCEPTANCE:** we 'come to terms' with our loss, and begin to rebuild our lives and face a new future.

This is a very basic description of the stages through which a grieving person may pass, and more recently this basic model has been expanded to make it more comprehensive and detailed, and also refined to make it feel less mechanistic.

Many of the 'stages' ring bells with a lot of people who can identify with the feelings. Some people find it a comfort that one stage seems to lead to another and that it is a way of reassuring people that there is a 'light at the end of the tunnel'.

It needs to be said, however, that a growing consensus of contemporary writers has led to a movement away from even a sophisticated 'stages model', because they feel that it does not do justice to the complexity and variety of people's reactions to grief and loss and runs the risk of being seen as a prescriptive model.

Handout 3

Approach 3: The tasks of grief

Another way of helping us understand what grief is all about was offered by William Worden, who moved away from the idea of stages or processes. He suggested that a helpful way to understand what grief is all about is to identify a number of tasks which a grieving person would need successfully to complete in order to move into the future.

The word 'tasks' may be a little off-putting at first – it is not like having a list of jobs to do, like going shopping, paying the rent, or doing your washing. Worden has much more psychological tasks in mind, which is hardly surprising as he was deeply involved in grief counselling and issues in people's mental health. He identified four main areas where, if you like, work has to be done if grief is to be successfully tackled.

- ▶ **Task One:** To accept the reality of the loss.
- ▶ **Task Two:** To work through the pain of grief.
- ▶ **Task Three:** To adjust to a world without the deceased (externally, internally and spiritually).
- ▶ **Task Four:** To move on emotionally.

It is important to recognise that these are not strictly sequential: it is not a case that you cannot tackle Task Three until Tasks One and Two have been thoroughly accomplished – far from it. For many people, it takes a long, long time before Task One is achieved and maybe for some it is never finally complete. Some people are caught up into Task Two immediately; others find that it takes a long time before they really let the pain of the event find full expression.

So, these are almost parallel tasks, except that Task Four makes it clear that, until some measure of 'letting go' has been achieved, it will be difficult to get on with life. However, Worden also recognises this is more of adaptation, and that 'eventually moving on' may also involve keeping an enduring connection or continuing bond with the deceased. There are some people for whom this is particularly difficult, who may need skilled help to complete this particular task.

For many people, the usefulness of this approach is that it highlights the importance of our being involved, and seeking to take charge, to some extent at least, of what is happening to us. Although there will be times when we sit back and let things swamp us and overcome us, we will need to find the energy to tackle these tasks, knowing that there is a different future ahead over which we have some control.

Handout 4

Approach 4: Finding new meanings

A common strand running through a lot of people's experience of grief is the loss of any meaning and purpose as a result of their great loss. They had vested so much in this particular relationship that its destruction shattered that sense of meaning for them.

That this is a key theme is beyond doubt, not least because without some sense of meaning and purpose most of us find it difficult to get on with our lives. This is not to deny some of the great strands of postmodernism which are woven into contemporary society, and which state that it is now increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to believe any more in grand overarching themes which can give meaning and purpose to our lives. That is something which you may wish to debate. At an individual level, however, most of us find something of this sense of meaning and purpose through particular relationships, and, when these cease, we find ourselves struggling to find a way forward without them.

This links both the fourth task identified by Worden (see Handout 3), and also with another set of approaches which focus on this issue of meaning. Some of the language of previous approaches had been that of 'working through' one's grief; of being able to 'let go' and 'move on' – all of which resonate to some extent with people's experience of grief and loss.

Some more recent approaches, however, encourage more of a narrative or 'story telling' approach which seeks not so much to leave things behind, as to reshape our understanding of where we are, and who we are, in the light of the loss we have experienced. Many bereaved people will readily talk of their loved one still being with them, many years after their physical death. For some, of course, this has a specific spiritual dimension because of a particular religious faith. But others, without this spirituality, will still talk of their lives being influenced by the memory of their loved one; of the 'gap still being very much there' in their lives, which nothing can fill.

Writers who have been exploring this aspect of grieving are now talking about 'story telling' in the sense of reshaping the sense of meaning and purpose after a significant loss – 'meaning reconstruction', for example, is a phrase used by Robert Neimeyer and his colleagues in the United States and Tony Walter in the UK that emphasises the importance of retelling the story of the loved one so that it has contemporary significance.

There is something in the 'reshaping of the biography of the deceased' which releases it from the past and makes it part of our present. 'Getting over a loss', from this perspective, is less a product of counselling or treatment, and a much more creative, albeit painful, reshaping of our individual world in the aftermath of the loss.

Handout 5

My boss really cares

- ▶ Are there guidelines for compassionate leave?
- ▶ What is an employee who has been bereaved entitled to expect?
- ▶ Are there arrangements for an employee to be able to take unpaid leave without losing their basic rights?
- ▶ Does the organisation allow flexi-working to help people experiencing grief and loss return to their employment?
- ▶ Health and safety: does the organisation recognise that people experiencing the stress of loss and grief may have reduced capacity to operate machinery and equipment safely?
- ▶ If there are major critical incidents in your organisation, how would employees be cared for effectively to help avoid the disabling symptoms of post-traumatic stress?
- ▶ Does your organisation have a confidential counselling service or 'employee assistance programme'?

Handout 6

Returning to work

On returning to work after a period of compassionate leave following the stress of a major loss, a person may feel anxious about:

- ▶ How workmates, colleagues and managers will react
- ▶ The extent to which 'things have moved on' without me – 'Am I still needed and valued?'
- ▶ Will I be able to cope at my job?
- ▶ Will I make a fool of myself and burst into tears when people ask how I am?
- ▶ Will I be able to get back to speed quickly enough? Or ever?

These anxieties are what Thompson (2015) calls 'Dealing with the Aftermath' of a major stressful event, and are part of what he calls 'the sometimes difficult transition back into 'normal' working life'.

These anxieties are mirrored by those experienced by colleagues and managers who may well feel anxious about the following:

- ▶ Have they come back to work too soon?
- ▶ What can I say to them?
- ▶ Should I mention their loss and ask how they are?
- ▶ Is it best just to ignore them and get on with it?
- ▶ Will they be able to cope with the job?
- ▶ Will we have to carry them?
- ▶ If so, for how long?

These are also part of 'Dealing with the Aftermath', and it is easy to see how two matching sets of anxieties can conspire to make the return to work doubly problematic.

There are clearly major responsibilities for management to ensure that a proper assessment is made about a person's fitness to return to work, once they have received medical clearance of course. An initial interview needs to be held as soon as the person is medically cleared to return to work following a period of extended absence, to clarify and talk through some of the issues which have caused anxiety on both sides.

A major issue will be whether or not the person requires some degree of workload relief to enable them to get back into the swing of things at work. This is admittedly difficult to calculate in order to strike a balance between the de-skilling effect of having too little to do, and the contrasting overload of work before a person's resilience has fully returned.

Finally

Returning to work after a period of loss-related absence can be a difficult process for all concerned – the member of staff involved, his or her colleagues and the line manager. Each has a part to play in contributing to the success or otherwise of the process of reintegration.

Handout 7

Oh my God!

Many people, whether or not they have a religious allegiance, instinctively exclaim the title of this exercise when faced with bad news. For some it is a powerful exclamation and nothing more; for others, it is an expression of some sort of faith in a higher being; and for others it is literally a prayer for help to a divine being in whom they have placed their trust.

This exercise is designed to help people explore some of the issues around religion and spirituality, not least because major traumas like loss and bereavement can often stop people in their tracks and cause them to ask questions about the meaning of their lives which otherwise might have gone unasked.

In contemporary multicultural societies, there are still many people who belong to faith communities. Christianity, Islam and Judaism command major followings, but there are many other religions which people find attractive and compelling. One common feature of all religions is the sense of meaning which they can give to people's lives, and also the meaning which they can often give to people's death and dying. What people believe happens to them when they die is one of the seminal questions we all have to face, and the answers we give will tell people a lot about how we feel we should live our lives.

The question of meaning is also caught up with the issue of spirituality, which is notoriously difficult to define. For some people, spirituality is inextricably bound up with their religion and how they practise it. For many others, however, it is a far more diffuse concept, and one that is encapsulated in the broad issue of what gives people meaning and purpose in their lives.

At times of serious loss, however, people's faith can be sorely tested, and the sense of meaning and purpose which previously underpinned their lives can be dislocated, if not shattered. It is therefore important to have some understanding of this dimension of human experience, and for us to be able to appreciate other people's experience and perspectives.