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The Experience of Loss: Grief, Resilience and When to Get Help

“Anyone with a heart, with a family, has experienced loss,” writes author Luanne Rice. “No one escapes unscathed. Every story of separation is different, but I think we all understand that basic, wrenching emotion that comes from saying goodbye, not knowing if we’ll see that person again – or perhaps knowing that we won’t.”

Grief is most often associated with the loss of a loved one. However, we may also grieve when we experience other major changes in our personal or work lives. Any of these losses can test our resilience, cause us to lose sleep and diminish our enjoyment of life.

A Natural Reaction

Grief is the natural reaction to any important loss and complicated grief can occur in any situation that triggers grief,” says Natalia Skritskaya, Ph.D., Clinical Training Director for the Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University. “The loss of a trusted colleague, major changes in our work



environment – anything that affects our identity or our everyday life in an important way can register as an important loss and trigger grief. If we get caught up in some aspect of the circumstances of the loss and/or try excessively to avoid reminders of the loss, this can stall the process of adaptation to the change and produce a syndrome of complicated grief. [See Q&A, page 2]

What Stands in the Way?

Some people are able to regain their footing after a loss or multiple losses, while others may cope in counterproductive ways. These may include working an excessive number of hours, compulsive behavior,

putting up emotional barriers, or misusing alcohol or drugs. These may signal a need to seek outside help.

Not knowing how to ask for help can be a barrier, however.

“For many of us, asking for and accepting help is much harder than giving it,” writes author Linda Graham, MFT in *Bouncing Back*. “We may not know how to ask for help, we may believe that asking for help is a sign of weakness, or we may have come to believe, from experience, that there’s no point.”¹ Graham’s book offers exercises in reaching out for help, along with practical skills for building

We may grieve the retirement or departure of a close colleague. Or we may feel a profound sense of loss when we experience a succession of major changes at work—a physical move or restructuring, for example, or a disruptive shift in the way we do our work. We may mourn the permanent passing of “the old way” of doing things.

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Grief, Loss and Resilience

Bad things do happen; how I respond to them defines my character and the quality of my life. I can choose to sit in perpetual sadness, immobilized by the gravity of my loss, or I can choose to rise from the pain and treasure the most precious gift I have - life itself.

- Walter Anderson



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resilience.

“No one wishes for life events that completely

knock the wind out of them,” writes Christian Moore, LCSW, in *The Resilience Breakthrough*.

“But rock-bottom experiences are sources of resilience that can strengthen us.”²

¹ Bouncing Back: Rewiring your brain for maximum resilience and well-being, by Linda Graham; New World Library, Novato, CA (2013).

² The Resilience Breakthrough: 27 Tools for Turning Adversity into Action, by Christian Moore; Greenleaf Book Group Press, Austin, TX (2014).

Complicated Grief—Q & A with M. Katherine Shear, M.D. Director, Center for Complicated Grief

Q: What are some of the most common signs of complicated grief?

A: Complicated grief includes symptoms of acute grief, such as intense yearning, longing and insistent distracting thoughts about the deceased, difficulty accepting the finality and consequences of the death and a sense of emptiness, or loss of purpose or meaning in life. There is often a feeling of being shocked or stunned and difficulty trusting or caring about other people and feeling of anger, bitterness or self-blame related to the death. People with complicated grief are often caught up in “if only” thoughts about how the death could have been prevented or delayed. They may have intense emotional or physical reactions to reminders of the loss and often try to avoid such reminders. They may also try to escape from the reality of the loss by spending hours doing things to try to feel close to the person who died by touching or smelling their clothes, listening to their voice on a recording or looking at pictures.

Q: Are there some characteristics that make certain people more susceptible to prolonged grief?

A: Susceptibility to prolonged grief results from a combination of person-related characteristics as well as circumstances, context and consequences of the death. In most cases complicated grief occurs after loss of an especially close, rewarding relationship. When the loss is sudden and unexpected, especially if it is a loss of a young person, adaptation is more difficult and acute grief can be especially persistent and intense. Women are more likely than men to develop complicated grief. People with a history of mood or anxiety disorders or people who have a history of difficult relationships with early caregivers appear to be more vulnerable to this condition. We do not grieve well alone, so not having emotional support after a loss or not being open to accepting support can contribute to adaptation getting stalled. Additionally, having a concurrent mental disorder can contribute to difficulty adapting to a loss.

Q: Are there some active ways people can become more resilient before they experience grief?

A: It is very difficult to prepare for grief. One of the best ways to help bereaved people is to understand that adaptation is a natural part of the response and most people find a way to adapt to even the most painful loss. Most people do not need to become more resilient before they experience grief. Health professionals can help by understanding that acute grief is a natural reaction to loss and it is often surprisingly intense. Patients and their friends and family may think a person should grieve a loss and move on, but that is not the way we adapt. Grief is permanent after we lose someone close but it usually attenuates over time, even when we do not prepare ourselves.

Resources:

Center for Complicated Grief www.complicatedgrief.org
Harvard Family Health Guide <http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/dealing-with-grief-and-bereavementthe-familyhealth-guide>