

BEREAVEMENT AND THE QUEST FOR MEANING: REWRITING STORIES OF LOSS AND GRIEF

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Abstract: Psychological theories applied to the experience of bereavement have recently undergone considerable evolution or perhaps even revolution, as conceptualizations of grief as a predictable series of stages of adjustment leading to recovery have been called into question by fresh thinking and research. This article summarizes some of the most important trends in the “new look” in grief research, drawing upon a brief case study to illustrate contemporary exploration of the role of meaning reconstruction, continuing bonds, the evolving self, and social processes in adaptation to bereavement.

Key words: Bereavement, Continuing bonds, Meaning reconstruction.

Sandra, a 42-year-old secretary and divorced mother of two young sons, experiences periodic upsurges of grief following the death of her mother from cancer three years ago. During her mother’s protracted illness, Sandra, along with her older sister, functioned as a primary caregiver, often bearing the brunt of her mother’s frustration over her declining health and increasing confinement. Now, trying to sort out the meaning of the loss for herself and her family, Sandra contends with the nagging sense that her best efforts at caregiving were not good enough, and that her mother’s death left ‘unfinished business’ between them. At the same time, this loss seemed to have ushered in elusive but important gains in Sandra’s life, as she developed a new persona as a ‘take-charge kind of person’, a fundamental shift in her sense of self that has served her well since that time. In grief counselling Sandra finds herself seeking a way to not only reconnect with her mother and address some of the emotional ambiguity of their relationship, but also to consolidate and recruit support for the personal transformation she has undergone since her mother’s death.

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FRESH CONCEPTS, NEW POSSIBILITIES

Real losses such as Sandra's do not fit easily with traditional views of mourning as a series of stages which, after a period of disruptive psychological and physical symptoms, lead to the re-establishment of a pre-existing equilibrium. Indeed, conventional theories provide little guidance to either the bereaved or those who try to assist them, beyond offering the simple reassurance that turbulent emotions are 'normal', and that with time, the ravages of acute grief will subside. At their worst, such models disempower both client and caregiver from engaging grief as an active process, one that is at the same time intensely personal, and inherently social. It is therefore not surprising that many grief therapists find that existing theories offer little of value in informing their practical work.

However, this situation is now changing. The process of mourning is being reexamined and different ways of working are being explored by both researchers and practitioners. This new wave of constructivist grief theory is less the product of any particular thinker than the expression of a sea-change in our ideas about the nature of bereavement. The following are among the common elements of these newer models.

Scepticism about the universality of stage theory

There is an increasing reluctance to generalize about grief as a process that can lead predictably from psychological disequilibrium to readjustment, coupled with an appreciation of more complex patterns of adaptation (Attig, 1991; Worden, 1991). Indeed, recent longitudinal research on widowed spouses clearly documents the quite different paths that they can take in adapting to loss, with many showing impressive resilience and adaptation in earliest months following loss, others becoming mired in chronic grief or depression, and still others (particularly those overwhelmed by caring for a chronically ill partner) actually demonstrating considerable improvement in mood and functioning after the death (Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004). Such results clearly point to the need to identify factors that account for the diversity in grief responses, and help us understand the multiple sources of both resilience and complication in the wake of loss.

Continuing bonds

We have seen a shift away from the presumption that successful mourning requires 'letting go' of the one who has died, and toward a recognition of the role of continuing symbolic bonds (Hagman, 2001; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Only recently have investigators begun to study the potential costs and benefits of cultivating an ongoing sense of connection with our lost loved ones, and the way in which this process can be a two-edged sword. For example, one study that signalled widows several times a day to prompt them to record their thoughts and feelings found that, overall, those who thought a great deal about their deceased husbands were also prone to report the highest level of negative feelings. On the other hand, for those widows who were farther along in their grief (a few years into bereavement as opposed to a few months), accessing memories of their husband was associated with higher levels of positive emotions (Field & Friedrichs, 2004). Again, such findings point to the individuality of grief, and the subtle ways in which any given factor, like seeking connection through shared memories of the deceased, can have different consequences for different grievers at different times.

Finding meaning in loss

There is a new focus on the cognitive and active processes in mourning, as well as the emotional consequences of loss (Horowitz, 1997; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). In particular, a good deal of evidence supports the view that the ability to find meaning in experiences of loss predicts positive adaptation, whereas a persistent and unsuccessful struggle for meaning is associated with intense (Uren & Wastell, 2002), chronic (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksama, & Larson, 1998), and complicated forms of grief (Prigerson, 2004). Likewise, research on large numbers of people bereaved by violent death (e.g., survivors of suicide, homicide, and accident) demonstrates that the inability to make sense of the loss is perhaps the primary factor that sets them apart from those whose losses are more anticipated in the context of serious illness in the loved one (Currier, Holland, Coleman, & Neimeyer, in press).

The evolving self

We are now more aware of the psychosocial transitions stimulated by loss,

and their implications for the bereaved person's sense of identity (Parkes, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Although regressive outcomes are indeed possible (as when people withdraw from close connections with others out of fear of future losses), more commonly people adapt to loss by giving greater emphasis to human relationships, reordering life priorities, and experiencing greater personal maturity, strength and empathy for the suffering of others (Frantz, Farrell, & Trolley, 2001; Neimeyer, 2001b).

Grief as a social process

Our approach to grief has broadened to include not only the idiosyncratic experience of individual grievers, but also the reciprocal impact of loss on families and (sub)cultural groups (Gilbert, 1996; Nadeau, 1997). Recent research from a family systems perspective, for example, attests to the way in which family cohesion and communication predict members' course of grieving over time much more strongly than early levels of grief predict subsequent family cohesion (Traylor, Hayslip, Kaminski, & York, 2003). Clearly, grieving is as much a social as individual process and more attention is needed into how families and other social groups can support or impede the adaptation of their members.

MEANING RECONSTRUCTION

Considering these trends, I have been working on a new paradigm of grief that views meaning reconstruction as the principal task in coping with a loss (Neimeyer, 2001a, 2005; Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002). This approach views human beings as inveterate meaning-makers, weavers of narratives that give thematic significance to the plot structures of their lives. One implication of this 'constructivist' view is that the narrative themes that people draw on are as varied as their personal biographies, and as complex as the overlapping cultural belief systems that inform their attempts at meaning making.

A further implication is that profound loss perturbs these taken-for-granted constructions about life, sometimes traumatically shaking the very foundations of one's assumptive world. As one widow in her 60s remarked, 'Work is a life-line right now — a place where I recognize myself. In so many other settings I don't seem to know who I am without Vance, and that is a great and painful surprise, as we lived so fully as independent people'

(Neimeyer, 2006b). In such cases, the grieving individual is forced to author a new life story, and seek an audience for the new sense of self that emerges.

The story of Sandra can be understood in these terms. Careful listening to Sandra's account of her final weeks with her mother and their aftermath suggested not a stage-like progression toward a simplistic ideal of 'recovery' from grief, but a complex, multi-level processing of the relationship and its loss. For example, Sandra referred in passing to her struggle not to be 'powerless' in the face of her mother's advancing cancer, and the 'façade' of authority that she adopted at that time. Reflecting this evocative image – suggesting a picture of a mask of competence that initially seemed only surface deep, I wondered aloud whether it seemed to become more genuine, more fully her, as she continued to wear it. Surprised by her own word choice, Sandra eagerly joined me in extending the metaphor, reformulating it as a 'mantle of authority' and a 'new garment' that became broken in and increasingly comfortable with continued wear. Exploring the mask or costume analogy, we then began to speak in terms of a theatrical metaphor, considering her shift from being a 'bit player in the family drama' to 'sharing centre stage with her sister' in the final production of her mother's life. Tacking from the self to the social, we concluded by considering the reaction of others, including her sister, sons, and husband, to this evolution in her sense of presence, finding support in their validation of her transformation. In particular, we 'invited her mother into the room', encouraging Sandra to have a moving symbolic conversation with her in an empty chair, which over the course of 10 minutes allowed her to put into words the love and pride each felt for the other, despite their acknowledgment of the other's human failings. Thus, in keeping with a meaning reconstruction approach, counselling focused incisively on deeply personal and initially unspoken meanings clustering around the loss, which could be articulated symbolically through a delicate attention to the nuances of Sandra's words and emotions. The result was an affirmation of both Sandra's relationship to her mother, and of the valued changes she had sustained in her sense of self since her bereavement (Neimeyer, 2005).

NEW HORIZONS

As I have continued this work, I have been struck by the power of these new models and metaphors to enhance counselling and psychotherapy with

bereaved individuals and, indeed, to promote a sense of reconstruction and renewal among bereaved persons who never find it necessary to seek professional assistance. This has led me to attempt to formulate this leading edge of grief theory in practical terms that are accessible to those who mourn, and to those who help (Neimeyer, 2000). For example, various forms of reflective journaling can be helpful in seeking meaning in loss, such as using a "loss characterization" to meditate on who one is in light of the loss, writing about the self as if from the standpoint of an intimate and sympathetic friend. Biographical techniques that seek to capture the basic life story of the deceased, perhaps in a way that it can be shared with others, and that consider how life 'chapters' shaped by bereavement fit into the broader "table of contents" of one's self-narrative can also help promote integration of loss, while also tracing strands of consistency within the life of the deceased and the life of the survivor. Formulating metaphors that capture one's sense of resilience in the aftermath of the loss (e.g., describing the kind of "soil" that one might need to find to "put down new roots" after a loss) can also be useful, as can various forms of imaginal psychotherapeutic dialogues with the deceased loved one, with needy and resourceful parts of oneself, and even with one's suffering might all play a role in helping clients find fresh significance in the course of grieving. Finally, meaningful rituals that acknowledge the personal dimensions of loss and transition not captured in standard church liturgies can help validate the ways in which not only individual mourners, but also a grieving community, are changed by a common loss. Detailed examples and discussion of these and other meaning-making methods have been provided elsewhere (Neimeyer, 1999, 2004, 2006a; Neimeyer, Keese, & Fortner, 2000).

Finally, I have been excited by the prospect of a meaning reconstruction model to deepen our scientific understanding of narratives of loss, an emerging area of research now being joined by colleagues drawing inspiration from a number of contemporary approaches. The result should be a more adequate understanding of how people reorganize their life stories in the wake of profound loss, and find meaning and purpose in the chapters yet to be written.

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