

Coming to Grips with Loss

Normalizing the grief process

Presented by

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Structure of the Presentation

- Research Design & Methodology
- Discovering & Assessing Loss
- Mourning
- Coping
- Turning Points
- Completing the Process

Research Design & Methodology

The grounded theory methodology differs from methodologies using verification approaches in that it allows the theory to emerge from the data. It does not seek to verify existing theory, but rather makes a unique contribution to sociological research. This methodology ensures that the theory “fits” in a substantive area of study, “works” to explain the majority of behavior, is “relevant” to the people in the field of study and is “modifiable” when new data is added. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1998).

Types of Loss

- External vs. Internal
- Expected vs. Unexpected
- Gradual vs. Immediate
- Permanent vs. Temporary
- Direct vs. Vicarious
- Mutual Loss
- Making a Choice
- Unresolved Losses
- *Cascading Losses*

Discovering Loss

External Source: police report, management announcement, declaration from a partner, diagnosis, or realizing that material goods have been stolen.

Internal Source: an internal realization of illness, change in heart about a relationship or career choice.

Assessing Loss

People suffering loss will place a relative value on one loss over another based on their priorities, hopes, plans, and expectations for themselves or others. The assessment is based on the type and scope of the loss combined with the experiences and conditions that make up one's personal life experiences.

This stage may be either a subconscious process; or it may be considered and meticulously well thought out, or any variation in between. Any aspect of one's personal life experience may affect the value placed on the loss.

Assessing Loss

Personal Life Experiences

- Biological
- Emotional
- Spirituality
- Personal history
- Available resources
- Cultural conditions
- Physical environment

Permeates every stage of the loss process.

Context in which the entire process functions.

May be responsible for the most variation in the timing and course of action.

Assessing Loss

There is a cyclical pattern of assigning a value, experiencing feelings associated with loss, choosing a coping strategy and evaluating the results of each loss cycle or iteration of the process. This re-cycling continues over a period of time until people either hit a stopping point or complete the process of coming to grips with loss.

Each of the participants in this study reported experiencing an initial loss and several cascading losses; each required re-cycling through the assessing, mourning and coping processes to resolve each loss. It is critical to investigate the value that people put on these cascading losses in order to help them through the loss process.

Mourning

Experiencing feelings associated with loss.

- Expressed openly.
- Experienced internally without external visibility.
- Any combination or range.

In response to the level of perceived importance ascribed to the loss.

Vacillate over time based on the effectiveness of coping actions, available resources, and estimation of one's ability to withstand emotions.

Moderate as the person moves through the loss process.

Mourning

Initial Reaction: may result in any number of intense, sometimes conflicting emotions.

Orienting

- Disbelief.
- Taking it in.
- Vacillation between connecting and blocking the feelings.

Overwhelming

- May experience sensory overload.
- Distortion in physical sensations.
- Distortion in experience of time.

Mourning

Ongoing Responses: may be marked by vacillating and varying intensity of feelings.

- Going through the motions
- Distortions
- Depression
- Anger
- Relief
- Carrying the feelings
- Transience
- Acceptance
- Integrating
- Sense of hope

Mourning

Reminiscing: recalling to mind an incident or an accounting of a memorable experience.

- Still experience feelings, but with diminishing intensity and disruption.
- Experience joy, even in the face of the loss.
- Go back to places that reminded them of the loss.
- Appreciate their capacity for emotional expression without becoming trapped in it.

Coping

Consists of actions or strategies that people employ to help deal with feelings that they experience as a result of loss.

Successful use of coping actions may result in progress and related positive emotional responses may also encourage coping strategies that can move people towards resolution.

Increasing stress, recognition of other losses related to the initial loss, or failure of coping actions may result in regression or what may seem like an overall failure or additional loss.

Coping

The coping process has two main tracks that people can enter, one that delays addressing issues as a result of a strong or overwhelming emotional climate, or one that takes some actions that will help them resolve the feelings that they are experiencing.

Both tracks meet the definition of dealing with difficulties.

Coping

Delaying: If the emotional climate is too overwhelming for people to handle, they may choose a coping strategy or series of actions that will help them contain the experience of feelings associated with the loss. These actions may temporarily or permanently delay their ability to come to grips with the experience of loss.

This stage consists of three possible options: insulating, trapping, or degenerating.

Coping

Insulating: may result in a short-term rest stop that places people in a detached or protected situation or an approach of non-confrontation of issues. Some common approaches to insulating one from experiencing the feelings associated with loss are:

- Circumventing
- Deflecting
- Substance use
- Façade maintenance
- Holing up
- Emotional self-talk

Coping

Trapping: People who are trying to avoid the feelings associated with loss may find themselves feeling trapped or that they have no options. They may close themselves off with self-protecting behaviors that also may stop them from completing the loss process. Some actions may include:

- Carrying the burden
- Self-protecting
- Self-harm
- Suicide

Coping

Degenerating: approaches that result in backsliding into a less functionally active position emotionally, physically, and socially. People may be avoiding or may be entirely unable to deal with their difficulties at this time, may eventually be unable to carry out their normal responsibilities, and may not be able to ask for help. Some strategies may include:

- Dropping out
- Self-harm
- Self-neglect
- Suicide

Coping

Resolving: progress that may consist of two steps forward, one step back; but there usually seems to be some forward motion. This movement may offer people more functionality and the ability to progress towards coming to grips with loss. The resolving stage consists of four sub-stages:

- Stabilizing
- Making sense
- Internalizing
- Salvaging

Coping

All Stages: Some coping strategies seem to help people in all phases of the resolving stage. Some have the characteristics of connecting with other people who can offer encouragement, developing a different perspective or maintaining hope. Others include solo activities. Some include:

- Seeking help
- Muscling through
- Keeping track
- Spiritual connection
- Storytelling

Coping

Stabilizing: bringing stability, safety, or consistency into one's life. People may break situations or responsibilities down into more manageable parts, engage in resource gathering or may restrict when, whom, and in what manner, people incurring the loss allow others to have access to them. Some activities include:

- Establishing safety
- Routinizing
- Compartmentalizing

Coping

Making Sense: People need to come to an understanding of how loss can be explained in a manner that allows them to move on with their lives. People will generally spend some time looking at their own part in the loss, questioning how it could have happened, and what they could have done differently to avoid the loss.

Some activities include:

- Ruminating
- Sharing the journey
- Researching

Coping

Internalizing: a means of adjusting to a change which can be a time of intermittent progress, followed by a soaking in period and then more progress. Some of the coping strategies that may be generally employed are:

- Reprioritizing
- Questing
- Shifting relations
- Pacing
- Seeking validation
- Resuming normalcy
- Creating closure
- Reconnecting with joy

Coping

Salvaging: a way of extracting something good from a difficult situation. It seems to be very important to people who completed the process, to be able to ferret out some benefits gained from struggling through the process. Some of the coping strategies that are commonly used are:

- Retrospecting
- Re-creating the self
- Finding a new perspective

Turning Points

When people become stuck in fear, are feeling overwhelmed, or negativity, they may stop making progress or even regress in attempting to resolve loss. Turning points are actions, resources, information, or contributing factors that make a significant difference in the way that people view themselves, their ability to affect change, and their outlook on the future. Turning points can contribute to a progressive or a regressive change in attitude that results in a change in feelings and perspectives, and in turn, coping strategies.

Turning Points

Control: regaining control can counteract the feeling of being trapped. Losing the power to make choices can be a regressive turning point.

Upping the Ante: when people do something with the intent of increasing demands or applying pressure in order to achieve a better result.

Hitting the Wall: a collapse of the entire system--emotional, physical, spiritual--usually after expending a great deal of energy attempting to make some movement.

Turning Points

Procuring Resources: being able to get some relief either financially, emotionally, or physically can break the logjam of feeling stuck.

Change in Venue: A change in scene, location, or physical situation may offer hope or different options. Can also be seen as regression.

Making a Stand: a transitional decision to do something different; something that was not in their previous character; something that is more authentic of who they want to become. Losing ground can result in despair, feeling like a failure, or loss of hope.

Turning Points

Being Seen: or taken seriously may come as a relief after fighting for recognition of a painful or stressful situation. Lost of credibility can be viewed as another failure.

Prognosis or Diagnosis: may result in a change in expectations or outlook for the future, either in a positive or negative manner.

Rite of Passage: A change in social status can motivate people to evaluate who they are and what their goals will be in their new sense of identity. May also result in loss of identity.

Turning Points

Spirituality: People may go to some spiritual or religious connection that has helped them in the past with the intention of creating a shift in their current experience.

Support: presence or absence of support may be a source of hope or fear for people trying to deal with loss.

Change in Perspective: Turning points usually result in a change in perspective that can garner various levels of hope or despair and induce movement out of a stuck position.

Completing the Process

People involved in the loss process determine what they consider a complete process. The loss process may go on for years, or even indefinitely throughout peoples' lifetimes, usually with diminishing intensity. The mourning sub-process may be considered complete when it turns to reminiscing. The coping sub-process may be considered complete when people are able to experience a sense of healing, a return to a satisfactory level of functionality, emotional balance, and are able to resume day-to-day existence in a satisfying manner.

Completing the Process

Ultimately, participants considered the process complete when they were able to:

- Make sense of the loss in a way that provided some sense of resolution.
- Integrate the loss into their ongoing life.
- Salvage something positive from the experience of coming to grips with loss.

The end result of navigating the entire process of coming to grips with loss, was experiencing hope for the future.

Discovering Loss
External or internal realization or acknowledgement

Assessing Loss
How bad is it? Who is affected?
How long with it last?
Results of Mourning & Coping

Mourning: Experiencing feelings
Emotional responses related to assessment & coping strategies

Coping: Dealing with difficulties
Actions used to moderate emotional responses & address issues

Re-Cycling
Interactive Processes

Initial Reaction

Ongoing Response

Reminiscing

Coming to Grips

Delaying:
Response to feeling overwhelmed

Insulating

Trapping

Degenerating

Resolving:
Forward movement

Stabilizing

Making Sense

Internalizing

Salvaging

Coming to Grips

Turning Points
Events that motivate movement after becoming stuck in any stage of the loss process

Implications

- Holistic view of how people come to grips with loss of any type.
- Non-Pathologizing perspective.
- Roadmap to understanding the beginning, middle and end of the process.
- Provides goals and desired end-state.
- Planning tool for individuals, families, community groups, and larger populations.
- Usable by those engaged in self-care as well as professional community.

Implementing the Theory

- Non-directive interviewing
- Open-ended questions
- Discover as many cascading losses as possible
- Allow the client to prioritize the losses
- Introduce turning points
- Re-assure the client
- Acknowledge progress