Loss and Bereavement-- Straight Talk

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Dear Reader,

This web document gives a brief overview and introduction to bereavement. It is written for all--professionals and non-professionals, bereaved and non-bereaved. From time to time, it will be updated. For those interested in a more comprehensive understanding of the field, please consult ***Working with the Bereaved: Multiple Lenses on Loss and Mourning*** by S. S. Rubin, R. Malkinson and Eliezer Witztum. It was published in 2012 by Routledge.

Respectfully,

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Brief Introduction to Loss	Q. How did you become interested in this topic?	Q What is the difference between grief and mourning?	Q What is the "purpose" of grief and mourning?
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Brief Introduction to Loss

The death of a significant person is a major life event for most people[1]. Despite the fact that we know that all things will die, and despite the fact that all families experience loss, death is a topic we often maintain at a psychological distance. Death is associated with: psychological pain, loneliness, fear of the unknown, with abandonment and being left, will illness, tragedy, -- and it is indeed related to all of these.

The psychological response to the death of someone we care about, however, is generally intimately associated with another psychological process of great importance—with love. The English psychoanalyst John Bowlby's three volume classic Attachment and Loss (1969-1980) devoted a volume each to the ways we become attached in early life (for example to our mothers and fathers) and later on, how we respond to temporary separations, and how people respond to the death of significant attachment figures across the lifecycle. The use of the term "attachment figure" is a bit technical, but it refers to those persons who make a tremendous difference in how we live our lives and how we feel safe. Bowlby reviewed a wide range of theoretical, clinical, and research literature in order to clarify what was known and understood at the time.

The people who are important to us in psychologically meaningful ways are individuals whom we form relationships with. We may have known them all our lives, such as parents or siblings; we may formed romantic and family relations with them, such as spouses, partners, and children, or we may have known them in more limited fashion but highly significant relationships (close friends, military comrades). During the formation of our closest bonds, we form relationships where the distance and distinctions between self and other, between me and "not-me",

[1] Ovdan Veschol Bechevar Hayisraelit, 1993

are reduced or blurred. We all have multiple circles of relationships and people who are important to us. We grieve differently for people who mean different things to us. For some losses, we may respond briefly, and for the most significant of our losses, the responses can be of overwhelming and debilitating proportions, and last in different ways, for as long as we ourselves live.

In the pages that follow, I will try to share with you a number of ideas and sources related to the area of loss and bereavement. My goal here is to be brief while remaining faithful to what is deemed current knowledge in the field The scientific knowledge of bereavement is constantly changing and expanding, but there remain many mysteries about why people respond with so much variation and in so many different ways to the loss of a loved one.

Q How did you become interested in this topic?

Many people wonder how I chose to work in the area of loss and bereavement. Some ask straight away. Others wait until they have known me better. For me, the question is not how I became an expert in loss and bereavement so much as how that expertise has changed over the years – including why I stay in it.

The first significant loss I experienced was my father's sudden death when he was 42 and I was 6. Crossing the dividing line from being a "normal" family to one where the pain of loss and longing were present was sharp—but once it was done, there was no turning back. On "this side" of the divide, were those who have experienced the loss of a close family member to death, and on the other side—those who have not. We all have reason to fear loss, but in my experiences, people who have not experienced the death of a beloved family member (or its equivalent) are more likely to be less emotionally open to this part of human existence.

Of course, not all who experience loss at an early age become psychologists, and fewer still make bereavement a focus of their study and work. The work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross talking to

people seriously ill or suffering from terminal illness caught my attention and her work spoke to me deeply. Dealing with regular people in irregular circumstances and using the threat of death to being closer rather to distance people from their loved ones was compelling. During my graduate studying in clinical psychology, my first practicum was at a VA psychiatric hospital. Due to my interest in loss and bereavement, I was given as a client a man diagnosed years before as schizophrenic who was suffering from terminal cancer. I was scared of the schizophrenia part—but I was even more curious about the man facing a terminal illness. We spent hours in psychotherapy talking about living while dying. By the end of our time working together, my client was discharged from the hospital in Massachusetts, and went traveling across the US to say goodbye to his surviving siblings and their families. My client's gift to me had been his openness and his willingness to meet me. We both benefited from our time together. Thanks to him, I had the opportunity to learn more about meeting people facing loss as well as about meeting people with severe forms of emotional disturbance.

In the years since I entered the field, I have maintained an interest and focus on loss and bereavement as a significant part of my professional work. The lessons learned early have been supplemented by thousands of hours of practicing therapy, teaching, research, and interactions with colleagues from near and far. One lesson I learned early has not changed. The field of loss is about how we are involved with each other and care about each other. That fundamental aspect of humanity is the basic axis of my interest in this work. True, there is a lot of pain here, but as one who studies the impact of loss across time, it becomes clear how human inter-connectness is the real story here. In other words, loss and bereavement are variations of the basic theme of life—love and connection.

Q What is the difference between grief and mourning?

Often, these terms are used interchangeably. And when they are not used that way, it is still not easy to know exactly what is meant.

From a psychological perspective, Grief (yagon) is often referred to as the sharp pangs of sadness and pain that accompany the first weeks or months of responding to the death of a close relation. Mourning is often referred to as the process of coming to grips with the fact that someone we care about is no longer with us, and it can preoccupy one totally, or partially, for quite some time. Much of the literature in the 20th century on loss used the term mourning in this way. At times the terms are used interchangeably— and the entire process of coming to grips with someone's death can be referred to either as the "grieving" or the "grief process" or "mourning" or the "mourning process."

In the scientific literature, sometimes, people refer to grief as the psychological aspects of adjusting to loss and the reactions that come with it, while they reserve the term "mourning" for the social, ritual, or religious features associated with loss. To take a page from religion, we note that in traditional Orthodox or "halachik" Judaism, the mourner is defined by having been bereaved of a particular kinship relationship. The mourner is religiously charged with displaying signs of public mourning. This public display of mourning is not necessarily connected to, or dependent upon, the emotional feelings of sadness or grief. The emotional experience may or may not be present, but the bereaved is classified as a "mourner".

A person can be a "mourner" by virtue of their social role, and still not be at all upset about the loss. And the reverse is no less true—a person may not have any formal social or religious status as a "mourner" – and still can be devastated emotionally.

Q What is the purpose of grief and mourning?

I am not sure we can answer that with any certainty. It is easier to describe what occurs more than it is to explain the purpose of deep seated human response patterns that have evolved over time. Many mental health professionals would agree, however, that the emotional processes of grief and mourning are reflections of the deep seated emotional bonds that are formed in close relationships, and that the pain involved is a reflection of how deeply people are connected.

From a psychological perspective, we might say that grief and mourning are the processes that accompany the readjustment of persons to the realization that someone has died, and the changes that the bereaved make as a result. Freud[2] was struck by the painfulness of these processes, and did not have a psychological explanation for why they would be quite so painful. His overarching explanation for the "mourning process" was that it had as its goal, the removal of psychological energy or investment from a relationship with someone who, as reality would suggest, cannot provide us with the reality based responses that only living people can bestow upon each other.

For many years, Freud's notion that "withdrawal of emotional investment" from the deceased was the goal of grief and mourning was accepted too wholeheartedly by many in the field of bereavement. It seemed to capture the intensity with which people can be preoccupied with the loss for some period of time after a loss, and also, the fact that later on they are able to resume their lives and make room for someone else.

Perhaps spousal loss best fits this paradigm. For a time after bereavement, the bereaved spouse may be inconsolable and convinced that they will be unavailable to form another spousal relationship ever. And yet, with the passage of time (but not JUST time), many of them can and do form a new relationship. In a basic way, Freud linked the way people feel and function following

[2] In Mourning and Melancholia 1917

loss to the processes of mourning. These involve making changes in one's world of relationships, and that these changes involve an important component of psychological change. If we stay with the idea of the marital couple, we can say the following. Becoming involved with a new partner requires a psychological readiness for the new partner. Having a new partner without psychological readiness for involvement with that new partner can be a very problematic experience for both sides. Freud spoke to the need to mourn the previous relationship in order to find the emotional energy required to become involved with a new partner. It does not follow, however, that one needs to completely sever the feelings of connection and memories to the previous spouse in order to invest in the new kinship relationship. People are capable of managing multiple relationships with multiple significant others. We are attached to our mothers and our fathers, our sisters and brothers, our children whether they be one or ten, our spouses and often their families of origin (including their parents, siblings, and significant others). To expect that in loss, we totally break off the connection to the one who has died, or that we must do so in order to stay connected or to reconnect to life, is to deny the multivariate way we all have of being involved in relationships.

Q What is meant by "mourning" as a psychological process?

When Freud wrote, he conceptualized the mourning process as the bereaved becoming intensely involved with the memories of the deceased and the relationship shared with him or her. By the bereaved's recounting, retelling, re-experiencing, and remembering, there is a kind of immersion with a focus on the deceased. Freud thought this focus, cognitively, emotionally, and experientially, allowed the bereaved to gain distance and free himself or herself up for other tasks and other relationships of life. This intensity of this immersion in the loss was thought to be a necessary condition for resuming the tasks of life, but until recently, it was not a focus of study.

For many years, it was generally assumed by professionals that successful mourning required one to become totally immersed in grieving the relationship with the deceased. If one were not preoccupied and focused emotionally, cognitively, and motivationally with the deceased, it was assumed that the grief process was problematic. Today, this viewpoint is no longer predominant. In its stead is an awareness of a range of grieving and mourning styles, and a much more accepting stance for variation. Also, there is much more behavioral research data mapping out the different ways in which people actually, rather than theoretically, respond following loss, and there are a lot of different ways in which this is done.

By extension, it also has come to mean that we understand that grief and mourning last longer than was thought. The categories of time such as week or month or year began to soften too. No longer are they understood to clearly demarcate the end of grief and mourning. and finally, the markers by which we had come to identify who was grieving began to shift as well. This means that there is greater readiness to say that looking sad, crying, or talking about the loss are not the only way to psychologically grieve and mourn for someone. A lot of what goes on regarding loss is not immediately apparent—and a lot of it may occur outside of conscious awareness. Some individuals tend to be private and more of what goes on in their minds regarding the loss and the lost (the person who died) are not known to others. Other people are more public and willing to share their feelings and thoughts with regard to loss.

Reworking loss and relationship in mourning may be served in many different ways. For many years it has been recognized that children grieve in ways that are different than adults. They may shift back and forth from response to loss (sadness, anxiety, fearfulness, somatic concerns, etc.) to immersion in the routines of their life (games, interaction, music, tv, computers, etc) and back again. Their ability to behave as if nothing has happened should not be mistaken for "getting

over" the loss. In a similar fashion, there is greater awareness that the model of grief that postulates an intense and overt expression of preoccupation with loss and with much sadness and depression, anxiety, anger, helplessness, etc are not the only ways in which mourning occurs. For some persons, the experience of mourning can be quite brief, and for others, the psychological process of mourning can take on a variety of seemingly unrelated behaviors. Thus a bereaved father might spend months building a wooden model of an historic building or might devote himself to planting a vegetable garden in the year after his child's death. The connection may not be apparent, but without any apparent links, the mourning process may be served by such "unrelated" activity. The fact that one person may be private and other more public, the fact that one person may have the need to talk about the loss and the deceased and another may wish to engage in "unrelated" activities can be a source of tension and difficulty in families following loss. There is value in exploring these differences, but there is also value in respecting individual variation.

Q. Are there right and wrong ways to grieve?

This is a difficult question indeed. What is meant by right and wrong in this context? What are our criteria for deciding right and wrong? If the question is what style leads to more physical illness or to more psychological discomfort, then we can describe several risk factors. Medical approaches to loss often look at loss in this way. If the question is what styles lead to greater social or familial discomfort and isolation, then another set of answers might be advanced. And if the question is, should we be encouraging people to grieve in particular ways, I would think we need to address a few points first.

One—People have important differences, and these need to be respected. Some people are more verbal, liking to talk about things that bother them. Others are more instrumental in that they like to do things rather than talk about them. Some people are very private, choosing not to share

what is on their mind to others, while others are more open to sharing what is on their minds and hearts. Expecting everyone to behave alike neglects the important individual, cultural, and familial differences that are important features of how people live their lives.

Two—Overt and covert processes are not the same. What we see and what we don't see are both important aspects of people's responses to significant life events. People can seem totally "over" a loss, and yet be intensely aware of a death and what has been loss. Some people camouflage these feelings well, others compartmentalize, and still others can be open to aspects of life and loss simultaneously.

Three—Some features of grief and mourning may be appropriate for some time during the loss process, and then be inappropriate at other times. For example, being preoccupied with the death and the loss without emotional interest or space for anything or anyone else might be appropriate for a day, week, month, or year, but might well not be appropriate for 5 or 10 years in a row following loss.

I will try to make this clearer in the section on how I think about loss—which refers to the Two Track Model of Bereavement. This is a way of thinking about loss and bereavement that many find helpful in sorting out the loss process.

Q What is the Two-Track Model of Bereavement [3] and how can it help me understand what bereaved people experience?

The Two-Track Model of Bereavement is a way to help professionals and non-professionals understand how to think about response to loss. Often after someone has died, we ask questions about the bereaved: "how is he or she doing?" Often the answers are quite concrete such as: "she

[3] Rubin, S.S. (1999). The Two-Track Model of Bereavement: Overview, Retrospect and Prospect. *Death Studies, 23(8),* 681-714.

was crying" or "he seemed to be okay". In truth, the response to bereavement occurs at many different levels of experience. Changes in health, in mood, in relationships to other persons, are among the areas that are affected when persons are mourning the loss of an important relationship. And yet, the grief and mourning process also revolves around rearranging the way in which one manages a life vis a vis the person who is no longer alive. The yearning for the loved one, the pangs of sadness or pain, the amount and type of memories that arise, are manifestations of the significance of the changing relationship to a person who is important to us, but who is no longer in this physical world with us. Managing the transition from the relationship with a living person to that with a person who now lives on in other spheres of memory or spirituality or afterlife is a significant aspect of bereavement. The Two Track Model of Bereavement organizes the understanding of the loss process to allow for separate consideration of how "one is doing" and what is the nature of the "ongoing relationship to and with the memories, thoughts, and feelings related to the deceased." Death does not end a relationship, but it does transform it.

The Two-Track Model of Bereavement intends to be clear in pinpointing the locus of progress or difficulty following loss. Track I focuses on the many aspects of functioning that characterize the bereaved while Track II focuses on the nature of the ongoing relationship to and with the memories, feelings, and ways of experiencing the deceased. It is possible to be doing very well in areas of functioning, and yet to be confused and very pained in areas of relationship to the deceased. Similarly, it is possible to have come to a balanced relationship with the deceased, and yet to suffer any numbers of difficulties in areas of functioning that were triggered by the loss. This distinction has practical implications. For example, persons who respond with major depression (Track I) and with much yearning for the deceased (Track II) have been found to need more than treatment for depression alone (eg Reynolds et al.) Often, the bereaved individual, the clinician, and

the family may benefit from being able to clarify where the difficulties following bereavement may occur.

At another level, the Two-Track Model of Bereavement also helped pioneer the idea that living with loss can be a life long experience for many individuals and families. While it may be true that disruption in areas of functioning pinpointed in Track I may resolve over months or years, it is equally true that measuring the nature of the ongoing relationship to the deceased on Track II is something that is active for many years and decades in a person's life.

On a more personal level, when I first proposed the Two-Track Model of Bereavement in 1981, it seemed a helpful way to organize my thinking for purposes of understanding the scientific literature and research results of my own work. Over the years, the usefulness of this model has expanded to include: ways of thinking about loss, following the process of grief and mourning, researching loss, intervening following problems in the process of assimilation of loss, and even examining religions and cultures as they assist the bereaved. As is true in all fields of science and psychology, no-one has a monopoly on important ways of organizing our understanding. Among those individuals whose work is very helpful in this area is Robert Neimeyer, whose work on how people make meaning of loss and how they manage the story of their lives following loss, is very well done. Also worth consulting are such contemporary clinicians and theorists as my colleagues and friends Ruth Malkinson, Eliezer Witztum, Colin M. Parkes, Phyllis Silverman, and many of the members of the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement.

Q How are love and loss related?

As I said earlier, there is significance to the type of relationship that one forms. Romantic love relationships are different than sibling relationships, or relations between parent and chilled. Friendships or interactions with comrades-in-arms are a different level of interpersonal

involvement and bonding.. And yet, some aspects are similar. Relationships with people that are important to us form under circumstances and over time. Things occur that make persons important as specific individuals, and those individual person are important to us and cannot be replaced by others capable of fulfilling the same function. One might say that there are three ways to manage attachments to others: to maintain them, to not deal with them, or to become "un"-attached. Many of our relationships may be not currently active, and although we are not currently actively involved with people from our past, the death of persons who were important to us can touch us and reawaken thoughts and feelings that have remained dormant for years or decades.

When it comes to persons who were intensely important to us during our formative years, (such as parents, in-laws, siblings, or other close relatives and friends), knowledge of one of their deaths can leapfrog years of distance and lack of contact to reawaken a whole host of thoughts and feelings rooted in our personal history, but finding expression in emotional response of the present.

Q. Is there a right way to comfort the bereaved?

Different cultures have different ways of responding to the task of comforting the bereaved. In Jewish tradition, the week long period of mourning, the shiva, is a time when family, friends, co-workers, acquaintances s, neighbors, and other circles of connection come to the funeral and/or the home to provide support for the bereaved. The stimulation provided by so many visitors, the telling and retelling of the circumstances of loss by the bereaved, the sharing of the various anecdotes and stories that people bring has a powerful effect on the mourners.

Support is something that has been shown to be important to assisting the bereaved. Some of the support is active, and some of it is more passive. In terms of active support, there are activities such as actively reassuring the bereaved that things will get better, asking how the bereaved are feeling, sharing personal stories of trial and triumph, offering to help in concrete ways (such as

assisting with child care, going places with the bereaved, etc.). Passive support is associated more with being available to listen to the bereaved, perhaps not changing the subject when they repeat themselves, and coming to visit. In general, active support is more prominent earlier following loss, while the more passive form continuing for longer periods. There is a lot more to add to this topic and I hope to do so in the near future.

Q Is there a wrong way to behave towards the bereaved?

My own bias is to associate "wrong behavior" with attempts to pressure the bereaved to behave or respond in some preconceived manner. Suggestions that are delivered as pronouncements are likely to miss the unique circumstances and personality of the grieving person. Sometimes, suggestions that are trying to be helpful can also be heard as pronouncements and prescriptions. The bereaved may feel that: they are being told that they "should " cry more or, perhaps that they should cry less; that it is time to resume activities; that they "must" go out and start dating or that they cannot go out and start dating, etc.

Clearly there are all kinds of bereaved persons having all manners of relatives and friends. Perhaps it is sufficient to say that there is no consensus about right and wrong following loss that does not have sufficient exceptions and extenuating circumstances so as to make a list of do's and don'ts sufficiently inaccurate. More on this topic at a later date.

Q: There are many religions, levels of connection to religion, sub- cultures, and ethnic groups in Israel. Does every group have their own mourning rituals and customs?[4]

Basically, yes.[5] For the Jewish majority in Israel, the chevrach kadisha groups are in charge of the burial rituals and rites in accordance with their interpreataion of orthodox Jewish ritual.

[4] Rubin, S. & Yasien-Esmael, H. (2004). Loss and bereavement among Israel's Muslims: Acceptance of God's will, grief, and the relationship to the deceased. Omega, 49(2), 149-162.

Unfortunately, for many secular Israeli's, the chevrah kadisha arrive in their lives when they are hurting and vulnerable, and often the interaction with the members of the organization does not bridge the tremendous cultural gap that exists between them and most Israelis. More on this soon.

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[5] Rubin, S.S., Malkinson, R., & Witztum, E. (2005). The sacred and the secular: The changing face of death, loss and bereavement in Israel. In. J. D. Morgan & P. Laungani (Eds.) *Death and Bereavement Around the World, Volume 4: Death and Bereavement in Asia, Australia and New Zealand*. (pp. 65-80). New York: Baywood Publishing Co.

Website: http://www.itim.org.il/default.jsp in Hebrew, Russian, and English with sections on aspects of Jewish life cycle and section on loss and bereavement.

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