

Growing around grief – another way of looking at grief and recovery

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Whether we realise it or not, we live in a world of models. Not models whose time is spent strutting the cat-walk, but those that exist within our minds, and which frame the way we see our lives and work. Our models of the world are created by what we are taught, and by our experience of life.

As a novice grief counsellor some years ago, the model of grief within which I saw my first clients (poor things!) was largely a theoretical one. Generalising wildly, one can say that most theories of grief postulate a series of stages, culminating in resolution. It was against this framework that I placed my clients' stories.

What concerned me was the people I talked to who told me that their grief certainly did not end in the way I thought it should. Most of my clients fitted the model well, but there was a sizeable minority whose 'resolution stage' did not match up. I was perplexed in grief group discussions when I would hear these people, whose lives were obviously going on and growing, quietly say that their pain was sometimes just as bad as ever, and had never really gone away.

Then, in an Elizabeth Kubler-Ross workshop some years ago, an unknown

woman described a model of grief which fitted her experience. I am indebted to this woman because her model made sense of grief for me in a way that others had not, and has comforted many clients to whom I have shown it since. Colleagues have also found it useful so, with thanks to a woman I do not know, I pass it on.

The woman's child had died some years before. At this time, she said, grief consumed her totally, filling every part of her life, awake and asleep. She drew a picture (Figure 1) with a circle to represent her life and shading to indicate her grief. She had imagined that as time went by the grief would shrink and become neatly encapsulated in her life, in a small and manageable way; she was realistic enough to assume that it would not go away entirely (Figure 2).

But what happened was different. The

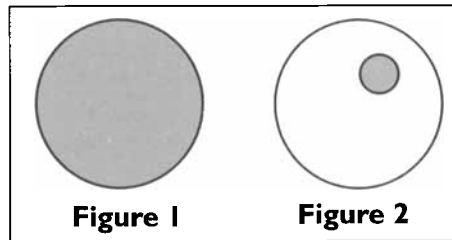


Figure 1

Figure 2

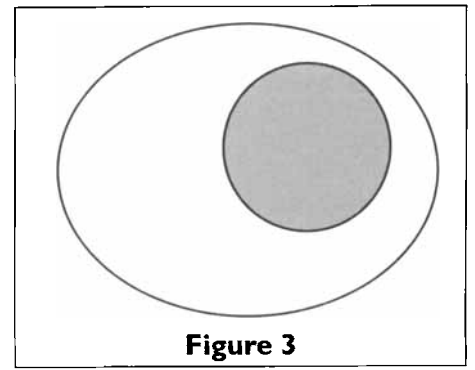


Figure 3

grief stayed just as big, but her life grew around it (Figure 3). There were times, anniversaries, or moments which reminded her of her child, when she operated entirely from out of the shaded circle in her life and her grief felt just as intense as it ever had. But, increasingly, she was able to experience life in the larger circle.

What helps some clients about this model (and it does not fit everyone) is that it relieves them of the expectation that their grief should largely go away. It explains the dark days, and also describes the richness and depth the experience of grief has given to their lives. As grief counsellors we can encourage them, as time goes by, in tentative attempts to 'grow a new life'. My clients have felt comforted, using this model, that they can do so without the sense of disloyalty to the deceased that so often holds back bereaved people. In this way they continue the process of integrating the loss with their lives, and moving forwards.

CENTRES FOR BEREAVEMENT RESEARCH

The Bereavement Research Forum (Oxford, UK)

The Forum was set up in 1990 by a small group of researchers who had found out about each other by accident. Assuming that others could also be working in isolation, they advertised a meeting, and from these beginnings the Forum developed as a friendly and supportive body, geared to the needs of active researchers.

The overall aim of the organisation is to provide a forum for the discussion, promotion and development of bereavement research. The objectives include:

- discussion and facilitation of current or future research
- exploring research issues, eg methodology, design, measurement, ethical issues, and terminology
- dissemination of information and ideas
- facilitating the publication of research

Membership is open to people from any discipline or professional background who are engaged in planning or carrying out research on bereavement by death, and to those who have a combined teaching and research interest in the field.

Meeting are attended by between 20 and 30 members from many disciplines whose interests include bereavement services in palliative care and in community settings, children's experience of grief, the effectiveness of training, and grief following the death of a child.

In 1995, the Forum organised three research symposia designed to promote in-depth discussion, and a workshop. Meetings in 1996 will focus on recently completed projects, the evaluation of training programmes and sampling issues. To promote networking, a Directory of members' research interests has been

published which helps people locate others with similar interests and provides information about bereavement research to the wider field.

The Forum is organised by a steering group, which comprises Linda Machin, Frances Sheldon, Virginia Dunn, Julie Stokes, Marilyn Relf, Sheila Payne and others. Membership costs £20 (£10 for post-graduate students) including the Directory. For further details, contact Marilyn Relf, Bereavement Research Forum, Sir Michael Sobell House, The Churchill Hospital, Old Road, Headington, Oxford OX3 7LJ, UK.

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