

Grief, loss, and the quest for meaning

Narrative contributions to bereavement care



Robert Neimeyer PhD
Professor of Psychology
University of Memphis
USA

IN OUR WORK WITH BEREAVED PEOPLE the complexities of their losses can push us beyond the constraints of traditional grief theories, with their limiting assumptions about mourning as a private and predictable sequence of emotional transitions. A new generation of theorists has begun to question these generalisations, opening fresh possibilities for both research and practice. In response to these trends, I have been developing a new paradigm in grief theory by arguing that *meaning reconstruction* is a central process in mourning.

Two very different stories of loss follow which illustrate these points.

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.

Chris, a 37-year-old single nurse, seems caught in the cross-currents of two separate recent losses: the sudden death of her father from a heart attack, and the protracted dying of her dear friend, David, from AIDS. While she loved both men in their own way, she experiences her grief for each of them in essentially different terms. On the one hand, she freely accesses the pain and also the sweetness of her final months, days, and hours with David, which were filled with shared memories and anticipations of what life would be like without him. On the other hand, her father's unexpected death left her no opportunity for a final goodbye, leading her to seek ways to achieve this symbolically in grief therapy. Moreover, her whole demeanour shifts during our meeting as she speaks about one death as opposed to the other: warming, shedding some tears, and regrouping when talking about David, and subtly cooling, becoming more controlled, and more distant as she speaks about her father. With gentle prompting from me, Chris connects this to the very different communication patterns enacted in the two relationships, characterised by mutual openness and vulnerability with David, and her functioning as the emotionally reserved 'communication satellite' in her family of origin.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Whether or not readers accept this author's account, and dismissal, of 'traditional grief theories', there can be little doubt that we have much to learn about the ways in which people can be helped to rebuild their assumptive world after bereavement. This is the strength of the constructivist or narrative approach that is so elegantly described in this paper. It fits well with the restoration orientation component of Stroebe and Schut's dual process model[®] even if it fails to recognise that, in order to find new aims and meanings in life, we may need to let go of the person 'out there' in order to discover that we never lost the person 'in here'. CMP

Negotiating her own needs as a griever in the two systems leads Chris to redefine her preferred role in the family following her father's death, and to identify both private and shared rituals of remembrance that could help her achieve some of the closure regarding her father's death that she felt with David's.

Fresh concept, new possibilities

Real losses such as these 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 pat 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 re-examined 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 stages theory

There is an increasing reluctance to generalise about grief as a process that can lead predictably from psychological disequilibrium to readjustment, coupled with an appreciation of more complex patterns of adaptation^{1,2}. 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 death³. 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

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died, and toward a recognition of the role of continuing symbolic bonds^{4,5}. 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 emotions⁶. 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^{7,8}. 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 intense⁹, chronic¹⁰, and complicated forms of grief¹¹. Likewise, research on large numbers of people bereaved by violent death (eg 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 one¹².

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^{13,14}. 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^{15,16}.

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^{17,18}. 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 cohesion¹⁹. 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^{20,21}. 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 lifeline right now – a place where I recognise 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'²². 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 results.

The stories of Sandra and Chris 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.

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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 ten 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 bereavement²³.

Chris's grieving process reflected features of a meaning reconstruction approach that were both similar to and different from Sandra's. What was most striking in Chris's case were the different paths through loss that the same individual could take at the same time – in one case leading through profound, if bittersweet, exploration of the dying trajectory of her friend and its integration into her life narrative, and on the other, to a sense of being stuck in relation to her father's sudden death.

Critical to Chris's struggle in the latter relationship was her position in her family of origin as the 'family telegraph', the one responsible for facilitating communication between her siblings and her mother, in a way that both required and reinforced her remaining in control to facilitate interactions for the benefit of others. As we explored these constraints, Chris quickly realized that this position was incompatible with her own needs as a griever, despite the family's implicit pressure for her to enact the old role even more consistently, now that their father's death had shaken the previous family system.

Although sorting through the implications of her declining this role was a valuable aspect of our work in session, the real therapy took place between sessions. Chris first identified, and then pursued a series of symbolic visits to her father, in the form of visiting his grave, his home, and most poignantly, the sailboat he built by hand, and which embodied so much of his dreams and his uniqueness. Thus, the relevant meanings for Chris resided in her family system as much as in

herself, and the relevant path toward reconstructing them was as much behavioural as conversational.

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 help²⁴. Likewise, 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 reorganise 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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WEB WATCH

Children and adults bereaved of a pet

Amanda Aitken BA PGCE DipCouns
Counsellor, Torbay Social Services, Devon, UK

IN THE LAST ISSUE of *Bereavement Care*, Tania Woods reviewed two books about bereavement of a companion animal. Undoubtedly some people suffer intense grief after such a loss, for a variety of reasons, and may seek support. However, for many children losing a pet may be sad but not devastating and if, as is often the case, this is their first experience of death, it can provide an opportunity for the adults involved to increase a child's awareness and understanding of grief.

In either case, the internet is ready with some excellent resources. One of the very best is www.griefhealing.com created by Marty Tousley, a hospice bereavement counsellor and mental health consultant to Arizona's Pet Grief Support Service. Pet loss is treated equally with human loss here, but a major reason I selected this site is that, in addition to its comprehensive coverage, it also provides links to a vast array of other online resources.

Blue keys towards the end of the home page take you around the site. Click on 'Articles and Books' and scroll down to find a drop-down menu of 'Articles Related To Pet Loss And Grieving'. Many interesting items here could be used to help clients explore their thoughts and feelings, including a consideration of 'Anticipatory grief', 'Helping children cope with a pet's euthanasia' and 'Loss and the burden of guilt'.

Scroll down further to the Books section for outlines of two publications about pet loss by Marty Tousley entitled *The Final Farewell: Preparing For and Mourning the Loss of your Pet and Children and Pet Loss: a Guide for Healing*. The latter is described as a practical tool for physicians, veterinarians, teachers, counsellors, parents and grandparents as well as for anyone supporting children through the grief of losing a pet. Also on this page the **Suggestions For Further Reading** section provides an extensive book list for adults

and children on human and pet loss. Click on any book title for a brief description and to buy online. Although linked to the USA version of Amazon.com, visitors from other countries can order titles by clicking on the appropriate box at the bottom of the Amazon page.

A unique feature of this website is the email courses. These are linked to Self Healing Expressions, a 'provider of self-paced holistic e-learning courses' for which Marty Tousley is a content provider. Two courses are designed to help with pet loss, one focusing on adult and one on children's grief. Click on the 'Subscribe Now' button for course details and reviews. These courses appear to be quite comprehensive and are reasonably priced at \$24.95, with material delivered directly by email at a frequency chosen by the client. There is also an option to study with a friend or supporter at no additional cost.

This site includes a long section of poems and quotes relating to pet loss (click on another blue key on the home page to access these) and visitors can leave their own comments in a well-used guest book. Membership is free to a number of online forums, each specific to a different type of bereavement, including pet loss. Site users must register a name and password as a safety measure to access the forums, which are moderated by professional grief counsellors.

Back on the homepage, the Links button, and then Pet Loss Links, connects you to some of the very best sites on the internet, well worth visiting. Also under Links is Memorializing, leading to an extensive section on memorial services and products including Sally Logue's UK-based Pet Portraits. A large number of animal welfare organisations, veterinary sites and sanctuaries can also be accessed here. Although the majority of these are based in the USA, many offer information on pet loss that will be relevant to the bereaved and their supporters in any location worldwide. ●