

## Understanding Grief

Grief is our emotional response to any loss. As Christians we are given ways to cope with grief, but we are not exempt from it. I Thessalonians 4:13 helps us understand that we can still have hope in the midst of our grief, since we have the perspective of eternity. Some have interpreted this to mean that we should not grieve. But, Paul tells us in Romans 12:15 to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. Isaiah 63:9, in the context of talking about the Lord's unfailing love, tell us that in all his people's suffering, "He also suffered." God joins us in our pain, and walks with us in the valley of the shadow of death. And He gives us a way to walk with others as they grieve.

Since traumatic events almost always include some kind of loss, grieving is part of the process of traumatic recovery. Oftentimes grief is associated with death, but we grieve many types of losses including:

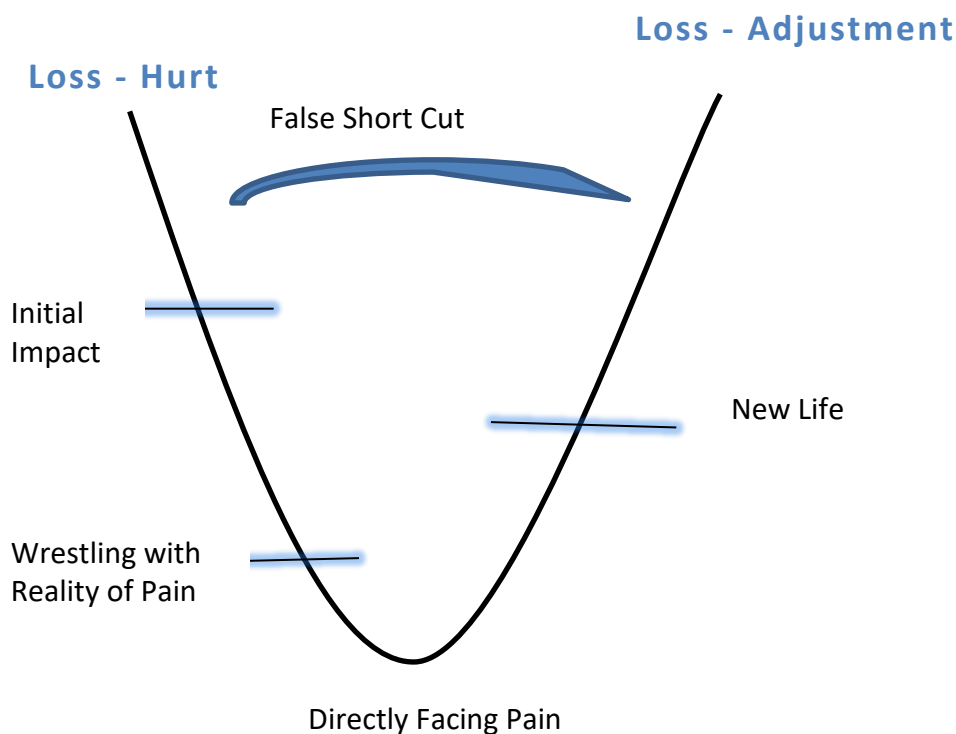
- **Material** – loss of a physical object or familiar surroundings
- **Relationship** – loss of the emotional and physical presence of a significant person
- **Functional** – loss of the physical ability to do certain tasks
- **Role** – loss of a specific social role or status
- **Systemic** – losses in family or organizational life (e.g., changes in traditions, familiar structures, financial benefits, ministry focus, etc.)
- **Psychological** – loss of hopes, dreams, sense of safety, security, or esteem

### The Process of Grief

Grief tends to be like a journey with many twists and turns. We may like to think that it is a straightforward process with defined stages and timelines, but in real life it tends to be messy and complicated. This is because we are often grieving multiple losses at once and each loss has its own timeline and complications. One traumatic event, such as an evacuation or deportation, may involve multiple losses including loss of home, loss of friends, death of loved ones, loss of ministry focus, loss of security, and loss of future plans. Sometimes, one feels that the grief is finished, but a new significant life event may bring about a fresh wave of grief at the realization that this won't be shared with the one who is gone. Also, past losses that have not been fully grieved may complicate or intensify the grief of new losses.

The *Grief/Loss Cycle* depicted below illustrates that grief tends to follow a course that involves walking through a deep valley before emerging into a place of strength and growth. Grief is an experience common to humans and most will experience some aspects of this grief cycle, however the way these elements of grief are expressed are often culturally and personality driven. Sometimes we try to take a short cut by going directly from the *Initial Impact to New Life*, but this is a false short cut. If we do not directly face the pain before entering new life, we will find that we are always looking over our shoulders and running from the painful emotions rather than genuinely entering the new life that God has for us.

## Grief/Loss Cycle<sup>i</sup>



### Responding to the Grieving

There is no one right way to respond to those who are grieving. A caring response to grief will bring the calming and loving presence of Christ, giving space for God's healing and providing practical support to accompany the person in this very painful process. How we respond depends on the Holy Spirit's leading and where the person is in the Grief Cycle.

When responding to those who have experienced loss, we need to respect the griever and their own process. Some may be so overwhelmed that they are not ready to talk about their grief. They may hide it away for a period of time before being ready to face it.

In some situations, especially when the grief is complicated or when the grief has been buried for a long time, a professional counselor may be most helpful.

### Initial Impact

In the immediate moments after a loss, the grieved person will experience shock, numbness, and denial. They may repeatedly cry, "No," after hearing bad news. They may look blankly or have no visible reaction at all. This kind of numbing is the body's natural way of cushioning the severity of the impact.

As the person is absorbing the reality of the loss and struggling to accept it, our role is to be a calm and safe presence with the following guidelines:

- Break the news gently if we are the one telling them about the loss
- Provide practical helps
- Help make decisions as needed
- Avoid talking too much

### **Wrestling with the Reality of the Pain:**

Once the shock of the initial impact has worn off, the person may begin to experience strong emotions such as anger and fear. They will often ask questions like, “How could this have happened?” and “Why did God let this happen?” These questions are attempts to undo what has happened and they are really more accusations coming from a place of pain rather than intellectual questions that can be satisfied with a logical answer. The person is beginning to feel the pain of the loss and yet they are resisting it because it is so difficult. The helper can offer support in many ways including:

- Be present and available
- Listen patiently
- Allow them to express their pain as long as it is not causing harm
- Reassure them that they are not going crazy
- Help them to organize what needs to be done
- Avoid making judgement, especially when they express anger
- Avoid responding with spiritual insights that cannot yet be absorbed

### **Directly Facing the Pain:**

This is in many ways, the most difficult part of grief, and often the most avoided. The griever may feel guilt and remorse, reflecting on things they wish they had said or done differently. They often feel lonely, isolated, and even depressed. Some will fear that this will last forever, and there is a sense of hopelessness. Because this happens deeper into the journey, those who were supporting the griever may not be as present, aware, or available which compounds the feelings of isolation. As the person makes attempts to form new relationships and new patterns, they may find that initial attempts don’t seem to work or fit for them. Their focus is still mostly in the past and it is easy to compare the present with the past and to judge the present as lacking what the past contained. Much has been shattered for the griever and they are adjusting to a world that is missing what has been lost. Helpers can support in the following ways:

- Invite the person to talk about their loss and their memories
- Give them a chance to talk about what they are learning and discovering

- Gently challenge any irrational conclusions and give them a chance to respond
- Explore any hurts that might need to be forgiven or any sin that might need to be confessed
- Help them talk about new values, goals, and beliefs
- Encourage them to try new things or give new things a second chance
- Avoid rushing them or telling them it's time to move on

## **New Life**

Once a person has passed through the deep valley of grief and allowed themselves to directly face the pain and receive genuine comfort from the Lord, they will be able to genuinely experience new relationships, new strengths, and new patterns. Although still very aware of the loss and not without pain from that loss, the person will sense hope for the future and will feel affirmed in new choices and directions. Because the person has honestly faced the past and forgiven others and themselves, they are more free to focus on the present and the future with less guilt and fewer regrets. Helpers continue to have a key role in the person's life in this way:

- Follow up and continuing to be supportive
- Encourage new initiatives
- Encourage development of competence in new areas
- Avoid expecting the person to return to their "old self"

Additional Resources/Supporting Documents:

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Greeson, Mary Hollingsworth, and Michael Washburn, *The Grief Adjustment Guide* (Sisters, Oregon: Questar Publishers, Inc., 1990)