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David Sedlacek

Andrews University, sedlacek@andrews.edu

Beverly Sedlacek

Andrews University, sedlaceb@andrews.edu

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Recommended Citation

Sedlacek, David and Sedlacek, Beverly, "Longings and losses: Working with grieving families" (2019).
Faculty Publications. 1397.

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Longings and Losses: Working with Grieving Families

DAVID AND BEVERLY SEDLACEK

Goals and Objectives: Session One

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

1. Define grief
2. Describe God's original intent for humanity
3. Identify five losses in the life of Jesus
4. Name three losses and longings individuals may experience
5. Identify normal grief process and Kübler-Ross stages of grief
6. Describe unexpected family grief such as trauma, adoption, loss of addiction
7. Identify 2 problems that may compound the grief process
8. Describe symptoms of complicated grief

loss, suffering, or death, it is normal to also experience grief.

A Definition of Grief

Grief is keen mental suffering or distress over a loss or affliction—a sharp sorrow—a painful regret. At the very heart of the grief definition is intense sorrow. Grief is a deep emotional response to a great loss.

Loss in the Life of Jesus

Jesus himself suffered many losses during the course of His life here on earth, but it is also important to understand the profound losses that he experienced in heaven with the other members of the Godhead. They experienced the loss of Lucifer and a third of the angels. They suffered when Adam and Eve chose sin and instead inherited suffering and death. Are there ways that we can comfort God as he grieves the loss of so many of his children today?

When Jesus was on earth, He experienced the loss of his cousin, John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-12). He experienced rejection at Nazareth, His home town (Matthew 13:53-58) and wept over Jerusalem. Abuse of any kind is accompanied by significant losses, such as a loss of innocence, capacity to trust, and safety, just to name a few. Jesus experienced physical, sexual, emotional, and verbal abuse. On the cross He experienced what it was like to be forsaken and to lose connection with

Grief and Suffering

It was never God's desire or intent that His human children should suffer. He created us as perfect, whole beings who would live eternally with himself. Suffering is an unfortunate but natural consequence of sin. Not only suffering, but death came as a consequence of sin. "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Whenever human beings experience

David Sedlacek, PhD, LMSW, CFLE is a Professor of Family Ministry and Discipleship Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, MI, USA.

Beverly Sedlacek, DNP, MSN, PMHCNS-BC, RN, is a Therapist in Private Practice and Clinical Director of Into His Rest Ministries in Berrien Springs, MI, USA.

His Father. Jesus experienced misunderstanding of his mission by His family and His own disciples. He was abandoned, denied, and betrayed by His disciples. Ultimately, He lost His very life. Jesus went through these experiences so that we might know that we have a Savior who was touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Hebrews 4:15).

Grief and Loss in the Human Experience

It is important that we allow ourselves the human experience of grief in response to real losses such as the death of a loved one, divorce or separation, breakup with a significant other, loss of anything that has been significant to a person, or other significant losses in adulthood or childhood such as: loss of innocence or virginity, safety, possessions, friends when making a move, post-abortion syndrome, miscarriage, a job, children growing up and moving on, friends and teachers, control, or losses related to retirement.

EXERCISE

Journal about grief that you have experienced in your life. As you do, identify specific losses that you have experienced. Write down feelings that you have had connected to these losses. If you have not been allowed to have feelings connected to real losses, are you willing to begin giving yourself permission to feel? Ask God for the gift of your feelings.

It is also important to realize that when our normal human longings are not met, we grieve their loss. Some typical human longings are listed below:

- Intimacy and Affection
- Connection
- Disappointment related to God
- Disappointment related to the Church Organization
- Time and Attention
- Affirmation

EXERCISE

As you look through this list of normal human longings, can you identify yours from this list or perhaps other longings, those that you have had that have not been met. God gives you every desire and longing so that you may in turn bring it to him to see how he wants to fulfill it. Write about these longings in your journal.

Unexpected Grief in Families

We normally think of grief related to the death of a loved one or other significant losses as mentioned above. It is important to realize that there are other losses that occur in families that may produce grief. For example, foster parents must be aware of the need for their foster children to grieve the loss of their biological parents and siblings. When a new child is born into the family, other children may grieve the loss of their favored position. When trauma occurs, a person may need to grieve losses such as safety and security, innocence, trust, etc. When a person overcomes an addiction, there may be a grief response to the loss of the substance, behavior, person, etc. that he/she has been addicted to because addicts develop significant relationships with the objects of their addiction.

Normal Grief

Grieving a significant loss takes time. Depending on the circumstances of a person's loss, grieving can take from weeks to years. Grieving helps a person gradually adjust to a new chapter of their life. Full awareness of a major loss can happen suddenly or over a few days or weeks. While an expected loss (such as a death after a long illness) can take a shorter time to absorb because it is anticipated, a sudden or tragic loss can take more time. Similarly, it can take time to grasp the reality of a loss that doesn't affect one's daily routine, such as a death in a distant city. During this time, a person may feel numb and seem distracted. They may obsess or yearn for the lost loved one. Funerals

and other rituals and events during this time may help one accept the reality of one's loss.

A person's way of feeling and expressing grief is unique to them and the nature of their loss. Some may feel irritable and restless, while others are quieter than usual, or need to be distant from or close to others. Some feel as if they aren't the same person they were before the loss. Don't be surprised by conflicting feelings while grieving. For example, it's normal to feel despair about a death or a job loss, yet also feel relief.

The grieving process does not happen in a step-by-step or orderly fashion. Grieving tends to be unpredictable, with sad thoughts and feelings coming and going, like a roller-coaster ride. After the early days of grieving, one may sense a lifting of numbness and sadness and experience a few days without tears. Then, for no apparent reason, the intense grief may strike again.

While grieving may make one want to isolate themselves from others and hold it all in, it's important that they find some way of expressing their grief. Some modes of expression include talking, writing, creating art or music, or being physically active. All of these are helpful ways of dealing with grief.

The Grief Process

Several years ago Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, Swiss-American psychiatrist, described grief in stages. While we have come to learn more recently that grief does not always occur in easily definable stages, it is helpful to know the typical process that most people experience when they grieve.

1) **Denial, numbness, and shock:** This stage serves to protect the individual from experiencing the intensity of the loss. It may be useful when the grieving person must take action (for example, making funeral arrangements). Numbness is a normal reaction to an immediate loss and should not be confused with "lack of caring." As the individual slowly acknowledges the

impact of the loss, denial and disbelief will diminish.

- 2) **Bargaining:** This stage may involve persistent thoughts about what could have been done to prevent the loss. People can become preoccupied about ways that things could have been better. If this stage is not properly resolved, intense feelings of remorse or guilt may interfere with the healing process.
- 3) **Depression:** This stage of grief occurs in some people after they realize the true extent of the loss. Signs of depression may include sleep and appetite disturbances, a lack of energy and concentration, and crying spells. A person may feel loneliness, emptiness, isolation, and self-pity.
- 4) **Anger:** This reaction usually occurs when an individual feels helpless and powerless. Anger can stem from a feeling of abandonment through a loved one's death. An individual may be angry at the person who died, at God, or toward life in general.
- 5) **Acceptance:** In time, an individual may be able to come to terms with various feelings and accept the fact that the loss has occurred. Healing can begin once the loss becomes integrated into the individual's set of life experiences.

Different people follow different paths through the grieving experience. The order and timing of these phases may vary from person to person: accepting the reality of their loss, allowing themselves to experience the pain of their loss, adjusting to a new reality in which the deceased is no longer present, and enjoying other relationships.

EXERCISE

Since there are many ways of grieving, try to identify ways that you express grief. Share your grief process with a close friend or in a small group.

Complicated Grief

In this complex and busy world, it can be hard to fully grieve a loss. It is possible to have

unresolved grief or complications associated with grieving, particularly if a person had several major losses in a short period of time; lost someone very important in their life; the person may feel that they will never get over the loss of someone special; experienced the unexpected or violent death of a loved one, such as the death of a child or a death caused by an accident, homicide, or suicide; have special life circumstances that act as obstacles to grieving, such as having to return to work too soon after a death; or have a history of depression or anxiety. If these symptoms of grief persist more than a year, it may be a sign of complicated grief.

For some people, feelings of loss are debilitating and don't improve even after time passes. This is known as complicated grief, sometimes called persistent complex bereavement disorder. In complicated grief, painful emotions are so long lasting and severe that a person has trouble recovering from the loss and resuming their own life.

During the first few months after a loss, many signs and symptoms of normal grief are the same as those of complicated grief. However, while normal grief symptoms gradually start to fade over time, those of complicated grief linger or get worse. Complicated grief is like being in an ongoing, heightened state of mourning that keeps a person from healing.

The following may be symptoms or indicators of complicated grief:

- Intense sorrow, pain, and rumination over the loss of your loved one
- Focus on little else but your loved one's death
- Extreme focus on reminders of the loved one or excessive avoidance of reminders
- Intense and persistent longing or pining for the deceased
- Problems accepting the death
- Numbness or detachment
- Bitterness about one's loss
- Feeling that life holds no meaning or purpose
- Lack of trust in others
- An inability to enjoy life or think back on positive experiences with one's loved one

Complicated grief also may be indicated if a person continues to have trouble carrying out normal daily routines, isolates from others and withdraws from social activities, experiences depression, deep sadness, guilt or self-blame related to the loss, believes that they did something wrong or could have prevented the death, feels that life isn't worth living without their loved one, or wishes that they had died along with their loved one.

When there are symptoms of complicated grief present, it is important to make a referral to a mental health professional who will be able to assess the severity of the grief response and make appropriate interventions to help resolve the grief. Interventions can include talk therapy, behavioral interventions, or perhaps medication.

EXERCISE

Would you know where to refer someone who is experiencing Complicated Grief? Explore the phone book, the internet, or community information services to find mental health professionals who have been trained to help during times of grief.

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Goals and Objectives Session Two

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

1. List five statements that are not to be said to grieving individuals
2. Three skills necessary to be a "compassionate consoler" for others
3. Identify 3 areas in which the church can show support for the grieving individual over time
4. Describe the use of scripture in experiencing the comfort of God
5. Identify 3 ways the role of the pastor and chaplain are important in the grief process

Helping others in the Grief Process: How to be a Compassionate Comforter

Spirituality often is part of the grieving process. A person often finds themselves looking

for or questioning the higher purpose of a loss. They ask “why” questions. Many find comfort in their religious or spiritual beliefs, while others may doubt their beliefs in the face of traumatic or senseless loss. When this happens, show your support to the grieving person. This includes emotional support but also practical support in the form of meals, phone calls, cards and so forth. It is often helpful to grieve with family members, if possible, to share memories and experiences whether the loss was a death in the family or another form of loss.

What Not to Say to a Grieving Person

Most people do not intend to be insensitive to a person experiencing grief. Many are out of touch with their own feelings and, therefore, find it difficult to connect meaningfully to a grieving person. When you don’t know what to say, it is better to say nothing at all. Just your presence is saying that you care.

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Sometimes, well-meaning people can wound a grieving person by saying the following things: “Don’t feel that way.” “God just needed another angel.” “You are young. You can have another child.” “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.” “We may not understand it, but it was God’s will.” “At least she lived a long life; many people die young.” “He is in a better place.” “She brought this on herself.” “There is a reason for everything.” “Aren’t you over him yet, he has been dead for a while now.” “She was such a good person that God wanted her to be with him.” “I know how you feel.” “She did what she came here to do and it was her time to go.” “Be strong.”

Helpful Things to do

It is important to allow a person to have their grief process and to not try to “fix” them. Often, the most helpful thing to do is simply to listen empathically, that is, with all of your attention and focus as if that person were the only person in the world at this moment. The “ministry of presence” can be helpful – just

being there with them helps to soothe feelings of loss and loneliness. Attempt to assess what the person may need at the time. Not everyone grieves in the same way. Try not to let your feelings get in the way. Address your own discomfort with the pain of seeing yourself or others grieving, and get out of your comfort zone to meet the needs of the other person.

Be attentive to providing support after the immediate loss, as it will continue to be needed. Assist your church community to establish rituals that would show respect and honor to the deceased (in the case of death). Examples might include: tying a black ribbon where the person may have routinely sat in church or “FIRSTs”. Firsts refer to significant first holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries related to the loss. Anniversaries can be times full of painful memories. Remembering and being sensitive to a person’s need for comfort during these times, especially anniversaries can be an important ministry to a grieving person.

GROUP EXERCISE

From the information above, identify things that you have said or done that have been helpful or unhelpful. Have you addressed your own feelings during times of grief? Write about what you have learned that has been especially helpful.

A Special Note to Pastors and Chaplains

You will often be called upon to conduct a funeral or memorial service. The service may or may not be for a person who is a Christian. It is important to spend time getting to know the family. They may or may not know how to grieve or celebrate the life of their loved one. Inquire about their desire for the setting and structure of the service. They may look to you for suggestions about how to structure a funeral or memorial service. Remember that it is for them and not for you. Evaluate carefully whether integrating Adventist doctrine into the service would be in the family’s best interest.

The better you know the person, the more effectively you will be able to speak words of comfort. You will know what they need and be able to surround them to the kind of help that they truly need.

Experiencing the Comfort of God

Scripture is filled with words of instruction and comfort for those traveling the journey of grief. Some example of Scriptures that are used to comfort others include the classic Psalms 23.

Other Scriptures include:

- “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope in you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort” (2 Cor 1:3-11).
- “The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles (outcasts) of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Ps 147:2-3).
- “A merry (cheerful) heart is good medicine, but a broken (crushed) spirit dries the bones” (Proverbs 17:22).
- “The human spirit can endure in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?” (Proverbs 18:14).
- “A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but by sorrow of the heart, the spirit is broken” (Proverbs 15:13).

There is power in the living Word of God as it is spoken into the heart of a hurting, grieving human person. Many will never have experienced the power of God in real ways in their lives. Others, during times of grief, lose hold of their trust and confidence in God. Below are some reminders to anchor persons in God during times

of grief. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and intents of the heart.” A living connection between the Comforter and the Spirit of God is essential to effective prayer ministry of comfort. Many people have never experienced comfort in their own lives as humans. They’ve not been permitted to have normal human feelings, and therefore have little or no framework in which to put comfort from God.

It is important to recall that Jesus Himself was touched with the feelings of our infirmities when He was born to an unwed mother, had no earthly father, was a refugee, struggled to surrender His will to His Father in Gethsemane, was betrayed by a kiss, sold for the price of a slave, stripped naked, physically, verbally, and mentally, and violated by the religious leaders. Jesus was shamed, humiliated, and embarrassed by men in power over him who should have been protecting Him and supporting Him. He was tempted to numb His pain when His situation seemed to be hopeless and useless. He cried out “My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?” in the midst of being unfairly treated, unjustly accused, rejected, arrested, convicted, and murdered as He was suffering and dying for our sin, shame, and guilt.

Jesus was tempted to relinquish His identity from the beginning to the end of His life. At the beginning of his public ministry, Satan tempted him in the wilderness to doubt His identity by declaring “If you are the Son of God.” At the end of his ministry, He was taunted on the cross by the Jewish leaders, by the Roman soldiers and by the thief on the cross with the same words.

During times of grief, people must face difficult questions such as “Why, God?” “Why did you not stop the abuse?” “Why did you give me these broken parents?” “Why did you let my child die?” “Why did you allow this miscarriage to happen?” Rather than discourage them from having these feelings, even feelings of anger at God, they need to be supported in expressing these feelings.

Both Job (Job 15) and David (Psalm 22 and more) engaged in healthy biblical lament. They freely expressed their feelings to God. If we truly believe in a compassionate God, we will not fear God's wrath when we lament during times of loss and grief. God is big enough to handle our feelings. Rather than fearing Jesus, invite Him into the places of pain and grief in our experience. Pray Scriptures such as the following into our hearts and those of others: "The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of

singing" (Isaiah 51:3). "In all your sufferings, he also suffered. He lifted them up and carried them through all the years" (Isaiah 63:9).

GROUP EXERCISE

Write about times in your life when you have experienced Jesus as being particularly close to you. How about far away? How have you been comforted by God? Do you experience God's comfort through internalizing his word? Share your thoughts and experiences with others in a small group.
