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Synchronizing Loss With Life Over a Life Span: A Dynamic Perspective

Frank C. Browning

Synchronizing loss with life is a dynamic journey. This article explores the myths, beliefs, and dynamics of loss and life. The purpose of the article is to help clinicians assist and support their clients with the difficulties of synchronizing loss with life as they progress on their life span journey.

Because of the dynamic nature of life and loss, individuals, especially those experiencing a life crisis, may have difficulty seeing or sensing any synchronization of loss and life. *Webster's Universal College Dictionary* (1997) defined synchronization as "to cause to go on, move, operate, and work, etc., at the same rate and exactly together" (p. 799). The rapidity of loss and life gives little opportunity to make any sense of an occurrence or to see any interconnectedness in life. Order and rhythm in life are lost, at least momentarily or sometimes permanently, in the midst of chaos, tragedy, and tremendous loss. Rather than maintaining a homeostasis of life or emotional and psychological balance in life, individuals may sense they are constantly being thrown back and forth on a depression–mania continuum. Three current examples of cataclysmic trauma include Hurricane Katrina, the Iraq War, and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. However, daily, personal, nonearthshaking, noninternational losses also greatly influence the emotional well-being of individuals. Trying to understand and accept how such losses fit into a larger synchronization of life is difficult at best. Some clients need concerted and supportive assistance before they can move on with life.

Individuals face difficulties in accepting and understanding how loss is a part of life because contradictory myths exist that support the denial of loss. Especially in developed societies such as the United States, people possess a strong belief in the conquering hero, the victorious cowboy, and the overcoming athlete. Rather than accepting a synchronized process of losses and gains in life, individuals often choose to believe in counterbeliefs that contradict reality. Such counterbeliefs or myths may include: (a) concerted effort will give freedom from pain and suffering; (b) change can be avoided; (c) safety and security can be secured by obtaining the best technology money can buy; (d) unhappiness

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and loss can be avoided by accumulation of wealth, maintenance of health, and intensity of activity; and (e) intelligent decisions can protect an individual from loss. The reality of life constantly exposes these myths, demonstrating that life is uncertain and unpredictable; change is the only constant; and loss, pain, and death are common to all humans.

As individuals progress in their life span, they gradually realize that life is full of losses. No one-to-one loss-to-gain formula can be humanly calculated; however, individuals can acknowledge a flow or synchronization of losses and gains that they can see in nature and experience in their own existence. Sometimes, individuals focus on death as the only great loss, as described by Kübler-Ross (1969). Death, however, is only one of many types of losses faced. As a child and adolescent, an individual's perspective of loss may be influenced by the death of a relative, a friend, or a pet. Children and adolescents may also sense loss of relationships when they geographically relocate, change schools, or experience friends moving away. As individuals progress through the psychosocial stages, as postulated by Erikson (1963), they realize other potential losses. Such losses include vocational or career losses, loss of health, relationship loss via divorce or separation, empty nest losses, financial losses, spiritual losses and doubts, and loss of mental and physical abilities. At 18 years old, the legally recognized age of maturity in the United States, most humans have no idea what is ahead of them regarding life and loss. Because these traumatic events can be so fundamentally catastrophic, individuals can be successful in maintaining mental and emotional homeostasis by having a realistic understanding of life and loss over a life span. Counselors have an opportunity to work with their clients to help them understand that loss is an ever present component of life.

What are some of the potential pitfalls that may influence a client who fails to see or accept loss as a component of life? Worden (2002) specified a number of debilitating conditions that can result from continued denial of loss. His enumeration includes pathological grief; major depression; anxiety reactions; social withdrawal; suicide; and other physical, mental, or spiritual conditions. Individuals may become frozen in the past, that is, lose their ability to function emotionally and psychologically in the present or future. Because of the inability to accept the loss, individuals may face other debilitating conditions such as domestic violence, substance abuse and dependence, divorce, and impulsive detrimental relationship behaviors.

In *The Skilled Helper: A Problem-Management and Opportunity-Development Approach to Helping*, Egan (2002) outlined his solution-focused model of brief therapy. Combining elements of Egan's model with Worden's (2002) Tasks of Mourning is a potential way to help clients grasp the synchronization of loss with life. In Egan's model, one of the first steps is for the client to tell his or her story. The counselor's responsibility is to actively listen to the client's reported thoughts, feelings, and actions in response to the loss. The counselor should be especially sensitive to indications of patterns of thoughts, feelings, and ac-

tions that may broaden the counselor's scope of understanding of the client. What is the metamessage behind the loss? Many losses in a family are systemic losses. Therefore, a suggested second step in Egan's solution-oriented model is to invite the client's family members and significant others to share their perspectives of the loss and its influence on them and the entire system. What does it mean that Dad is no longer the senior minister of the most prestigious church in town, or that Mom has terminal cancer with only 4 months to live, or that Grandma (the Matriarch) is no longer physically present to lead the family clan? Having the family members share their personal perspectives of the loss can be a powerful, validating, and bonding experience for the family and for the individual directly influenced by the loss. By actively listening, inviting all to share their perspectives, validating feelings and thoughts, and seeking to normalize the loss as a part of life, the counselor can do much to help the client and family continue with life.

In moving beyond the loss and toward understanding and acceptance of a synchronization of loss and life, individuals can benefit from reconsidering the Western way of perceiving the body, mind, and spirit as three separate, disconnected entities. If anything has been learned in the past 100 years of scientific study, humanity has learned that body, mind, and spirit are highly interconnected. People have also learned through the biological sciences that both nature and humans have cycles, patterns, development stages, and rhythms. Humans are connected to the life and loss process of nature. Through the centuries, humanity has continued to search for immortality and immutability in life. Reality, however, has consistently demonstrated that such pursuits are futile and that loss and change are realistic components in the flow of life.

The counselor can assist the client in acceptance of the process of loss and life in a number of ways. In an existential therapeutic approach, the counselor can assist the client in detaching, if only temporarily, from the loss and viewing the loss from a more global perspective in relation to the entirety of life. The counselor can help the client to view life as a journey rather than as an event. Many events, circumstances, and changes linked together become a journey and a life. Along the way, according to Frankl (1963), Glasser (1984), Jacks (2005), and others, individuals choose how they are going to perceive, accept, and deal with events, changes, and losses. In the process of listening to the client's perspective, the counselor may benefit from understanding that loss is different for each person and is dependent upon psychosocial developmental stage and maturity level (Erikson, 1963). This revelation emphasizes the need for family members or significant others to share their honest perspectives of the loss. Their disclosures may do much to facilitate recovery from the loss. This sharing of individual perspectives of the loss is similar to the powerful experiences of addicts sharing their drug history with family members and significant others. Inner, conflicted feelings and emotional pain are open to the light of reality.

Henry David Thoreau (as cited in “Flow and Synchronicity,” 2001) encouraged humans to “dwell as near as possible to the channel in which your life flows” focusing on the energy, wonder, and magic of life. Others have encouraged humanity to look at life in its broadest context. Life’s context includes loss, suffering, darkness, and pain accompanied by joy, happiness, and peace. According to Thomas Merton (as cited in “Life Balance,” 2005), “Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance and order and rhythm and harmony.” Robert L. Fulghum (as cited in “Life Balance,” 2005) exhorted humanity to “Be aware of wonder. Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.” Life is vast and complex. To see it through only a negative perspective of loss is to miss many of the wonders and blessings of life.

Seaborn (2006) shared her story of black-and-white trees in a forest that were intertwined. One day when she was attempting to show this marvelous relationship to her spouse, she realized that the black tree had been removed. The symbology of the absent tree in relation to her life was powerful and moving. She stated, “The black half of my tree had been dead a long time” (Seaborn, 2006, p. 4). In spite of this revelation, she remained in denial about her “dead” marital relationship for another 5 years. After finally letting go of her denial, she stated, “Whatever union—marriage, family, friendship—ends, the tree that not only stood but flourished after its partner was removed symbolizes survival. The death of one didn’t mean the end of the other” (Seaborn, 2006, p. 4).

Jacks (2005) discussed what many individuals learn when loss occurs. The loss can lead to a new land of empowerment via new insights, renewed self-evaluation, and personal choice. As a door or life chapter closes, another opportunity arises in a sometimes mysterious, synchronistic way. She stated, “I am never alone; I always have myself and the Divine. And both are good friends” (Jacks, 2005, p. 85). After facing a difficult divorce, Jacks highlighted lessons learned from her experience. She stated, “There is only today, only now. It is an awareness I don’t seem to possess naturally (yet) and so remind myself of continuously” (Jacks, 2005, p. 86). Other insights from her loss focus upon the importance of love and gratitude. Her insight about love was that “love is not love if it is based on need” (Jacks, 2005, p. 86). From her experience, she expressed her appreciation of the emotional and psychological power of gratitude. “Gratitude is a great way to stay positive. It is always enlightening to focus on *what I have rather than what is missing* [italics added]” (Jacks, 2005, p. 86). Kushner’s (2003) work supports this insight. Kushner, in explaining the Twenty-third Psalm, stated that the Hebrew translation for “I shall not want” is more accurately stated as “I shall lack for nothing” (Kushner, 2003, p. 29). Last, Jacks reiterated what many humans know but fail to accept until a loss occurs, that is, no one but that individual is responsible for an individual’s happiness, challenges (opportunities for gain and loss) are constant over a life span, and life is a process not an event.

In assisting clients to contemplate vicarious life and loss insights from others, counselors may choose to discuss with clients the concept of developmental life span changes. Such a discussion may help the client grasp the reality of change as an integral part of life span development. Nothing in a human's life is immutable. Many humans cognitively accept this concept but behave as if it were not true. Every day is truly a new day and a new opportunity for growth and development. Cognitive reframing, adjustment, accommodation, forgiveness of others and self, and acceptance of life's circumstances are essential for continued growth, development, and psychological well-being.

Worden (2002) encouraged those who have experienced loss to continue their recovery by undertaking the Tasks of Mourning & Recovery. The counselor can be supportive as the client works through the tasks of accepting the reality of the loss: working through the pain of grief, adjusting to an environment in which the deceased (loss object) is missing, and emotionally relocating the deceased (loss object) in the psyche. Performing these tasks does not have to be done only by the person experiencing the direct loss. A supportive and participative group of family members or friends may do much to expedite the mourning and recovery process.

In summation, the acceptance of loss and a synchronized recovery are heavily dependent upon the loss history and the emotional maturity level of the individual. Additional contributing factors that may influence the severity of the loss include the type of loss, the nature of attachment to the object of loss, the mode of loss (sudden, expected, gradual), personality variables (age, gender, coping style), and other concurrent stressors (Worden, 2002). As Judge Sol Wachtler, a former head of the New York State Court of Appeals who was arrested and imprisoned for actions related to his bipolar disorder, stated in an episode of the public radio series *The Infinite Mind* (Kramer & Wachtler, 2006), "Loss closes one door and often opens another door but it's hell in the hallway." Counselors have the responsibility to help their clients make it "through the hallway" and on to the beginning of a new life with the reality that life has permanently changed. Memory of losses will remain, but clients do not have to remain frozen in time with hurt, hate, betrayal, resentment, and immobility. Through various eclectic approaches using existential, humanistic, and rational emotive techniques, counselors can assist clients in accepting a synchronization of loss and life so that they can endure loss, accept change, seek new opportunities, and move on with the wonder and beauty of life.

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