

Supporting Others in Grief and Trauma

The painful experiences of loss and injury are universal. Equally common is the difficult task of supporting loved ones currently going through hard times. The desire to help is part of human nature, but the execution of that desire can be quite flawed because of the complexity of the healing process. To improve *how* we express love and support, let's consider the nuanced differences of the following:

- ❖ **Pain:** Whether physical or emotional, it is the consequence of unpleasant experiences.
- ❖ **Suffering:** The experience of pain without finding a deeper meaning in it.
- ❖ **Trauma:** The feeling of deep, personal violation(s), with long-lasting aftermath.
- ❖ **Grief:** Internal process of emotions, often in response to the experience of loss or trauma.
- ❖ **Mourning:** The outward expression of grief, like crying or avoiding others.
- ❖ **Depression:** Emotional disorder where symptoms significantly impede normal daily life.

The effects of grief and trauma are pervasive, invading many arenas of life. Someone can feel grief and trauma physically, emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally, and spiritually. This makes the experience complex and the healing process complicated.

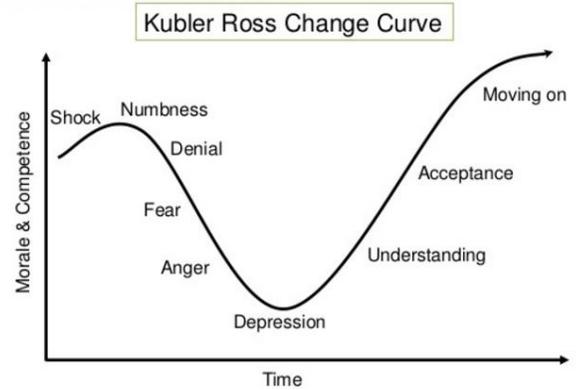


Furthermore, an individual's particular reaction style impacts how grief and trauma are manifested. As a loving, supportive person, you should understand two things:

- 1.) Reaction styles vary person-to-person. Those differences do not indicate deficiencies of some kind.
- 2.) You can successfully help individuals with different reaction styles and grief processes by seeking to understand those differences.

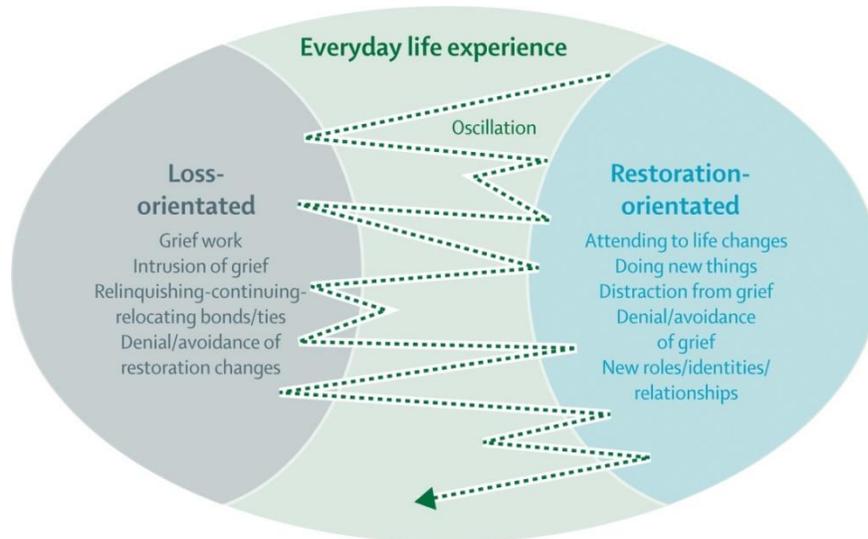
Models for Understanding the Grief Process

Five Stages of Grief by Kübler-Ross: First introduced in 1969 to describe the experience of terminally ill cancer patients, this process model has become widely applied to different contexts. The stages of this model are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. This is not a stair-stepped model, but rather individuals are expected to waiver in-and-out of these stages.



Continuum of Grief Styles by Kenneth Doka: This model proposes two kinds of grieving reactions. "Intuitive Grief" is experienced and expressed outwardly in emotional waves (e.g., crying, anger, etc.). Healing for this style comes with the exploration and expression of emotion. In contrast, "Instrumental Grief" can be seen in people who are more contemplative about a difficult experience, versus the emotional reaction of Intuitive Grief. Those who react with Instrumental Grief tend to busy themselves in thought and/or activity in response to difficult experiences, often to regain a sense of control in their lives.

Dual Process of Grief by Stroebe & Shute: Grieving individuals oscillate between being "Loss-Oriented" and "Restoration-Oriented" in their attitudes and behaviors during everyday life.



Four Tasks of Mourning by William Worden: Regardless of reaction style or stage of grief, Worden suggests that certain milestones must be completed in order to process emotions and reestablish equilibrium in one's life. The tasks are to 1) Accept reality of experience, 2) allow self to feel grief, 3) adjust to a new normal, and 4) find ways to stay connected to the past and while moving forward (e.g., by creating traditions and/or rituals to honor the past).

Supporting others is Difficult

Many people feel uncomfortable while in the presence of someone struggling through grief and/or trauma. Reactions can include squeamishness, frustration, and even irritability. Examining the source of your own discomfort is one step in demonstrating support. Below are very common reactions people have even though they want to support a loved one.

Reaction

Deer-in-headlights uncertainty of what to do.

Desire to fix the problem.

Vicarious trauma, which occurs when listening to others' grief triggers difficult memories or fears of your own.

Desire to just "get over it" and "move on."

Challenges to your own expectations, assumptions, and beliefs.

Experience of unpleasant emotions.

Compassion fatigue, which can often occur when caring for too many people or for caring too long in duration.

Reality

Surrender to the fact that your job is the gift of presence, not to make something happen.

You cannot take the pain away or force someone through the experience. Do not psychoanalyze or judge the experience. Simply listen.

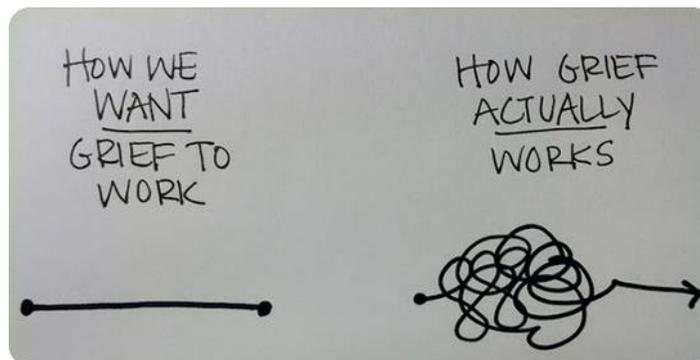
Your job is to witness and affirm their experience, not explore your own. If you find yourself excessively triggered, find someone else who can support you as you are supporting your loved one.

Grief is a process to experience, not a problem to resolve.

Meet them where they are. Each person has their own journey to walk; where they come from and where they are going. You do not have to give meaning to what others are experiencing.

There are no "good" or "bad" emotions. They are all valid; just some are more tolerable than others.

Yes, you are supporting a loved one, but that does not mean you do not need support of your own. Strengthen your ability to "be there" for others by allowing people to "be there" for you.



How to Sound Empathic

Typically there is not an absolute “right” and “wrong” thing to say. However, some things are usually more helpful while other things are usually less helpful. And what is most helpful and healing is connection; empathy. The goal is first to support and second to seek understanding, if possible. Below are tips to sound supportive and progress toward understanding.



Reflective Listening: A way to demonstrate active listening, this is a “checking-in” exercise in which statements are clarified, validated, and truly appreciated. Benefits of reflective listening include:
Decreased repetition of statements because the speaker feels understood.
Accurate clarification of broad statements and questions so that specific sentiments are understood.
Clear determination of any requests for action or decision.

Two primary types of reflective listening are to 1) paraphrase the content of what was just said, and 2) address the emotion underlying the content. Either way, use your own words so as to sound sincere, rather than simply parroting the content or being overly flowery about the emotion. The basic reflective listening formula is:

Tentative Opening + Feeling + Preposition + Thought

It sounds like	you feel mad	about	_____
I hear you saying that	you feel sad	because of	_____
If I hear you correctly	you feel glad	when	_____
You seem to be saying	you feel afraid	about	_____
I think I hear you saying	you feel confused	because of	_____
I may not be following, but	you feel ashamed	about	_____
Am I hearing you say	you feel lonely	when	_____



You may be afraid to say a particular word or phrase – or even mention the pain at all for fear of triggering your loved one. Don't be afraid to talk about it. You are not going to remind someone that something upsetting happened / is happening. They already know it. You should make space to honor the elephant in the room. Also, you should use their lingo regarding the issue.

What to Avoid

It is strongly suggested to avoid cliché platitudes, and to instead reflectively listen. Don't feel bad if you have expressed platitudes in the past to comfort people. Just put them to rest. Only use these kinds of expressions if the person grieving does so. Common platitudes include:

- ❖ Forecasting. This is unhelpful because you cannot guarantee these things.
 - "It will get better."
 - "You'll be stronger for it."
- ❖ Giving your religious meaning. This is unhelpful because your beliefs may not fit the person grieving.
 - "You know God has a plan," or, "It was God's will."
 - "God needed an angel."
 - "God never gives you more than you can handle."
 - "_____ is in a better place."
 - "Everything happens for a reason."
- ❖ Mindreading the deceased. Again, you cannot guarantee this.
 - "Their suffering is over."
 - "_____ would want you to move on and be happy."
 - Assuming someone's inner experience. Reaction styles vary greatly person-to-person.
 - "I know this must be hard for you."
- ❖ Tiptoeing around the issue by using euphemisms like:
 - "Loss" or "passing" rather than "death."
 - "Transition" or "opportunity" rather than "job loss."
 - "What happened" or "the event" rather than "rape," "cheating," or some other traumatic experience.
- ❖ Victim blaming. This is immensely destructive and is an absolute no-no.
 - "On some level, you chose this. You're decisions and/or attitude made this happen."
 - "What goes around comes around."

What gives you comfort may not comfort others, and may in fact worsen their suffering. It is fine – actually ideal – for people to come to peace with their assigned meaning, whether or not you agree with it. Your primary task is to make the grieving person feel heard and hopefully understood.

Psychotherapy is strongly encouraged for people either suffering after a difficult experience or those who are struggling to support loved ones going through hard times. A skilled therapist can:

- ✓ Provide educational material on what is helpful and what is potentially harmful;
- ✓ Support both the grieving person and the supportive loved one;
- ✓ Help grieving individuals find meaning in their pain;
- ✓ Facilitate the healing process, and bringing about a desire for and ability to achieve forgiveness;
- ✓ Co-create a "new normal" that allows life to functionally continue; and
- ✓ Suggest creative ways to honor the past while moving forward.

Contact Wheelhouse Counseling for any of your emotional- and relational-health needs.

