

Grief Throughout My Lifespan
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Fortunately, I've never experienced the death of anyone close to me. I've experienced death before, but not someone so close that I would have had to deeply grieve their loss. I have however, experienced a lot of other losses in my life. So many that it was hard trying to pick 7 significant losses. The events I decided to choose formed recurring themes throughout my lifetime that I thought it was important to explore.

The first major loss has shaped my entire personality. This was the loss of my ability to make mistakes. As children grow, they experience the developmental loss of the innocence they had before their parents punished them to teach them right from wrong (McCoyd et al, 2021). In healthy household this developmental loss is still met with affirming love from the parents. For me, it meant the loss of unconditional love from my parents.

I had an abusive upbringing. I learned that if I made any mistakes, it would result in a loss of love from my dad or a beating from my mom. This lesson taught me that love was based on my performance. My father is a narcissist, which means that his affection was conditioned on the latest thing you did to make him proud. As long as I maintained perfect grades, never got into trouble, was pretty and well behaved he would lavish me with affection and attention. My mom was an authoritative, and reactive teenage mom dealing with the stress of having 3 young children, one of which was hyperactive. If we didn't listen perfectly, we would be punished. The punishment either consisted of a beating, kneeling down in the corner (sometimes on rice) or both. Since I was the "good kid" I got punished less often but found myself overcompensating for my brothers, hoping I could prevent them from getting into trouble. I coped with this by trying to be perfect. I was terrified to be less than perfect. My dad would say to me if I brought home a 98 "where are the other 2 points." Even if I brought home a 100 he would ask why I didn't get the extra credit.

This could also be classified as an ambiguous loss (McCoyd et al, 2021). Obviously, I didn't lose my ability to make mistakes, rather I lost the freedom to know that I would be loved and safe if I did. There was a secondary loss in this as well (McCoyd et al, 2021). I learned all this at a very early age, meaning that by the time I got to school, I was a full on "try hard". The other kids in class hated me. They thought I was annoying and a nerd. I went on to never quite finding social acceptance in school, meaning the loss of friends and social status.

Later in life, I experienced the second major loss when my parents divorced. Besides the real loss of not having my father around all the time, was the loss of "what could have been." My parents would talk about buying us a house in the suburbs with a pool. The divorce meant that those dreams would never happen. The biggest loss in this was my childhood. While that is normal developmental loss, it is not normal to happen at age 11. By this age I was parentified. Both my parents turned to me as a substitute parent. My sister was born around that time. I would push her around in her carriage. People in the neighborhood thought she was my child. I basically raised my siblings. I potty trained my sister, helped the boys with their homework, cleaned the house and made dinner. It was to the point that they called me mom well into my 20's. The ability to be a child was also an ambiguous loss. Obviously, I was still a child. My parents certainly treated me as such when it suited them. Yet, for everything else, I was the role model, the one who held the family together, the one my siblings went to when they had a problem. The idea of the dual process really resonated with me for this time period. I oscillated from a loss oriented thought process, missing my dad, missing our family to a restoration oriented process where I tried to get my parents back together or just tried to keep them from getting upset with the children (McCoyd et al, 2021). As I grew into a teenager with no one to parent me, this led to years of me lying and pretending for my parents sake but rebelling behind

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their back. I became sexually active at 13 (another loss) and would sneak out of the house. I got tired of being hated by my peers so I rebelled in school. I went from being salutatorian in middle school to being in the bottom 50% of my class in high school. Ironically though, I had an 88 average, but since I went to an elite, highly competitive high school, I was at the bottom. I would have been respected more there if I was at the top of the class. Coping with the loss of my childhood was a combination of trying to be a perfect role model or rebelling to find some sense of freedom for myself. In time, I learned that rebelling only brought trouble for me.

The third major loss came from an unintended pregnancy at 14 and again at 16. During these years I was verbally, mentally and physically abused by various boyfriends and raped by another (also a loss). The first pregnancy should have been a wake-up call for me, but it wasn't. I fell into a very deep depression, contemplated suicide and ultimately terminated the pregnancy. By the time it happened again two years later I realized that rebellion wasn't serving me. I terminated the pregnancy again but this time with the support of my mother. I let go of my rebellion and threw all my effort into being a "good girl" (mostly) again. The loss associated with the abortion had many layers to it. While for me it was a disenfranchised perinatal loss, it was also a socially negated loss (McCoyd et al, 2021). The few people around me that knew about it tried to make me feel better by saying it was the best thing for me. The only way I thought to cope with it at the time was to pretend it never happened. I would put it out of my mind. I was afraid that if I allowed myself time to sit and grieve I would fall into a depression again. Till this day, I never allowed myself to fully grieve that loss. I cope by thinking of how miserable my life would have been if were forever tied to that abusive boyfriend. For years after he stalked me. Almost 30 years later, I still find myself afraid to run into him. This is how I've made meaning of the loss, but as a parent, I find myself secretly grieving those children. Especially since my younger

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brother (my dad's 5th child) is the same age (29) the first one would have been. I look at him and what a kind young man he is, and what amazing children I have now and I'm filled with pain. I experienced several other losses related to lost friendships, heart breaks and essentially a failure to find loving acceptance from my peers.

The 4th loss was of this type. I chose this loss because it has continued to affect me still. It may sound silly but this loss had to deal with rejection from people I thought were friends. In college, I pledged a sorority. I was so excited to "finally" have a group of friends. That was short lived. After 6 weeks of pledging, one of the fraternities on campus kidnapped us. It became a whole big scandal. Ultimately, they decided to drop the pledge class. Not only did I lose this group of girls that were going to be my "sisters", I had lost the six weeks of time invested, I had lost respect from other people on campus and of my other "friends" who had disagreed with me pledging in the first place. I took this event really hard. It made me feel like I was never going to be loved and accepted by my friends. Other people disagreed. They were quick to point out that these girls weren't my friends and that I should stop pretending they were. While this was true, it didn't change the fact that I desperately wanted community. Not to mention the fact that it reinforced the idea that I had to be perfect to receive love. It feels so silly to even write about it here. How could this "loss" even be considered as significant to me amongst all the others I've written about. I would consider this to be a socially negated loss. People don't see it as a loss because it was something I never really had to begin with. For me though, it was the sense of belonging that I longed for. "Greek life" was a big part of the social hierarchy on campus. This would have been fine if I had never publicly claimed to want to be a part of it. But because I did and failed, it meant rejection from those in it and rejection from those who thought it was stupid. All over again, I found myself not fitting in anywhere.

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It has affected me today because some of those girls are still in my life. Two of which are some of my closest friends. This just further proves the point of those who think it's silly for me to think of that as a loss. They say, "you see you didn't need the sorority to give you friends." While this is true, I felt like I missed out on a portion of my friend's life that they don't/can't share with me. At the time, I coped with the loss through anger and resentment. I told myself (and others) unkind things about them. I stepped into an old pattern of defensiveness, and fight. This happened when I was 20 years old, which meant that I was navigating the first few years of young adulthood through the lens of rejection, resentment, and fear. It also sent me into old patterns of rebellion. I've since matured emotionally and am able to hang out with them without animosity or resentment, but the person I was then was anything but emotionally healthy.

By the age of 23 I decided that the only way I was going to find safety and belonging was by settling down and starting a family. I started dating my husband and returned to my overachieving self publicly and periods of rebellion in private. This made for a very emotionally unhealthy relationship (on my part mostly). I pushed forward because I knew my husband would be a great husband and father one day even though I was not equipped for the stresses of marriage or parenthood. We got engaged about 3 years later and less than a year after that found ourselves with an unintended pregnancy in the midst of a period of intense fighting where I almost ended our engagement. I hesitate to call this loss #5. My daughter has been such a huge blessing to me. I can't imagine my world without her in it.

Yet – getting pregnant at that time was still a loss. It was a development loss as this loss was a normal part of moving through life's developmental stages (McCoyd et al, 2021). Yet, I never had the chance to enjoy the previous stages. I never had the time many brides enjoy of being able to plan a wedding and focusing on the upcoming marriage. Immediately I went from being a

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bride to be to being a mother to be. I didn't have the period of time with my husband as a newlywed where we strengthen our marriage, save for our future and travel. All my needs and concerns were suddenly irrelevant. I had to focus on the needs and concerns of the new baby. I wish I could say that the gift of my daughter cured me. That my baby gave me the sense of belonging and safety I was looking for, but it didn't. I suffered severe post-partum depression. I had such a difficult time bonding and connecting with her and I felt terrible about myself for it. As I suspected, my husband is an amazing father. He gave my daughter everything I couldn't. The issue is that I felt rejected by him. As he looked at his new baby girl with the adoration of a doting father, I found myself resentful that he never looked at me like that and I was quick to tell him as much.

I'm forever grateful to the Lord for finding me at this time. My emotional unhealthiness was pushing away my husband and child. It was causing me to repeat some old patterns and ruin the thing I prayed for that God was so gracious to grant me. God was doing a work in me. He was fundamentally changing me through his word. My husband however, was not on board.

My 6th loss was when my husband walked out on me. Amongst all my emotional unhealthiness and newfound faith, he didn't recognize the woman he married. He said he didn't sign up for a "crazy Christian wife." We had lived life together but separated for several months before he moved out. We had discussed his move. The whole time God was keeping me and changing me so that my reactions to him became grace fueled responses. One day, I had come home from a business trip. I knew that he was moving out that weekend, but I was not prepared to come home to the empty apartment. This loss was probably the hardest I had ever had to deal with. It was as if all the losses I had ever experienced combined for this one. I felt unloved, rejected, unsafe. I felt like a failure, like a terrible wife and terrible mother. I went through all of

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Bowlby's stages of grief including numbness, yearning, despair, and reorganization (McCoyd et al, 2021). I bounced around from one stage to the next and didn't realize it but was using the dual process model to cope with the pain of loss while also keeping my family and career together. My career was the other place where I was finding security and acceptance so I wasn't going to risk losing that. When it came to my marriage, my coping varied between "good" sitting in my word, staying close to God, allowing him to change me, and finding Christian resources and "bad." On some days I would run to the world for validation, help, advice and comfort. Nothing good ever came from that. I was often left feeling empty and depressed on those days. I would find myself back in my word and praying for forgiveness and change. This was the first time I went through a hard season with God on my side. It was the first time I had something good and holy to turn to.

This was a time that I grew the most in my faith and in my relationship with God. He was doing a new thing in me, and in my family. As always he stayed true to his promise. He promised me that he would bring me a new man (what I had been praying for thinking that would help) but the same one. A few months after our separation my husband and I reconciled. God had changed him, while he was still an unbeliever, and changed me. God was really working on the deepest parts of me to bring healing for the generations to come. What I've learned is that God will take away anything you idolize. If I'm not careful, I could let things become an idol in my life. My husband, my career (another loss later) and for my 7th and last significant loss was my sense of financial security.

Covid meant that I lost my financial safety net. At first, I didn't take it well, but this time, instead of spiraling, I was finally able to handle things differently. Throughout my life, my sense of identity and self-worth was tied to the things I lost. I don't believe that those things were bad

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in and of themselves, but that they become bad once our sense of self-worth and security is tied to it. Coping with those losses would send me into a spiral of two different identities. Not only did I deal with adjustment disorder from all the changes going on during covid, but the issue of financial insecurity had me feeling new levels of anxiousness. This time however, my coping mechanism was by finding my hope in the Lord.

My morning routines became non-negotiable. I invited the Lord into every area of my life. I continued to work hard, but this time I allowed myself to find rest. I realized that every time I allowed myself to idolize something, I would lose it. So I became good and recognizing when I was putting too much focus on any single area of my life. This meant that I no longer allowed the things that once provided me with validation and security to take away from my family, my faith, or my marriage. Whether this was my work, ministry, zeros in my bank account or even the acceptance of my family and friends, I coped with this last lost by learning to use healthy boundaries. I was able to set boundaries with my narcissistic father, and forgive my formerly abusive mother. I was able to fully repair the relationship with my daughter and working on having a great relationship with my son. I was able to identify the friends in my life who really were there for me. I was able to focus on a few key relationships and allow God to continue working in my life. No one likes loss or change, but I have been able to make meaning of the losses in my life to allow them to make me more resilient for the future. I recognize that God allowed these losses to happen so that he could bring me exactly to the place I am today. These losses happened *for* me, not *to* me. I'm able to understand that they make me uniquely qualified to serve where God has called me today. As long as I operate from this place of service, I can't fail, because my calling is God ordained. If for whatever reason it doesn't work out, it simply means that God has something better for me but not that I am worth any less to Him.

References:

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