

Grief Paper

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MFT 603: Individual and Family Development

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April 25, 2023

The first significant loss I experienced was the loss of what I considered a normal living arrangement as an eight-year-old. In second grade, my parents moved outside of Seoul to be closer to my dad's work. My parents wanted me to continue attending the same private elementary school in Seoul, so I stayed with my grandmother in Seoul during the week and returned to my family home on the weekends. My mom would come around with my baby brother on some weekdays to run errands or drive me to places if needed, but otherwise I spent a lot of time alone with my grandma and away from my parents and brother. This lasted for about three years until sixth grade when my family immigrated to the United States. I do not recall how this decision to have me live away from home was made or whether my parents asked me for my thoughts at any point. In addition to losing access to a conventional home environment, it also signified a loss of a sense of belonging and stability in my childhood. I was the odd one out among my friends as the only one who did not always live with her parents. I constantly felt up in the air and stuck in limbo between two homes, unsure how to fully settle in one place.

When my younger brothers were born, I lost the love and attention I received as an only child and also a carefree childhood due to parentification. I was eight when my first brother was born – while I had always wished for a sibling and adored my baby brother, there was a shift in the family dynamic that seemed to favor him over me. I was thirteen when my youngest brother was born. Already well-versed in the caretaking big sister role, I picked up looking after him as well while my parents were busy making a living in a new country. As I got older, I took on even more responsibilities from feeding my brothers to driving them to places, all at the expense of my own needs and wishes as a teenager. So much of my adolescence was defined by what other people needed from me. I rarely ever had a chance to speak up for what I wanted out of fear of appearing selfish, entitled, and unhelpful to my struggling parents and innocent brothers.

I have had to grieve losing the relationship I had with my mom before I started my first serious relationship with my now husband. As the only daughter, I was very close with my mom and shared almost everything with her for most of my life. My mom also confided in me about a lot of things because she connected with me in a way that could not be replicated with my dad and brothers. I was single my whole life until I began dating Jay at age 27, with the mutual intention of marriage. Before this point, I had considered my mom to be the most important person in my life, prioritized pleasing her, and internalized her opinions as my own. Looking back, I was experiencing an ambiguous loss where my mom was still living, but she and I both had to mourn the end of our relationship as we knew it and adjust to a new dynamic. Especially once Jay and I got engaged and began preparing for marriage, my mom and I had more conflict than ever before because my priorities shifted away from her and toward the future family I was building with my husband. I had spent most of my life simply obeying my parents and rarely voicing my own thoughts, but that began to change during this life transition. I had to learn to set boundaries for the first time and get ready to cleave from my parents.

While I was engaged and preparing for marriage, I also had to pre-grieve the anticipated loss of my independence that would come with marriage. In the months leading up to my wedding in August 2020, I had so much spare time to reflect while temporarily living with my parents during lockdown. There was a sense of fearing the unknown and the pain of losing the ability to live my life however I want. Every decision I make about my life would now have to involve my partner, presumably till death do us part. Having the burden of always thinking about my spouse in addition to myself was a loss of my identity as an empowered, ambitious, single woman and the unique autonomy that came with it. If I had an exciting career opportunity in another country, I would no longer have the flexibility and freedom to pack up and go like I did

when I was single. At the same time, I was also excited to start a new chapter with the love of my life – it was confusing to mourn the loss and feel the excitement at the same time.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a challenging season as I was making my way from early adulthood to young adulthood. These years marked a highly transitional period because I got married in 2020, turned 30 years old in 2021, and then left the company I was with for seven years for a new job in the same year. I felt blessed that I got to spend a lot of quality time with my husband as newlyweds, but I still experienced the loss of precious time I would have spent with people important to me. When we postponed our big wedding and changed the official ceremony to a small, family-only occasion, I lost the opportunity to celebrate a once-in-a-lifetime milestone in the way that I had planned to. There was so much fear and uncertainty around what kind of gathering we could have safely. I even wished for the ability to stress like a normal bride would in pre-pandemic days without worrying about risking the health of our loved ones. We were grateful for an intimate ceremony, but we felt the absence of our friends and missed the memories we would have made with them. My husband and I also both turned 30 in peak pandemic and were not able to see anyone else to celebrate another key milestone in our lives. More than simply not being able to see people, I think the loss was also felt in not being able to do what others could do freely before the pandemic. Beyond special events like a wedding or a birthday party, there were times when we simply could not see our loved ones at all – simply visiting our parents' house was a luxury we could not always afford due to the health risks. In moving to a new job, I also was not able to say a proper goodbye to my coworkers, some of whom I had worked with for seven years. It felt strange and sad to submit my resignation and say farewell over Zoom after having spent so many of my formative years at the company. It was yet another way I lost so much facetime with people in my circles.

Last year, I made the huge decision to quit my job and enroll in graduate school full time. I had had a great reputation among my bosses and colleagues for many years and was even offered a significant promotion just a few months before I resigned. Even though it was my own choice, considered over the course of a year, to risk the loss of my advertising career and a steady income, I had to go through the grief process for quite a while. I tried to mentally and emotionally prepare myself for this transition in therapy, but even the anticipatory grief process did not make the adjustment any easier. Miserable and unfulfilled in my job, I was excited and relieved to some degree to resign from my position. At the same time, I still felt the loss and guilt – giving up the ability to contribute financially to my marriage rather than relying on my husband to support both of us. The secondary loss of my self-concept was also substantial because of the way I have always identified myself as an equal contributor that takes her responsibilities seriously. I felt a lot of guilt during this transition despite the unwavering support from my husband.

Another significant loss I went through as a result of my career change was the loss of family planning at a more conventional and expected time. It was one of the main anxieties I had about pivoting to graduate school at age 30. One of the living losses in young adulthood is the loss of opportunity to have children biologically due to infertility or delay of parenthood (McCoyd et al., 2020). Prior to the pandemic and my career pivot, it would have been likely that my husband and I would have begun family planning in the next year or so. The pandemic kept us stuck in one place and took away our plans to make the most of our first couple years of marriage, including traveling all around the world. On a brighter note, the pandemic also gave me the chance to seriously reflect on the direction I wanted to take in my life and pray over the calling I felt God placed in my heart. My husband and I have decided to put off planning for a

baby while I am in school for the next two years or so – I will be 34 when I graduate, just one year from what is considered advanced maternal age. At first I tried to be okay with this choice and accepted its implications. However, with so many friends my age getting pregnant in recent months, I have felt the pang of loss more strongly than ever. I am also losing the opportunity to go through such lifechanging experiences with close friends at the same time and increasingly feeling the gap between us widening when others bond over pregnancy and parenthood.

When I think back to my significant losses involving my family-of-origin, I recognize that it took me many years to truly understand them as something worth grieving. My identity as a responsible and trustworthy eldest daughter and older sister had a huge impact on how I responded to my loss experiences. Many Asian cultures are based on collectivism, including my home country South Korea. The value of sacrifice for others is deeply ingrained in me as a result of this cultural influence, as well as from what my mom taught me growing up. Korea has also historically been a patriarchal society that often favored sons over daughters – daughters were expected to work and serve the family while sons were prioritized to receive education. Although this is now considered an outdated way of thinking, I can still see some of its effects trickling through to the present. I certainly notice the difference between how my brothers and I were raised. I internalized a lot of what I saw my mom practice, including selflessness and empathy, while my brothers might have taken after my dad more. Filial piety is also a key element of growing up in an Asian household, which is why I had a hard time looking back on my childhood and adolescence losses involving family. For a long time, I thought about those experiences as necessary sacrifices and compromises to support the family I love, rather than a loss I had any right to mourn.

When I began to process some of my earlier losses, there was pain, anger, resentment, and guilt in my heart. I was angry about being handed off to my grandmother for years but also felt guilty, knowing it was ultimately for my benefit – my parents were working hard for their children. I was resentful about being parentified to be a second mom to my brothers but also felt guilty for only thinking about myself. I was hurt by the way my mom was not as understanding or empathetic as I wished when I was getting married, but I also tried to have compassion for how hard it must be for her to let her only daughter go. There was always an internal conflict between my pain of loss and my guilt for complaining and not being more understanding and mature. It makes sense given what Erikson believed about the adolescent brain – they tend to equate behavior with identity and easily create a problem-saturated narrative that they may carry into adulthood (Polan & Taylor, 2018). I equated any signs of disobedience and pushback with being a bad, ungrateful person. What I have learned from this course and Boss (2021), however, is that both/and thinking is possible. I am allowed to feel angry about my losses and still be a loving daughter and sister. Even now, I still struggle with the paradox and ambiguity of such a way of thinking. It instinctively feels contradictory and wrong to express any negative emotions about my parents because I always saw myself as someone happy and willing to do anything for them. Thinking about what Boss (2021) wrote, “grief is meant to be expressed, not controlled,” I remind myself that I deserve and need to grieve these losses despite the discomfort.

Since it took me some time to register some of my childhood losses as a loss to grieve, I only began to think about really coping with the pain many years later. When I was going through it, I responded by rationalizing and justifying why it had to happen. Living apart from my parents was a necessary arrangement so that my parents could ensure I still got the best education in Seoul. I had to take care of my brothers because I was much older and mature

enough to take some load off my hardworking parents. This was a way for me to make meaning of the loss by finding a greater purpose and a worthy cause behind it. I think this coping strategy was effective in helping me move forward but also presented some dysfunction. I used meaning-making to justify the loss, so I also felt hypocritical when trying to let myself grieve the loss. I pressured myself to accept the loss as a meaningful sacrifice I was strong enough to handle. It was and still is sometimes extremely uncomfortable for me to prioritize expressing my true emotions first.

My losses around getting married were somewhat easier to deal with because I was able to share with my trusted confidantes. I used active emotional coping skills to tap into my humor, optimism, and vulnerability to handle the pain, fear and confusion I was feeling. When it came to grieving my relationship with my mom, I had girlfriends I could vent to and connect with because many of them went through a similar experience when they got married. I care deeply about building friendships where we can share our struggles openly, speak truth into each other with love, and go beyond the surface level connection. Opening up to friends who could relate to my struggles was an invaluable resource I had during this season of my life. I also had friends who were engaged and wedding planning during the pandemic that I could commiserate with, which gave me a purpose during this time by supporting and encouraging them through their own grief processes. We were able to bond on a deeper level sharing about our changing family dynamics and priorities and be there for each other in completely new ways. Even the importance of mental health became a major topic of conversation among my friends and family, which was quite gratifying. One clear positive outcome of COVID-19 was the beauty of people coming together to shine a light on important issues and advocating for change, empathy, and

kindness for one another. It also led more people, including myself, to seek God and draw closer to Him, which is the best outcome of all.

In the dual-process model of coping, McCoyd et al. (2020) identifies the cycling between loss orientation (LO) and restoration orientation (RO) that can help one process the loss and work on rebuilding her life. I tend to default to RO over LO when dealing with difficult and emotional situations because finding ways to problem solve and take action empowers me and gives me hope, relieving me of having to sit with the emotions. Even when I was grieving my pandemic losses, I distracted myself by focusing on what I could do in the moment rather than dwelling on the negative. However, it is just as important for me to face the loss head on as it is to find ways to move on. My natural tendency is to try to take the pain away as soon as possible, but it is the combination of both LO and RO that can truly help me cope in the face of grief. I also took notice of Polan and Taylor's (2018) explanation of general adaptation syndrome and its third stage – state of exhaustion. It occurs with prolonged exposure to stress drawing the body's energy. While I have had a longtime habit of breezing past the stressors quickly, I am learning that the immediate response to stress should not end with a premature dismissal but involve appropriate processing to minimize long-term negative impact on the person. That is why balancing between LO and RO is an effective coping strategy to learn.

I am still grieving the losses of my career, income, and family planning opportunity at the moment. My husband and I are both grieving the loss of the opportunity to walk in step with our friends who are buying homes and having children. Therapy was an important strategy I employed to process how to move forward in a healthy way. My counselor helped me reality test my belief that quitting my job makes me a bad, unhelpful wife who is holding us back. I learned to reframe the transition in a positive light – I am investing in my happiness and fulfillment that

will ultimately help me be the best wife and mom I can be for my family in the future. This process has also given me a chance to revisit my upbringing and gain new insight into how I was shaped and why I think and behave the way I do. I have been able to make meaning of the losses by getting to know myself on a deeper level. My husband and I have also been able to draw even closer to each other through this experience, which has been so meaningful and fulfilling for our marriage. These losses forced me to deal with painful emotions that I tried to avoid most of my life, and I know I am better and stronger for it. They are definitely losses I have a right to grieve in the present time, but they are also somewhat fluid – one day I will go back to working and earning money and plan to expand our family. I am still working on learning how to respond to triggers that make these losses come alive for me, but I am all the more hopeful that I am taking small steps in the right direction. I am honoring myself by processing the grief I feel now, but I can also look forward to the wonderful things ahead in my future. There is humor and beauty in how my personal grief work is part of my training to become an empathetic and client-focused therapist to help others with their grief and loss.

The most important thing I learned about grief therapy is that grief is unique to each individual, and no loss looks the same. Aside from an abnormal or excessive grief reaction defined by how significantly it impacts a person's daily functioning, there is no universal frame of reference to judge anyone's grief experience. At the same time, it is also true that people can heal by sharing common experiences with one another, even if grief looks different for every person. The grief process can happen following a loss, before a loss, and years after the loss occurred (Worden, 2018). I also loved what Worden (2018) said about the phrase *time heals* being only partially true – “healing comes from what the grieving person does with the time.” Time alone does not necessarily activate the necessary grief work for people to heal and move

forward with their lives. There is so much nuance to consider in the grief process, but I want to strive for a balance between treating grief work as a deeply personal experience and normalizing talking about losses with others in safe and supportive environments.

Learning about nonfinite or chronic grief was extremely important to me because my sister-in-law has a rare genetic condition that consists of developmental delays and autism spectrum disorder. My in-laws have taken care of her for her entire 28 years of life from feeding, bathing, dressing, and using the bathroom. It was so important for me to learn about how chronic sorrow can impact the parents – it helped me understand and feel for my in-laws more. I am in awe of their dedication to love and serve their daughter so unconditionally while facing such heartbreaking grief. This has also inspired me to work with families like my husband's and help them get the counseling support they need – to normalize giving access to such care to those going through similar struggles. It is a loss that never really ends and a fitting illustration of the ambiguity that is inherent in so many loss experiences.

Boss (2021) highlighted the value of balancing the negative with the positive in both/and thinking. I learned that part of handling loss and grief is acknowledging that there may not be a perfect solution or even closure that heals all the pain and fixes everything. I had previously never considered the possibility of not seeking closure. It is more helpful in the grief process to learn to move in some direction toward adjusting to life without the lost person, object, dream, or potential, and being okay with some ambiguity and paradox, “rather than be immobilized by stress and pain.” Boss (2021) also describes resilience as openness to change and the ability to “hold two opposing ideas in your mind at the same time.” Perhaps it is the constant pursuit of a magical solution or closure that actually adds more stress and pain to the grief process and puts pressure on the bereaved, the counselor, and those around them to “get over it.” A critical aspect

of doing grief work as a counselor is to keep in mind the important mourning task of accepting things as they are, however imperfect or uncertain, and finding ways to live in the new normal.

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