

Grief Paper:

Learning and Processing Grief and Loss as a Therapist-in-Training

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Coping Strategies to Manage Pain of Seven Losses

Throughout this semester, I reflected and processed many memories of special people, rites of passage and the bittersweet changes of my life as I learned about the phases and theories of human development and lifespan, various research studies and theories about biological, psychological, psychosocial and relational therapeutic models therapists use and most importantly, the many types of loss and grief and symptoms of adaptive and maladaptive responses to grief, loss and the effect trauma may have on processing and phases. This study has helped me recall the coping strategies I used to manage seven painful losses and grief I have experienced, beginning with the first time I experienced death to the most recent accumulated losses in the rites of passage of life.

My first, most painful and significant experience of death was the loss of my favorite dog, Mosel, the namesake of a river in Oregon. She was an athletic, black labrador-retriever mixed breed. Moving to a small farm north of Detroit when I was 8 years old, I was sad to leave my friends and our sidewalks and bike rides to the school playground or corner store to buy bubble gum. When I was ten, my Dad brought Mosel, already named and a year old, home one day. Although we had another older dog, Mosel became my dog. Wherever I went, she would follow. She came when I beeped my bicycle's horn. When I was about ten years old, I came home from school and could not find Mosel. When I asked my Great Grandma who was living with us if she had seen Mosel, she said our older dog died. But, I had already seen him outside. She meant no harm, as she was becoming confused with age. I began to panic, then asked where the dog was buried. She told me, and I ran down the path behind the house to the woods and saw a fresh grave. My Mom, not home at the time, must have dug the grave and buried Mosel. She was my first experience with mourning and grief and now I see the impact in how I found out and the aspect of sudden, traumatic death. When my Mom came home, she found me crying in my room and said she was so sorry for my loss and when I asked what happened, she told me the neighbors saw her body on the country road between our farms, and they thought it looked like Mosel. Looking back, my parents openly talked about mourning and sadness. I made a wooden cross for her grave, and said prayers for her soul for about a month. As time passed, I was able to look at photos of her, and feel less sad. At this time, I began believing in everlasting life for animals, too. And, when I see an animal's body, I always ask the Lord to let their soul rest in peace. Being able to cry and be taken seriously about my grief helped me to cope and move on to having many other dogs, and some I have loved as much as Mosel.

As the next year passed, my Great Grandmother's memory faded, and this was my first experience with loss, anticipated loss and death. She often had me over to spend the night with her in her downtown Detroit, one bedroom, old brownstone apartment. When I was 5 years old, my parents moved to the suburbs, and she often stayed with us on the weekends and holiday weeks. She cooked, cleaned, did the laundry and took good care of us. She never owned a car or learned to drive so it seems natural that when we moved to the countryside she moved in with us. I recall being 11 years old and our parents telling us Great Grandma had to move to a senior nursing home. I sobbed for days, helping go through Grandma's room and packing her things, and sifting through her few keepsakes she brought when she had moved in with us about 3 years prior. I was devastated by this decision. It was as if she had died. I missed her attention and constant presence. She took good care of us three girls, but I saw her memory and confusion worsen after she moved to a nursing home. At first, she was in our town and we could see her several times a week, and then my parents found a much nicer place with better care about 30 minutes away. To cope, we visited her weekly. When home, we talked about memories and stories she shared with us over the years and all the inventions she witnessed being born in 1890 in Detroit. Eventually, she began calling our Mom, Grace, her daughter, who had died suddenly in 1960. When I was 12 years old, she had a stroke and while in the hospital, she died shortly afterwards. Hers was the first viewing and funeral I ever

attended. She is the first person I loved dearly and lost. I coped by keeping photos, keepsakes and stories and memories of her. Even to this day, I share stories about her with my sons. In 2017, I visited the family graves in Detroit, and spent time at hers. Recently, my Mom gave me Great Grandma's engagement and wedding ring, a watch and locket with my Great Grandpa's photo. I had never seen these heirlooms and wish I had more history from her about them. Although my parents did not have a church funeral for Great Grandma, I have memories of her reading a Lutheran Daily Missile. And, without knowing it, I believe she taught me the coping skills of relying on God, praying for strength, having hobbies and interests like the Detroit Tigers baseball team, a good work ethic and baking fresh bread daily. In her 90 years, she experienced much loss, uncertainty and death yet she sang while doing chores and found purpose and connection up until her last two years of life.

A significant loss I experienced was moving from my childhood home, from extended family and friends and my roots when my parents decided to move from Michigan to Florida when I was almost 19 years old. The news devastated me, and I cried for two weeks - at least. I asked to stay with my paternal Grandparents and continue the next 3 years of college. My parents did not support this idea. In May, with less than a month's notice, we moved to south Florida to a house without air conditioning, but it had 1970's appeal and a pool. My focus on goals and work ethic helped me cope through this very difficult loss of connection, belonging, familiarity and the closeness of relatives and friends I loved. To combat loneliness, I coped by relying on my work ethic and goal-orientation. I researched and applied for jobs and to the local community college. I started a full-time retail job selling fine jewelry and began my second year of college that September. I coped by making new friends despite being from the northern midwest where even in 1985 many New York Metropolitan area people relocated to southeast Florida. About six months into living in Florida, my boyfriend from Michigan visited at Christmas. After the trip, I told him I did not believe it would work out to be long distance, and we broke up. I began to date, which made it better, and was working and going to school and trying to establish a new life in this very different place with a very different lifestyle than the rural small town where I spent the last decade and commuted from to a university about an hour's drive away for the past year.

In 1987, I suffered the loss of a dream I worked hard to achieve and had held out in great anticipation. In May, my parents decided to move from Florida to Arizona, a bit of a shock given he had been with one employer in Michigan for 20 years. At this point, I had been dating a nice guy for more than a year. Early that spring, I was accepted to transfer to Florida State University's Business School to study Human Resources Management and earn a Bachelor's degree. At the beginning of July, my father and mother told me they would not support my plan to go to Florida State, and that I could instead apply to Arizona State and live at home. It was a difficult period for me as I had dreamed of living and working on campus. To cope, I never hid my tears, and I tried to plead my case, but my father said this was the more economically sound plan, and the school was just as good. My boyfriend in south Florida had already graduated from college and was working full-time in his new career. Tallahassee is far from West Palm Beach, but I believe my father thought I would throw away my dreams. But, the Lord saw to it that I had the strength to carry on. Despite not going to church except for holidays in Florida and Arizona, my faith had not wavered. I coped by getting my tears cried out after a few weeks and re-engaging my dream with logic, grit, work ethic and putting to use skills I had learned in how to search and apply for jobs and colleges. By August, I was attending Arizona State's Business School full time and working in a department store 20-25 hours per week. My boyfriend had visited in early August for my birthday and was coming to visit for Thanksgiving. In those days, long distance calls were expensive, but this relationship was different; we talked on the phone several times a week and exchanged letters most weeks.

I have experienced grief over the deaths of several significant people in my life, and feel the biggest blessing of having young parent of the mid 1960's is the gift of Grandparents for much longer than most people experience, and the blessing of living near them, and even when afar, staying in close contact and relationship. I

lost first my maternal Grandpa in 1998, and today I would label it a bit like an ambiguous loss because I was unable to travel for his funeral and burial at sea in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of California where he spent the majority of his adult life as did most of his 13 siblings and their families. I coped by counting my blessings of the gift of his decision in 1986 to move from Hawaii to Florida and then to move to Arizona in 1987 and finally to follow my family of origin to California in 1988. So, we had a lot of time with each other, despite my never having lived in California. To cope, I brought out photos and explained to our oldest son 2 years old then why I was sad and crying. I showed him photos of him with his Great Grandpa. To honor him, two months later when our twins were born his namesake is the middle name of one son. Another significant death was my beloved paternal Grandmother made even more difficult by my paternal Grandfather's decision not to have a Mass, funeral or graveside service devastating us all. To cope, I spoke with a grief counselor. I scheduled a trip to visit my Grandfather. He chose not to speak about her or her death. He wanted me to have some of her keepsakes, and a sterling silver charm bracelet is the gift I most cherish. Despite not recalling her ever wearing it, I recognize the charms representing their wedding, the births of their two children and their family vacations. My paternal Grandfather's faith did not dim and over 4 years, he slowly began to decline yet managed to live independently up until the last 6 months of his life. He had a "do not resuscitate order" and by the grace of God was kept on a ventilator along with a series of miracles allowing me to be with him the last 30 hours of his life. He knew I was there by squeezing my hands, and tears flowing down his eyes. I used my cell phone to call my husband and our children, my sisters, my Dad so they could tell him how much they loved him. He had everything planned in advance. We held the Mass and the Reception right after he died. Later in July, we returned to western Michigan for a burial service of his ashes at the Veterans Cemetery across the state, where he had chosen to lay our Grandma to rest. Coping with the death of my Grandfather was difficult because it was the first time I was with someone when they died, and because he was always there for my husband and me with a prayer, a call, a letter and a lot of wisdom, faith and courage. When I returned to work, I was like a zombie the first week. Thankfully, my colleagues and my husband, my young children, friends, sister and Dad and extended family were there for me during this difficult period of deaths and mourning. Although I received no inheritance, to honor both of my Grandparents, I bought a Grandmother clock and two Sycamore Trees as these are just a few of the many things that remind me of them and their 60 years of marriage and dedication to family, faith and country. In my life, my Grandparents, especially my paternal Grandparents made a significant impact on my life, marriage and my own family. They did so without me even realizing it.

I still cope with the significant loss of my family of origin in 2004 when my parents divorced after 38 years of marriage. While their relationship had problems, I did not anticipate my parents would divorce, both being Catholic. My mother told me the news by way of a voicemail message on my cell phone while I was at work. This loss was made more real when my two sisters married late in life in 2018 and 2019. Our father never invited us to meet his new wife, or visited us to introduce her or our half brother, now aged 12. So, my sisters' weddings were the first time we were all together, and the first time one sister ever spoke, saw or corresponded with our Dad since the big reveal in 2012. I visited California in 2014 to see my Mom, other sister and my Dad and meet our half brother and stepmother.. I am coping by having more open dialogue and inviting my family of origin to speak more about our feelings and some of what I am learning about stepfamilies and how to begin to mend and heal and reconcile brokenness and cutoff relationships in families. I think age and maturity and becoming a coach and now studying therapy is continuing to open myself up to emotion. I have many times since 2012, become more comfortable with being able to dialogue with my parents, share my appreciation for them and their sacrifices and make sure I tell them I forgive their missteps and I feel sorrow for and miss them, and I apologized recently having realized how cutoff I am from my Dad, in particular.

Family of Origin and Ethnicity Factors Influencing Grief Process

My family of origin is mostly Eastern European, Catholic and I grew up following the customs and traditions, services, family and faith as we had three generations who lived near one another in the Detroit area. My Dad's grandparents on both sides emigrated to the United States from Poland and Prussia, in 1889 and 1907, respectively. They all settled in a city called Hamtramck, near Detroit. More recently, my great grandparents' family homes, churches and many schools were demolished for redevelopment. It was typical to have a Viewing, Mass and Burial ceremonies followed by a reception for guests with a meal, photos, memories shared to honor the deceased. Prayer cards with the deceased Patron Saint were always given at the Mass. We still light candles in the many large churches when you enter, as a way to make an offering and honor the soul of someone you loved who is deceased. Despite the reputation that Eastern Europeans sometimes have, my paternal side of my family is more emotive, open to share their sorrow, grief, tears, pain and sorrow over death and loss. Throughout my life, I have seen my relatives cry over loss and grief.

My Mom's side of the family is much less demonstrative with emotional support and expression. Her maternal grandparents arrived in Michigan from Bavaria in the 1840's. My Mom's mother died suddenly in 1960 in her sleep, the cause of either an aneurysm or sudden heart attack as she was taking medication for high blood pressure. Last fall, when I was interviewing my Mom for my genogram, it marked the first time my Mom opened up about her Mom's funeral and her life. She told me hundreds of people attended her viewing for 3 days, and her funeral and so many flowers were held at the Lutheran Evangelical Church in Detroit as well as so many flowers delivered to their home as well as people coming over to speak with them, pray and bring them food. I spend more extended periods of time and that the trauma of her mother dying at home is only now something my Mom is beginning to talk about, especially since my Mom survived a heart attack in 2017 and the pandemic has made her more open to discussing death and her funeral arrangements and her will. What also contributes to this is my Mom's paternal grandfather died suddenly in 1930 leaving my Great Grandma who later lived with us, a widow who raised my Mom's mom and her Uncle. Being Lutheran and from Bavaria, having settled large farms near Detroit in the early and mid 1800's, my sense is My Mom's Dad on both sides was definitely of a different sort having arrived as Colonists in the 1700's from England, Scotland and Ireland. They were Protestants who settled farms and had large families in Ohio and Michigan. Mom is less emotional, seeks to busy herself to avoid pain, sorrow and until recent years would insist she can pass for 40! She and her family of origin I would describe avoiding speaking about death, grief, loss, hardship - anything less than positive does not get mentioned.

Strengths in My Personal Mourning Process

My personal strengths in the mourning process include being a continuous student, relying on the Holy Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit and my belief in everlasting life. Through becoming a leadership and career coach, I intentionally have worked on increasing my emotional intelligence to become more comfortable in expressing my emotions and needs. I have also studied and continually learn and use somatic practices to enhance connection of mind, body, heart and soul. Through close relationships with my husband, close friends, my sisters, my mom, mother-in-law and prayer circles I continue to grow in sharing my pain, grief, sorrow, loss, disappointments and ask for support, validation, affirmation and prayers. I try to prioritize people I love and relationships and try to ask forgiveness quickly and forgive fast to avoid regret. I journal, learn, seek counseling and speak to mentors and colleagues during difficult times.

Deficits in My Mourning Process

The areas I see as deficits to my mourning process include the need to be aware of overextending myself, especially to prevent burnout and stress. Because I care deeply for and about others, the area of

emotional intelligence I most pay attention to is my self regard. Through the use of proper boundaries I am conscious about assuring my self-care. As I drafted this paper, I noted I cope by allowing myself to express my sadness, tears and pain and then shift to goals and work to help me carry on. I have not struggled with mental health, grief or loss and loss compared to others, and it could be a growing edge for me as a therapist-in-training to be able to empathize and show compassion for the deep pain, loss and grief of others while at the same time self-protection against transference of the client's suffering being absorbed by me. This is a concern I have around working with clients through deep grief and loss because it could be difficult to learn how to empathize and not take it into oneself, particularly around traumatic experiences. My youngest sister lost a close, childhood friend of 30 years in her tiny circle of friends when he was killed in the Las Vegas massacre several years ago. Our Mom is also a close friend of his mother, and her only child. This traumatic death and grief is one that has been difficult, and had it been closer to me than in California or Virginia where they all live, I am unsure I would have been able to not be more emotionally impacted by this traumatic experience.

Most Significant Learnings About Grief and Loss Therapy

The most significant learnings are the many faceted nuances, distinctions, characteristics, models, research and aspects of loss, trauma and mourning and grief a therapist requires a therapist to know. Accumulated loss in particular has struck me as one of the most important aspects of loss, particularly when dealing with a crisis or tragedy such as many deaths experienced in social circles as we age or manage through a pandemic or recession with the number of lost graduations and jobs young people under 30 years old are experiencing. I've learned about the types of relationships and losses that tend to be the most common, such as the loss of a sibling being often more painful than the loss of a spouse or the grandparent's grief over the death of a grandchild being extremely painful for many people. I've learned the clinical symptoms often associated with grief, loss and trauma which accompany maladaptive and adaptive behaviors and how to note and respond to them effectively and ethically. What struck me is being aware of triggers of my own losses when working with others through their grief and loss, especially if similar to a loss I have suffered and it has not been healed or worked in enough to as not impede the therapeutic process for the client. Being cognizant of my own fears about losses is important to note, because even working through this semester made me face reading these books and thinking about Fourth Adult Stage and the deaths of my aging mother, father and mother-in-law whom I value and love so much. In recent months, I have been anxious about my oldest son who lives in California who traveled to Mexico City two weeks ago and two months ago traveled to Los Cabos so I am mindful of how working with someone in grief over the death of an adult child will cause my anxiety to rise. This is something I am working with my Marriage and Family Therapist. I learned about how my own personal death awareness and the degree of anxiety I feel about the inevitability of death may be triggered by someone like myself who is dealing with their mortality or grief and mourning of someone who is similar in some way to myself. Being self-aware of triggers, my own history of losses, any unfinished processing of mourning and limitations of what my capacity for serving clients in grief and loss is are all important aspects for providing the best care for the client.

Therapists need to be best prepared to help clients identify emotions, thought patterns and behaviors as the client processes grief, loss and death. This work has helped me notice also the lost dreams and hopes we hold that have come to pass, and will not be realized and those are especially pertinent today with an aging population, economic difficulties, mental health crisis, suicide and drug overdoses. And, finally, what I take away from this experience is that grief is never something one gets over, around, under - it is only something you try to get through. And, you never have closure or forget it. You may be able one day to go on without thinking about it all the time.

References

Worden, William, J. (2018) *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy, Fifth Edition: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, New York, NY, Springer Publishing Company.