

## **BEREAVEMENT**

Grief can be defined as the emotion stemming from an experience of loss, particularly a death, and consisting of sorrow and distress felt at personal and interpersonal levels (Humphrey, 2009). Bereavement is both a universal experience and also unique to each grieving person and each lost relationship. The intensity and duration of our moments of grief are determined by the unique relationships that we form with people. Worden (2001) described four tasks of mourning which can assist the healing process in circumstances of bereavement:

### **Task 1: To accept the reality of the loss**

When someone dies, even if the death is expected, there is often a sense that it hasn't really happened. The first task of grieving therefore is to come full face with the reality that the person is gone. People who refuse to accept that a death is real can get stuck in the grieving process indefinitely. Another way of denying the full significance of the loss is by 'selective forgetting.' This is a common but only short-term coping strategy used by the bereaved: if they do not think about the loss then they will not feel the pain of losing their loved one, hence they might block the event from their memory simply to move on with ordinary life. However, a particular event might eventually trigger the feeling of loss, and never having fully acknowledged it could cause renewed emotional distress.

### **Task 2: To work through the pain of one's grief**

It is necessary to acknowledge and work through the pain of one's grief as it could otherwise manifest itself in symptoms of depression or aberrant behaviour. It is important that this task is not short-circuited in any way, for example by cutting off one's feelings too abruptly or even denying that pain is present rather than acknowledging it. It is not uncommon for people to deny the pain of their loss by avoiding the painful thoughts and considerations surrounding the reality of the loss. Thus, a primary aim of grief counselling is to help people through the difficult task of feeling their pain so that they won't carry it with them throughout their life. If Task 2 is not adequately accomplished, therapy may be needed later on, at which point it may be more difficult for the person to go back and work through the pain he or she has all along been avoiding. This is often a more complex and difficult experience than having

dealt with their pain at the time of the loss. A strong support system can also contribute to the healing process.

### **Task 3: To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing**

Adjusting to a new interpersonal environment means different things to different people, depending on what the relationship was with the deceased and the various roles that person had played. Not only must the bereaved adjust to the loss or shifting of the roles previously played by the deceased, but the challenge also lies in adjusting to their own sense of self. Promoting self-efficacy may assist a bereaved person in adjusting to the new interpersonal environment or altered roles among the family and friends of the deceased.

### **Task 4: To emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life**

One never loses memories of a significant relationship. Volkan (*in Worden, 2001*) states that a mourner never altogether forgets the deceased who was so highly valued in life and never totally withdraws investment in his or her representation. Nevertheless, mourning ends when the mourner no longer has a need to reactivate the representation of the loved one who has been lost with exaggerated intensity in the course of daily living. Shuchter & Zisook (*in Worden, 2001*) suggest that a survivor's readiness to enter new relationships depends not on 'giving up' on the loved one that has passed on, but on finding a suitable place for that person in their own psychological life: namely, a place that is important yet leaves room for others. Likewise, the counsellor's task then becomes not to help the bereaved give up their relationship with the deceased altogether, but to help them find an appropriate place for the deceased in their emotional lives, a place that will enable them to go on living effectively.

## **References**

Humphrey, K.M. (2009) *Counselling Strategies for Loss and Grief*. Alexandria, Virginia: American Counselling Association.

Worden, J.W. (2001) *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (2nd ed.). New York: Brunner-Routledge.