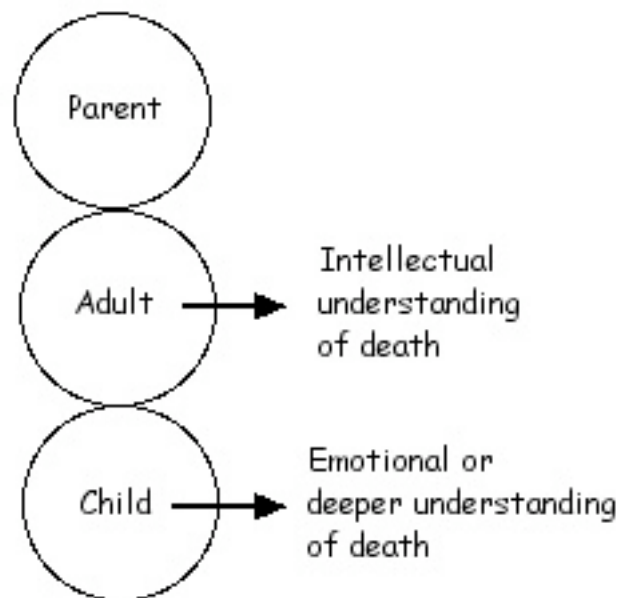


Bereavement counselling

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Grieving is a hard thing to do because it hurts, it feels bad, indeed sometimes it hurts very, very much and feels very, very bad.

To complete the grief process, to make it a finite event the individual must come to an Adult ego state or intellectual understanding of the death and then a Child ego state or emotional understanding and acceptance of the death.



The Adult ego state understanding is usually quite quick. When told of a sudden death some people go into shock and denial. At this point the person has not accepted the death as a fact. They simply don't accept that the person is gone for ever. This most often will last a few hours to perhaps a few days. Most people will accept fairly quickly that it is a fact that the person is dead. It is hard to keep denying the fact when you attend the funeral!

The harder part is the Child acceptance that the person is dead and gone for good. Human beings are very good liars to themselves. They have a whole bag of emotional tricks so they don't have to accept reality. This is one of the reasons why it has been easy to trick the general public into giving grief counsellors lots of money. The person them self does not want to emotionally accept that the other person is dead. Some people feel that if they are grieving then they still have a connection to the person and emotionally they do.

Then the magical thinking of the Child ego state can be - "If I have an emotional connection (grief) with the person then they have not really gone or at least not fully gone". So if I can keep the grief going then the connection keeps going. Thus grief counsellors can make monetary gains based on this magical thinking in the client.

The reluctance to accept death at the Child ego state level is why I always recommend that at a funeral there is a viewing of the body and that the client touches the body of the person in the coffin. This truly says to the Child ego state of the client that this person is now dead. It almost slaps the Child ego state in the face with the facts. It is much harder for the Child ego state to keep up the magical belief that the dead person somehow is not really gone when the body is touched and one feels the coldness and 'deadness' of the deceased.



There are many, many ways people use to not really let go of the deceased. I saw another example the other day that tends to repeat it self over and over again on TV in this part of the world. It relates to the Bali Bombing.

Abu Bakar Bashir the mastermind of the bombing was released early from prison

for his role in the bombing. As usual we see on TV the survivors of the bombing making statements to the effect that because of his release that makes the grieving harder to do and it reminds them again of the events.

At this point the grief counsellor can do one of two things and this will separate the rich counsellor from the poor counsellor.

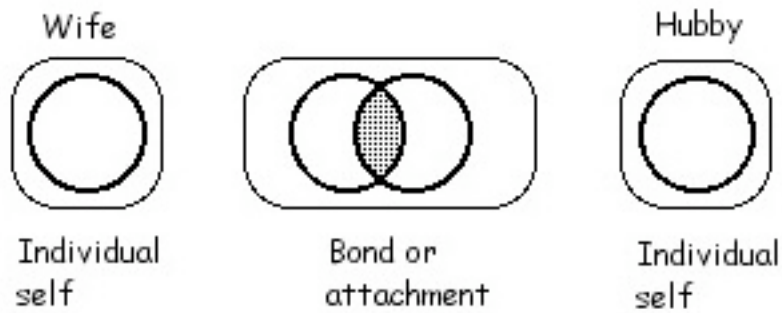
1. The rich counsellor can say some thing like, "Yes I understand and sympathise that this is very unfair and it must make your memories and grief much worse. But I will be here to support you though this process and setback" (The other bit that is not said is this has set back your grieving another 12 months and \$5,000 as well.)

2. The poor counsellor may say something like, "Yes I understand that this is unfair and life is sometimes unfair. And it will be especially unfair if the convicted bombers are not executed and that is quite a possibility. If you connect your progress through the grief with life being fair then you are going to be grieving forever. If you keep your letting go of the person separate from the actions of Abu Bakar Bashir then the grief will come to an end much quicker".

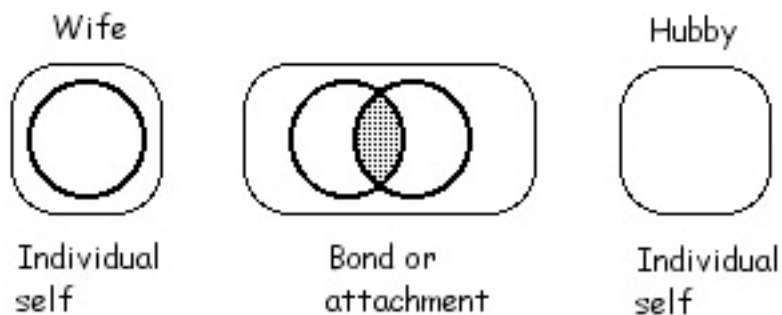


Psychological function of grief

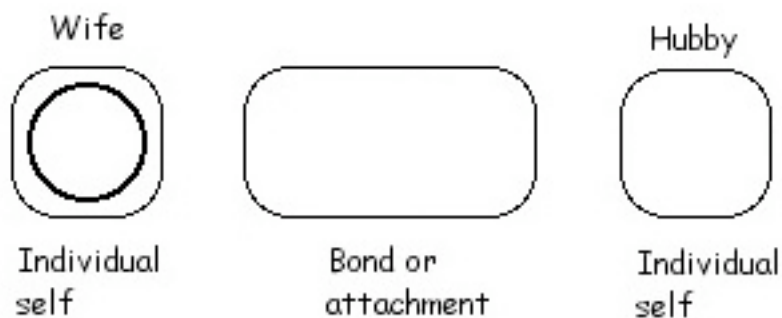
So why does grief occur in the first place?. The diagram here provides the psychological explanation of grief.



Death results in this



Grieving results in this



In the top diagram the husband and wife have a normal attachment in their marriage. In the second diagram the husband dies and thus the wife is left and attachment to someone who no longer exists. In the final diagram the wife has gone through her grieving process and it is this process that allows her to remove her attachment to the deceased husband. Once she has done this then she is psychologically ready to establish a similar type of attachment with another man. The problem is that grief is very painful and thus she may try all sort of tricks to avoid it as was mentioned before.

Case example of working with grief

Example of how I would work with grief and how I establish the foundations of bereavement counselling

Client presentation

"My daughter died a year ago. I do feel such intensity of grief, the worst experience of my life. Keep in mind I've been through hell but never in a million years did I think this could happen to me. Regardless of my past hell this is the worst experience of my life".

Assessments to make in the counselling approach

The first thing one does is to acknowledge the feelings and ask the person to describe them and have some discussion about them. The client is clearly in considerable discomfort and that needs to be acknowledged, understood and listened to.

A year since the death is a significant period of time so I would question the client as to what has happened in that year. Have there been any changes in what is known as the "level of functioning". When someone dies the loved one's level of functioning rapidly decreases. They become less effective at work, socially and in their familial duties. I would seek to find if the client has reclaimed any of that level of functioning in the family life, work life, social life and so forth. The more level of functioning reclaimed the better.

At what level of functioning was the person prior to the death, what extent of a drop was there in the level of functioning right after the death and how much of that has been reclaimed in the year since. For example the person may have had quite an active social life prior to the death, soon after the death that social life dropped to about zero and how much of it has come back over the year?. As I said before the more reclaimed the better as it shows the individual is moving on or getting over the deceased at least at a behavioural level.

In the year how much, if any, has there been a reduction in pain of the grief. This refers to both the intensity of the grief and the amount of time the person is experiencing the grief feelings. 10 times per day, 1 time per day, 1 time every few days and so forth. How often is the deceased thought about and are there any intrusive thoughts about the deceased.

The secondary gains of the bereavement for the client are established and assessed. What are the psychological advantages that the client obtains from being in a stage of grief? For example they may get lots of positive strokes and

caring and kind comments from others, the grief may bring the family together when they are normally estranged and you get friends and family mowing your lawn and cooking you casseroles. It is important to assess these as they can cause the grief process to be dragged on for much longer periods of time as they can be most attractive to the bereaved.

The psychological foundations of human grief

Right from the beginning the counsellor needs to set up the basic attitude underlying the grief counselling. These are the foundations on which the counselling is based. From what I have seen many grief counsellors do not do this. Instead they simply start working with what is presented and never address these.

These foundations are that grief is meant to be finite. The purpose of the grief is to break the attachment with the deceased. Each time a piece of 'grief work' is completed there will be less of an attachment with the deceased. The dead person has no attachment with those left as they are deceased. When the bereavement is over the deceased will be a fond memory that is thought about from time to time.



Over time the varying levels of emotion will reduce. The goal is to get over the attachment with the deceased and move on with your life and that includes

establishing subsequent relationships. Within 6 months there will be a significant drop in the level of grief and after two years even the most important of relationships will be by and large 'gotten over'.

In the initial sessions the counsellor is stating such things to the client where appropriate and it is just assumed by the counsellor that grief is a temporary process that has the clear psychological goal of ending the attachment with the deceased. Thus the underlying attitude or foundations are established as the work progresses and the work maintains that underlying focus and direction.

In this sense grieving is not a complicated process and the Free Child is usually quite invested in completing it. The FC does not want to get stuck in painful feelings so usually working with grief has little or no Parent contract at all. As the various feelings and thoughts come up the counsellor assists the client in dealing with them. Quite a simple process really but obviously an emotionally difficult one for the client.

The therapeutic skill can be required when the grieving gets bogged down in secondary gains or other script issues like Be Strong, Don't feel, Don't be separate and so forth. In this case one is said to have complicated bereavement and that is the topic of another post.