

Loss and Mourning

Paul David, Ph.D.

In one way or another all change in life involves some kind of loss which, in turn, requires some kind of mourning. Mourning is the process by which we (a) grieve for what we have lost and (b) derive a meaning to the loss that allows us to move on in our lives. Loss can include everything from dashed career dreams to the death of a loved one.

Mourning

Mourning that leads to resolution involves several components:

1. Sharing the experience of the loss to those that matter.
2. Putting the loss in context of some benign meaning which, more often than not, integrates the meaning of the loss into the survivor's belief system about life and significant relationships.
3. Restructuring key relationships and roles that fill the void that the loss has created.

One helpful mourning ritual in the case of a lost loved one is where each family member reviews his or her history (including his or her conflicts) with the deceased family member.

Impact of Death

The impact of a death depends on many factors:

1. Point in the Lifecycle. The untimely death of the young, particularly a child, is often the most devastating. A death in the "prime of life" is also especially difficult, particularly when that individual functioned as a caretaker or breadwinner.
2. Manner of Death. The manner of death also affects the impact of the death. The more sudden, traumatic, or stigmatized the loss, the more widespread its impact (e.g., homicide and suicide are particularly strenuous). Also difficult are ambiguous losses when a family member disappears.
3. Pre-Existing Stressors. The pre-existing stressors in which the death occurs will also affect its impact. For instance, when there is a family conflict or estrangement at the time of the death, a family member may be left with a bitter legacy which is hard to move beyond.

When family members communicate openly about death (no matter what the circumstances), and when they participate together in rituals that have meaning for them (e.g., funeral rites and visits to the grave), the mourning process is more likely to result in resolution of the loss.

Unresolved Grief

As McGoldrick (1995) points out, "When family members cannot mourn, they become locked in time--in dreams of the past, emotions of the present, or dread of the future" (p. 143).

As a result of this time lock, individuals experiencing unresolved grief are often unable to maintain or engage in the meaningful relationships in their lives.

Reference

McGoldrick, M. (1995). *You can go home again*. New York: W.W. Norton.