

GRIEF

By Sara Priestley RMT DSM DOSM SMTO

Introduction

Grief is an experience that affects everyone at some stage and has an impact across all areas of life. As massage therapists and holistic practitioners it is something we should understand.

This essay will look at:

- definitions of grief;
- causes of grief;
- the five stages of grief;
- some of the many symptoms of grief;
- the role of massage.

Definition

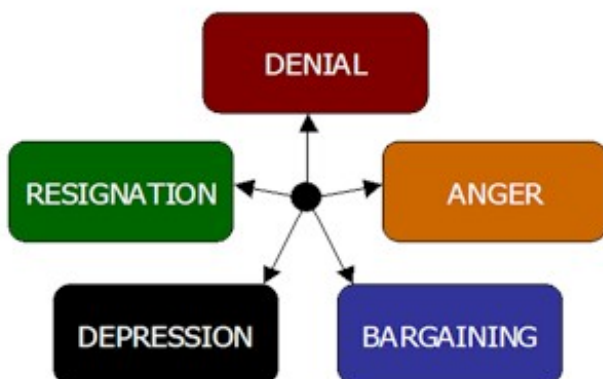
Grief is defined in the dictionary as “keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret”¹. Grief is a normal experience in reaction to a loss; it usually passes as the person adapts to the loss and assimilates it into their life. In certain circumstances a person may not be able to make sufficient adaptation and will require extra support, this is known as “complicated grief”².

Causes of Grief

Whilst grief is most often understood as a reaction to the death of a loved one, it can have many causes. Most commonly the diagnosis of terminal illness, the end of a relationship, unemployment, forced migration, childlessness or recovery from cancer have all been highlighted as triggers for grief³. Other life changes may also generate a less expected grief reaction, for example: the realisation that as your youngest child starts school that a phase of your life is over; a minor injury that means you can no longer compete in a chosen sport at the same level; passing a ‘milestone’ birthday.

Five Stages of Grief

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross⁴ defines five stages of grief. These are not linear stages, nor will everyone who is grieving pass through each stage. A person may flip in and out of several different stages in the course of a few hours. The definition of each stage is designed to help understand grief and its complex manifestations. The stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.



Denial: this is a protective stage, where a lack of belief in the loss shields a person from the full impact of that loss. It is often accompanied by a feeling of unreality as ordinary tasks (such as funeral arrangements) are carried out. As denial fades, the healing process can start – this can lead to the release of strong feelings.

Anger: this stage is an important part of healing. A person experiencing loss will often express pain as anger – at themselves, at a lost loved-one, at doctors, at God – it does not have to be logical or reasonable. Anger gives strength, and if it is allowed to be expressed – through vocalisation and exercise – it can help to access the deeper emotions behind it.

Bargaining: this stage reflects the desire for life to go back to how it was. A person will bargain with God, a god-like power or the universe to restore a person, a situation or to turn the clock back – all with promises to ‘be a better person’, ‘go to church every week’, ‘never shout at them again’. Bargaining is a form of denial, deep-down everyone knows that they can’t change the situation in this way, and that what they have lost is truly gone. As the healing process continues, bargaining will fade.

Depression: this stage is where a person starts to recognise the reality of their loss. It has been described as being stuck in a storm or in a very deep, black space with no walls or doors. It is a natural stage of grief and a starting point for recovery. The flattened feelings and lack of enthusiasm for anything can give a person space to take stock and to grow stronger.

Resignation/Acceptance: this stage is where a person starts to learn to live with their loss. It does not mean that they feel okay with the loss; rather it is a deeper acceptance that this is the new norm and life will go on. It is a period of healing and adjustment. Through acceptance, a person will redefine their identity without the person they have lost, and life will take on a different pattern. Acceptance brings a form of peace with what has happened.

Symptoms of Grief

Worden² has pulled together some helpful lists of the many symptoms of grief, classifying them as feelings, physical sensations, cognitions and behaviours. Awareness of these symptoms can help us as therapists recognise that someone may be grieving.

Feelings: sadness, anger, guilt and self-reproach, anxiety, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness, shock, yearning, emancipation, relief, numbness.

Physical sensations: hollowness in the stomach, tightness in the chest, tightness in the throat, oversensitivity to noise, a sense of depersonalisation or unreality, breathlessness or feeling short of breath, weakness in the muscles, lack of energy, dry mouth.

Cognitions: disbelief, confusion, preoccupation, sense of presence (after a death), hallucinations.

Behaviours: sleep disturbances, appetite disturbances, absentminded behaviour, social withdrawal, dreams of the deceased (after a death), avoiding or clinging to reminders of the deceased, searching and calling out, sighing, restless over-activity, crying.

The Role of Massage

We already know through the work of the Touch Research Institute in Miami that massage has a role to play in recovery from depression and stress⁵. Many of the symptoms of grief overlap and so it is clear that massage can have a role in the grieving process.

Pietroni⁶ says “There is nothing more natural or human than the use of touch to relieve pain and distress”. Massage affects people on different levels – in relaxing muscles and easing pain, in promoting relaxation, in giving a sense of connection to another person which can reduce loneliness and anxiety. Massage can be used as a form of communication between therapist and patient, to give validation and comfort for physical and emotional pain.

Lyn Prashant⁷ has spent over twenty years working in the field of grief counselling, specialising in the use of somatic techniques as an integral part of her counselling. She also teaches on the subject. She has coined the word “degriefing” to describe the support for a person processing and integrating grief-related changes into their life.

Degriefing recognises that grief brings about physical imbalances. Working with the body to improve function supports mental and emotional health. Physical pain can

prolong and worsen the mental and emotional feelings of grief. Three simple examples are given:

1. Grief is often described as ‘heartache’ and is a very physical weight on the chest. The use of deep tissue massage can help to physically lift this pain, improving circulation, respiration and digestion. This physical improvement supports a feeling of healing in the patient and can lead to more positive thoughts and feelings.
2. Relaxation techniques, including relaxing massage can help with insomnia, a common symptom of grief. Simply getting a good night’s sleep can promote deeper healing.
3. Lethargy and listlessness are other symptoms of grief. A combination of massage and exercise can help to boost the patient’s feelings of confidence and well-being, reducing symptoms of depression and despair.

It is becoming accepted that the body holds onto emotional, mental or physical trauma. Through massage the body may release the stored trauma. This leads to positive physical and emotional changes. During treatment there may be temporary disturbing effects of the release, such as tears, flash-backs, shock reaction, or profound emotional responses.

Grief is a whole person experience and so a holistic approach to treatment is appropriate. As well as the different branches of massage referral to other therapies such as nutritional/diet advice, exercise, postural work, yoga, counselling, hypnotherapy or self-help support groups may be indicated.

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Conclusion

Grief is an important subject for us as massage therapists.

Firstly, we need to appreciate how feelings of grief may affect us in our work. We need to recognise how symptoms of grief in ourselves may affect our work and care for ourselves before we can treat others. This may involve a definite choice to step out of a personal situation and into the role of therapist before treatments – but should also allow time for rest and healing.

For our clients we need to learn to understand the many and varied triggers of grief, to be aware of symptoms and tailor our treatment to recognise these symptoms. The depth and duration of treatment is likely to need to be adjusted. We also need to be aware of the potential side-effects of the massage in terms of emotional or physical release and healing crisis.

If we know what to expect, we can provide better care and treatment of our clients, helping them through a difficult period of their lives.

Further Reading

Massage is now being used regularly at large trauma incidents in the USA. There are even specific classes taught by massage schools (<http://www.mckinnonmassage.com>). This gives a wealth of resources that we can adapt to our own work:

- “Touching Grief” by *Judith McKinnon and Robyn Scherr* - massagetherapy.com article no. 302
- “Trauma Touch Therapy” by *Karrie Mowen* - massagetherapy.com article no.542
- “Surviving Trauma” by *David Sobel and Robert Ornstein* - massagetherapy.com article no. 229
- “Grief and Degrief” by *Lyn Prashant* - massagetherapy.com article nos. 651, 28,53 & 54
- “Trauma and Healing” by *Keith Eric Grant* - mckinnonmassage.com article no. 47

References:

¹ “grief” *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. retrieved 10 Jul. 2007. <[Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/grief](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/grief)>.

² “Attachment, Loss and the Experience of Grief” *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy (3rd edition)*, J William Worden. Routledge. 2006. ISBN 1-58391-941-4

³ “Reactions to other types of loss” *Bereavement (3rd edition)*, Colin Murray Parkes. Penguin Books. 1998. ISBN 0-14-025754-3

⁴ “The Five Stages of Grief” *On Grief and Grieving (1st edition)*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler. Simon & Schuster UK Ltd. 2005. ISBN 0-7432-6344-8

⁵ <http://www6.miami.edu/touch-research/index.htm>

⁶ “Complementary medicine – its place in the care of dying people” by Patrick C. Pietroni in *Death, Dying and Bereavement(2nd edition)*, ed. Dickenson, Johnson & Katz. Open University with Sage Publications. 2000. ISBN 0-7619-6857-1

⁷ *The Art of Transforming Grief (1st edition)*, Lyn Prashant. Self-published. 2002.

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