Living with Loss

Adapted from “Facing the Truth of What We Have Lost,” by Sheila M. Reindl, 2003.
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Fully engaging in mourning means that you will be a different person from the one you were before you began.


One of my friends is a former Catholic nun. I met her shortly after she had left the convent and had moved into the building in which I lived. She was in her early 30s at the time and just beginning to date. One day I asked her, “So what are you looking for in [in her case] a guy?”

She said, “I am looking for a man who has grieved a significant loss.”

“Oh,” I said. This was not the sort of answer I was expecting. “Say more.”

“Well, she said, “I figure that if the loss was significant, that means he has loved, so he knows what really counts in life. And I figure that if he’s grieved that loss, then he has regained the courage to risk his heart again.”

I was blown away. Here was someone who understood so clearly, who stated so matter-of-factly, that our capacity to love and our capacity to grieve are intimately connected.

When we lose someone – whether because that person dies, or because we part ways – we are left with the challenge of how to grieve that loss so that we can go on to live – and love – even with that loss. This handout is an attempt to consider those challenges by addressing five questions:

- What are some of the particular flavors of our loss?
- What might we try to deny or avoid?
- How might we try to avoid facing the truth of what we have lost?
- Why face the reality of the loss?
- What helps us to face – and feel – the reality of what we have lost?

What are some of the particular flavors of our loss?

- Loss of comfort and care
  “He was my confidante, my best friend. He knew how to soothe me, how to lift my spirits and give me hope when I was down. He knew all of the little things that make me happy. No one else will ever comfort me like he did.”

- Loss of the familiar
  “We had so many shared routines, jokes, traditions. Without her, it’s not the same. I liked our life the way it was. I didn’t want any of it to change.”

- Loss of company
  “He was there at the breakfast table, there when I came home at night. We snuggled on the couch watching TV, watching movies. We planned vacations together. Even everyday tasks – like studying, or writing papers, or shopping for a party – were fun when we did them together.”

- Loss of pleasure
  “I never enjoyed life as much as when she was with me. Nothing has quite the sparkle or light it did when she was in my life.”
• **Loss of self**
  
  “My whole identity, my sense of who I am and who I will be over time, is so tied up with my relationship with him. It’s like I don’t know who I am now. Or what to stake my identity on. What’s my purpose in life, my role? Where am I needed now? Where do I belong? To what do I lend my energy, my care?”

• **Loss of opportunity**
  
  “I have many regrets. I didn’t tell her enough how much I loved her. I never gave her that special gift she wanted. We didn’t dance enough. I never told her that she transformed my life. What a fool I was not to cherish her.” Or, “I wish I had left (or set limits on, or accepted the limitations of) the relationship sooner. It wasn’t good for me. The longer I stayed, the less zest, the less confidence, the less ease I felt. I felt deadened, diminished, and fearful, not enlivened, expansive, and creative. I lost so much time. I wasted so much of my life and my love.”

• **Loss of security**
  
  “I feel unsafe. I’m scared to be alone. I’m afraid that I won’t be able to make it without his help. He was so wise, so practical. I don’t feel as confident talking with people or making decisions or handling life.”

• **Loss of a particular other**
  
  “The world was a better place with her in it. She was such an unusual, generous, vibrant being. Her particular sense of humor and playfulness, her way of looking at the world, her way of loving – it sounds corny, but it was a gift to be with her. I will miss her for the rest of my life.”

• **Loss of vitality**
  
  “He brought me to life. I’m not a risk-taker by nature, and I can be shy. But with him, a whole other side of me emerged. Life felt exciting. I was bolder. I felt enlivened. I don’t know how to sustain that without him.”

• **Loss of feeling known and loved**
  
  “No one will ever know me so completely or love me so fully. She really got it about who I am. I’m convinced we were soulmates.”

• **Loss of a shared history, a witnessed past**
  
  “No one else witnessed my life in the way he did – what I lived, how I changed. Now I’m the only guardian of the memories from those years. Who will help me remember my life?”

• **Loss of a sense of hope and promise, a shared and witnessed future**
  
  “I thought we would grow old together and enjoy so many more seasons of life together. Now I can’t imagine the future. I am fogged in. Whatever lies ahead for me, she won’t be there to share it. I will miss her presence. She won’t even know what happens in my life.”

• **Loss of dignity**
  
  “I feel a sense of shame in being alone. Like people will think I’ve failed, that I’m a loser. I’m afraid people will feel pity for me. I don’t like being around couples or groups of friends without him in my life. I feel like a fifth wheel, a sad case.”

• **Loss of community**
  
  “I don’t feel like seeing people – family, friends. It was comfortable when she was part of my world. But solo, I feel awkward. I don’t know what to say to anyone, how to interact. Honestly, I don’t enjoy getting together with people now. I don’t feel a sense of full belonging anywhere anymore.”

• **Loss of sensuality, sexuality**
  
  “I miss the sensual, sexual connection we had. I miss his touch, his smell, the way we looked at one another. I loved all of that. I simply miss it.”

• **Loss of a sense that I matter**
  
  “I knew that I mattered to her, that I was held in her heart, that she cherished me. Now I’m not that central to anyone’s life.” Or, “I thought that I mattered to her, but now I wonder – did I matter to her? Was I mistaken? Does she miss me or ache for me? Was the love that I gave to her wasted on someone to whom it didn’t matter?”
• Loss of a place for one’s love to take root and grow
  “I felt as if my love took root in our relationship, as if my love was a creative force that led to growth and vitality and something blossoming. Now, it’s as if my love has no one and no place that will welcome it and be transformed by it. Where will my love matter now?”

• Loss of meaning
  “My life made sense when we were together. The choices I made were part of a bigger picture; they were based on the assumption that we would be connected for years to come. But now, the most basic choices don’t make any sense. Why study what I’m studying? Why continue with our shared endeavors? Why play the music we played together? Why watch our favorite shows? Why do anything when it now feels so empty?”

• Loss of faith
  “I feel terrible saying this, but I don’t know if I believe in God anymore. What kind of a god would let this happen? I feel God has forsaken me.”

What might we try to deny or avoid?

• The reality of the loss
  Refusing to believe that someone is dead or that a relationship has ended

• Our feelings
  Trying to escape from feeling the depth of our sorrow for fear that the pain will destroy us or that the pain will never end

• The complexity of our feelings about the person and the relationship
  Denying that we feel negative feelings (disappointment, resentment, anger, disdain, pity) even for those we adore and positive feelings (fondness, attraction, fascination, gratitude, concern) even for those we can’t stand

• The complexity of our feelings about our own role in the relationship
  Trying to avoid feeling our regret, remorse, guilt, shame

How might we try to avoid facing the truth of what we have lost?

• Out and out refusing to acknowledge the reality that a life or a relationship is over

• Bargaining – trying to strike a deal with God, the Universe, our estranged partner, or ourselves in hopes of undoing the loss and not having to bear the pain of it

• Engaging in compulsive behavior that distracts us or deadens our pain (e.g., compulsive shopping, eating, working, sex, gambling, exercising, drinking or other substance use, novelty-seeking/stimulation-seeking)

• Avoiding people, places, or things that remind us of the person we’ve lost

• Pushing away thoughts and feelings

• Minimizing the meaning of the loss, saying that it was all for the best, or that we are better off without the person, without also feeling the pain of the loss

• “Mummification”: refusing to make any changes in our home, routines, traditions

Why face the reality of the loss?

• Denial, avoidance, compulsion, and minimization can work adaptively, but only in the short run. In the long run, these defenses and coping mechanisms create more pain.

• Loss is inevitable. If we love, and if we live long enough, we will suffer loss.
• Avoiding our pain keeps us from grieving and from experiencing the fullness of life. If we do not trust that we can grieve a significant loss, we cannot bear to risk our heart; we try to protect ourselves by playing it safe, living half-heartedly, hedging.

What helps us to face – and feel – the reality of what we have lost?

• Knowing the nature of painful feelings. Painful feelings do not destroy us. What destroys us is our refusal to feel painful feelings. Painful feelings do not last forever. They follow the cycle of a wave: they crest and fall, crest and fall.

• Knowing that painful feelings are not a confirmation of our defectiveness or badness. Some people are afraid to feel sadness because they fear it means they are weak. They are afraid to feel anger because they think it means they are wicked. They are afraid to feel loneliness because they believe it means they are unlovable. But sadness, anger, and loneliness – as well as guilt, fear, shame, and regret – are not confirmation of inadequacy or unworthiness. Painful feelings are essential to human experience. If we are fully alive, we feel both pleasure and pain.

• Knowing that we are complex beings capable of feeling many seemingly contradictory feelings alongside of one another. We can feel angry and apologetic, grateful and disappointed, relieved and regretful, glad and guilty.

• Letting feelings flow through us, like clear water, rather than trying to dam them up. Damming them up gunks up our soul.

• Honoring our own timetable and pace. We don’t need to feel all of the pain all at once. While healing requires that we feel our pain, we don’t need to dive into it, immerse ourselves in an ocean of anguish, or get swept away in an undertow. We do, however, need to step far enough into the pain to get our feet wet, even if we would rather not.

• Taking breaks from our pain. We can – we must – allow ourselves distraction and the pleasure and relief of those moments when, much to our own surprise, we actually laugh or smile in amusement or enjoyment. In the river of our emotional life, the current of joy flows alongside of the current of sorrow. (See “Self-Calming and Self-Recharging Activities,” a handout prepared by Sheila M. Reindl.)

• Talking with someone who really gets it and who is not afraid of our pain. Painful feelings become more bearable in the company of someone who can bear loss and who knows how to grieve.

• Talking out loud and/or writing to the one we’ve lost. We might let that person know when and how we miss them, narrate what we are doing and how we are feeling in a particular moment, or say what we would ask of the person or want that person to know or do if he or she were still here. Talking out loud can leave us feeling a bit self-conscious, but it can actually be helpful in evoking that me-with-you feeling. Being able to evoke that feeling is in part how we internalize and incorporate our experience of the one we’ve lost; that incorporation is part of the grieving process.

• Talking to whomever or whatever we pray to or ultimately trust to. We need to say just how sad we are – and how angry, hurt, scared, etc. We might pray that we will be granted courage, company, and consolation as we try to bear our pain and grieve our loss.

• Knowing that grief, in a sense, is the process by which we weave into the fibers of our being the aspects of the other that we cherished, or the aspects of ourselves that we developed through knowing that particular person. It is this process of weaving the other into our own way of doing life that the other is not entirely lost – to us or to the world. When we incorporate into our own way of being the ways in which we changed through knowing that person, we extend that person’s sensibilities to everyone we meet, including to members of the next generation, and through them, to generations we will never know.

• Claiming – and naming – that which we get custody of. However much we’ve lost, we get custody of the aspects of ourselves that developed through our knowing this particular person. Consider these sorts of questions: How are you different for having known and loved this person? Did you acquire a taste for baseball or Bach? For Sinatra or sushi? Did you get introduced to a particularly beautiful part of Maine or hear about someone’s love of a country or city you now long to visit? Did you develop an appreciation for gardening or black-and-white photographs or mystery novels or time doing nothing in particular? Did you develop your capacity to laugh at life and at yourself? Did you learn what really counts in life? Did you learn how to love?

• Remembering that loss is part of the human condition. In our grief, we are in good company with so many who have gone before us. Much of great literature tells a story about loving and losing and living with loss.