



Tips for Supporting Others Through Grief and Loss

When someone experiences a loss, it demands their attention. It is all they can see, hear, and feel. That is why counsellors and helpers need to support others with self-compassion and explore “What has been lost?” “What has changed?” and “What remains?” Helping others reflect on these questions is an important part of learning to sit with grief.

Throughout the pandemic, the idea of loss has dominated our conversations. The heaviness of its impacts have been felt globally. And, understandably so, it has been hard.

I recently experienced a welcome shift in perspective through a social media post that suggested not everything is cancelled and then went on to list specifics:

- *The sun is not cancelled*
- *Spring is not cancelled*
- *Relationships are not cancelled*

I appreciated this reminder, noting how many people’s experience of the pandemic shifted as we held the tension of both the losses and what remains in our consciousness. I have been reflecting on this and the following questions to guide others through loss as I research and gather information supporting those with loss and those who support them.

Ask, “What has been lost?”

One of grief’s primary roles is that of a teacher (and a brutal one at that!). It reminds us of our values and our priorities, and it points to what is important. As Lord Byron brilliantly puts it, “Sorrows are our best educators. A [person] can see further through a tear than a telescope.”

Grief and pain are often intertwined. A common response to pain is to numb, avoid, minimize, or deny. The problem is that when these become our go-to behaviours for coping, the teachings of grief can go unnoticed. Supporting others as they face the pain is one way to make the suffering more bearable so they can remain open to grief’s teachings.

When it comes to supporting people in their grief, a common instinct is to try to take away the pain and provide comfort. To soothe their sorrow, we might say things like:

- *“They are in a better place.”*
- *“You are young, you can have another child.”*
- *“You will find someone new.”*

Although such responses are rooted in good intentions, they can have the opposite impact. These kinds of responses can minimize the person's loss and/or invalidate their experience.

Rather than soothing, comforting, or distracting from the pain, a more helpful response is to join the person in it. Try acknowledging and witnessing what has been lost. To do this, ask questions like:

- *“What does your pain say about what is important to you?”*
- *“How do you want to be with this pain?”*
- *“What did you value most about _____?”*
- *“When/where do you notice grief the most? Are there times when it is bigger/smaller? How do you make sense of this?”*
- *“When is grief more welcomed? When is it not?”*

Recognizing loss can be scary, but it is a necessary part of journeying with grief. Helping people understand their grief helps them better pick up the pieces after a loss.

Ask, “What has changed?”

One of the things we can count on in life is *change*. We are always in a state of change, and loss is one of the many things that forces it. Exploring the changes after loss is one of the ways of being intentional in the journey with grief.

Awhile back, I was working with a person around the loss of their partner of many years. Their grief was intense. As we continued to meet, they also began to share about some new opportunities they were experiencing. Unexpectedly, they now had more time for themselves, so they began to look more at their own health and well-being in a way that was not possible before. They were able to push themselves to begin to make new connections. They were forced to learn new skills like car and home maintenance. They appreciated aspects of this new reality *and* they continued to grieve deeply.

As we walk with people in their grief, exploring the changes – the good, the bad, and the ugly – is one of the ways we can offer support. To do this, ask questions like:

- *“How might this pain change you?”*
- *“What changes do you dread?”*
- *“What changes might you welcome?”*
- *“How can you embrace these changes?”*
- *“How can I support you with these changes?”*
- *“What learnings, skills, and/or abilities have you developed after the loss?”*
- *“What have you learned about grief that will assist you in the future?”*
- *“How might these learnings help you support others?”*

As we support others in their grief, it is helpful to both acknowledge and witness the pain and make room for new realities/opportunities. However, it is important to note that exploring change is not as appropriate when the grief is fresh. Don't rush this conversation – wait until some time has passed and the person has shown they are open to exploring their loss.

Ask, “What remains?”

Grief demands our attention – the greater the love, the greater the loss. When a loss is fresh, it is all encompassing. As we walk with others in their grief, it is helpful to expand their awareness by asking them about what’s been lost, what’s changed, and what remains. This allows them to make space for the pain, including the changes it brings and an appreciation for what’s left.

The problem is that memory and mood are invariably connected. When a loss is new, other experiences outside the pain are often minimized or forgotten. Helping people explore other experiences outside of the pain opens the door for greater appreciation of what remains.

Loss forces change whether we like it or not, and the pain of the loss can overshadow other experiences. One of the ways we can support people in their grief is to sit with their pain of what has been lost, embrace the changes it brings, and recognize other experiences in addition to the pain.

Grief is a part of all our lives. It separates and isolates us, which can make room for other problems. One of the biggest gifts we can give a person in their grief is to make room for connection so that these connections crowd out the problems.

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