

Coping with Loss – An Integral Approach

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Introduction

This paper is an attempt to describe how you can deal with the loss of a loved one. You may think of losing someone to death, but loss exists in other ways as well, such as loss of a relationship or loss of communication due to e.g. the partner getting Alzheimer's disease. The latter has also been referred to as "mourning without death". Whichever the case may be for you, you are dealing with loss of someone you love and need to find a way to cope with it. This has proven to be one of the most difficult things for people to do. Not only because it has such a profound impact on our lives, but also because there is no easy prescription or manual on how to deal with it. Every person has his own process to go through and no two people go through the same process, not even when mourning for the same person. This paper is therefore general in its setup and leaves a lot of questions to be answered by yourself. It does aim to be complete, though, by taking into account all levels and perspectives that come into play when dealing with loss.

Coping with loss is possible in many ways and depends on several factors. These factors are to do with the following two elements:

- a. The *stage* of (psychological) development that you function at. People function in different ways and go in their lives through a development of their value-systems, morality, emotions and many other things. The level that you are at in your development indicates the needs that you have in how you deal with your loss. The idea is, that you deal with your loss at all levels that are available to you. Only then can you deal with all elements that loss consists of.
- b. The *perspectives* that you take on your loss. Apart from your personal emotions, thoughts and actions, there are other factors that play a role, such as the culture you come from, support that you can get from other people and society, physical issues, etc. Dealing with the situation from these other perspectives may turn out to be helpful in living through it.

The general message in this paper is that mourning exists at many levels and in many perspectives and that we can only deal fully with it if we deal with all applicable levels and perspectives. Ultimately, we have to complete a process leading to being able to live our own lives again, where the loss of a beloved person has gotten its place, but without being unnecessarily dominating anymore.

Stages of Development and Mourning

In this section I want to show how your personal development influences the way in which you deal with loss. Development takes place in all kinds of aspects and can be seen as going through several *stages* that succeed each other, while at the same time higher stages include the stages before them. Each stage has different aspects that are important to deal with when going through a process of mourning. And the message of this section is that all the aspects from all those stages need to be taken into account and dealt with to completely go through your process of mourning.

I will use a generalised model of development for the purpose of simplicity. Extensive and detailed models of human development in areas such as cognition, morality, value-systems and many others exist, but these all come down to a number of similar stages of development that we all go through from childhood. Some people reach further than other people, because the world around us provides each person reasons to develop ourselves up to a certain point or reasons to develop ourselves further. So, generally, our levels of development can be called as follows, in the order of how they develop in us throughout life:

1. First Stage: where our individual survival and a magical view of the world are dominant. Influence of ancestors in our current lives are recognised and often taken literally. It is here where emotions play a significant role in viewing the world.
2. Second Stage: where the rules and roles of e.g. traditional religions are dominant and the needs of the group someone belongs to are important.
3. Third Stage: where varying needs of the individual development and success are important as well as the needs of all people and the world around us. You will be confronted with setting out your own future here, both for yourself and together with the people and world around you. It is here that more rational issues play a role.
4. Fourth Stage: where the world is viewed from a perspective that goes beyond the personal interests of yourself or society. Here, your spiritual side will come into play. This ultimately leads to the view that everyone is united, one with the source of our common consciousness and that essentially the difference between life and death is smaller than we usually assume.

So how do we deal with loss at each of these stages? Firstly, keep in mind that you will need to deal with all of them up to your current level of development. Lower stages of development are also part of who you are and therefore need to be given attention. So we'll start with the first stage and gradually move on to higher stages. You may notice that this is also a logical timeline in the process of mourning you go through.

First Stage

After a lot of practical things have rushed by, you can start focussing on the emotional, personal side of things. The first step in the mourning process is to realise how the loss of the loved one affects you personally. There is a somewhat egocentric aspect in this and there is nothing wrong with that at all. This is in the first place a personal loss that you need to deal with yourself. So, in this stage, focus on yourself and ask yourself some questions:

- What role has he or she¹ played in your life? Think of the importance of your beloved for your life, what were the most significant aspects of what he did for you, what he meant to you.
- What is it that you are missing now? Are there parts of your life that are empty, unfilled now because he is not with you anymore?
- What are the emotions you are feeling – shock, pain, anger, guilt, tiredness? Many different emotions are possible, even not feeling emotions at all. Just feel them and acknowledge that they are there and that they are part of what

¹ I will only use the common male form from now on to keep the text readable. Obviously, wherever the male form is used, the female form can be substituted instead.

you are going through now. There are no good or bad emotions, there is just that what you are feeling now.

- What do these emotions tell you about yourself? What is it that your emotions want to tell you? Does the pain you maybe feel tell you something about how you loved him or does it tell you something else? Does the guilt you maybe feel tell you something about how your relationship has been? Just observe your emotions as they develop in yourself and try to see what message they are giving you.
- What other effects are you experiencing – sleeplessness, seeing or hearing the person that died, lack of concentration? All these and more are possible. Just as with your emotions, let them arise, they are natural. And they will naturally pass by after some time.

Do take all the time you need to deal with these feelings and questions. Do it your own way: either on your own or in communication with others. Either in silence or by being active in one way or the other. This period where you experience all this may take long, several months or even up to a year or longer. This is perfectly normal, so give yourself the time to deal with it. There are no set rules for how long mourning should take, nor are there phases that you need to go through. It is your own personal process, so you need to deal with it in your own way.

Part of this phase can also be ideas that some cultures have about how the dead influence our lives. These may involve ideas like the dead having direct influence on what our fates are, us having to keep them satisfied to avoid things going wrong in our lives or general reverence for the dead. These may seem strange from a modern perspective, but if looked at in a more metaphorical way, you can see the essence of it. That essence consists of looking at how you *let* yourself be influenced by the deceased person:

What is the meaning of the deceased person for you when you continue your life without him? How does what he did and who he was continue to influence the way in which you lead your life? You may think of how things he used to do continue to play a role in your life. How things that belonged to him now have a special significance to you, how a picture of him becomes a special object in your house.

You might instate certain rituals for a while when visiting their grave, to indicate for yourself how much you still care for them. Burning a candle for the deceased has a similar function. Just keep in mind that the ritual itself is not the aim: the aim is for ourselves to remember the one we lost *by means of* that ritual. And through that we can gradually grow to accept the loss and create a distance to him without feeling guilty or being afraid of forgetting about him.

Second Stage

This stage follows the first stage, meaning that logically, you should have gone through most of the emotional process already. However, if the time feels right for you, just go ahead and deal with this stage as well.

It is this stage where a view on the world exists that is constructed with all sorts of rules that apply and roles that people fulfil in life. It is far more rational than the previous stage, where the emotional side of things was dominant.

The main influences on the mourning process here are the traditional religions and worldviews and the culture of the society you come from or are in today. Most religions and cultures have a certain view on life and death that you can accept or reject: it's a matter of having faith in it or not. For many people, the belief in e.g. the

existence of life after death is a comforting one. Other aspects can have a negative effect, though: if you believe that it was God who is responsible for the death of your loved one, then you need to deal with the question why He did so.

In order to deal with this phase, you need to think about what a religion or other worldview that you feel part of says about life and death. Do those views support you in what you are going through or not? Do you have other insights that conflict with these views and how do you solve that conflict?

Also look into the practical ways in which religion deals with death – for instance, holding a vigil for the deceased person, ways of burying the dead, etc. It is here that you can think of practical ways to deal with the remembrance of your beloved. These are ritual things such as: frame your favourite picture and put it somewhere in your house, make a special place in the house that reminds you of your lost beloved, plant a tree, take care of the grave in a special way, artistic expressions like painting or music. Find your own preferred way of dealing with your loss in a ritualistic manner.

Third Stage

Beyond these more rational insights lie phases where in the first place your individual views and beliefs on life and death play a role. Now that you have been fully confronted with death, what are your beliefs about life and death?

- What exactly do you believe happens when people die? Is it an end of existence or do you have the feeling that there is something beyond death?
- Is there some natural cycle in life and death that you can see?
- How do your ideas and beliefs help in coping with the loss of your beloved?

You may start to get other insights as well, that are to do with the greater context of your mourning. In the beginning you will probably have been totally overwhelmed by your loss and it fully determined the way in which you spent your days. Now, gradually, you can start to see it in the context of your life as a whole. In this stage, start thinking about the future: set yourself some goals to work towards, like determining how you want to lead your life going forwards. Your life has clearly changed, so what are you going to do to reorganise it in these new circumstances and when and how do you want to get there? How do you give this loss a place in your life and how will you carry on with the rest of your life, with your work, with the rest of the people around you?

Make the people around you part of this process as well, share your feelings, thoughts and views and perhaps learn from others' experiences who have been or are in the same situation.

You may notice that you change during this period, get a different view on life and hence get perspectives that help you carry on. Embrace those views, but use them carefully. Check what the value of them is for you in your current situation and only then base your next steps on them.

Before continuing with the fourth stage, I want to deal with some other perspectives on mourning first, as they come into play already in the first three stages.

The Multiple Perspectives on Dealing with Loss

The previous sections have mainly dealt with how you personally dealt with your loss from an emotional and mental point of view. The first period after your loss will be

filled with that personal way of dealing with it from inside, but there are some other perspectives that may need to be taken into account as well. Those will be described in this section.

For starters, apart from the emotions and thoughts inside you, there are also *physical* effects of mourning. The stress you have to go through has necessarily effects on the body. These effects can be various things:

- Muscle pains
- Headaches
- Sleeplessness
- A general numb feeling
- Your appetite may be affected, either by not being able to eat much anymore or by wanting to eat much more than usual
- Mourning can lead to your feeling tired as you need a lot of energy dealing with the emotions
- Sexuality may be affected during a period of mourning: it may decrease if the need disappears, but may also increase if there is a need for more intimacy.

Whatever happens to you, just recognise the effects and don't worry about them. Only when they last a very long time, it may be wise looking for professional help.

Then there are the *other people* around you. People who are mourning may feel as if they are dealing with it all on their own. However, there are other people in your environment as well who can support you in practical ways, who can be with you, who can listen to you or help in any other way. You are not alone in this world, so ask for help if you need it – some people will offer their help themselves as well. Set your own limits in how you want to have contact with other people in this period, though – be aware of what feels good for you and kindly send them away if you don't feel up to it. Sharing feelings with other people may be a huge relief and help to deal with those feelings.

The negative side of dealing with others is, that people are not accustomed to dealing with others that have lost someone. They may seem to avoid you under the pretext that it is best to leave you alone with your feelings. Or they come across clumsy in their fear of being confronted with your loss and your feelings, talking only about themselves or making empty remarks. This can be hurtful for you or you may get disappointed in them, but also realise that dealing with death is not an everyday thing and that some people simply have no clue how to do confront people who are mourning. This is nothing to do with intelligence, but is an entirely different aspect of people's development.

Do notice the little gems of contact with people that you don't expect it from, though. Sometimes support comes from an unexpected direction and in unexpected ways. Try to be open for it.

An other aspect that is to do with the role of the people around you is whether you can show your emotions or not. In the western societies, this is often not easy, as western people usually suppress emotions rather than show them. Deal with this in your own way, without being bothered about what other people may think of you. Emotions should be expressed, so do so if you feel the need for it, wherever you are. Let other people deal with how they feel about your showing your emotions.

Lastly, there are *facilities in society* that may help you deal with loss. If you feel you cannot deal with mourning yourself or in communication with others, look for professionals to help you with it. Signs that you may want to do so can be the following:

- If your physical health turns bad without there being a medical reason for it
- If your psychological health turns bad, like when you are depressed for a long period
- If you feel you cannot take care of yourself anymore
- If after a long period you still feel you cannot accept the loss

There are many specialised organisations that assist people go through one of the most difficult aspects of life and they will be happy to help you. These are both organisations that do this from a religious or other philosophical perspective, but also totally neutral groups. Counselors and other therapists are open to deal with people who go through this process and sometimes even specialise in it. Choose the one that fits your needs – the Internet is full of them.

Fourth Stage – The Transpersonal Perspective on Death and Mourning

If we go beyond the personal emotional and rational aspects of mourning, we come in the realm of the transpersonal or spiritual. Note that this is a realm that many people have reservations about, which is why I waited until the end dealing with it. Going as far as this stage in your mourning process may be helpful, though, if you are ready for it.

In the first place, the process of mourning has aspects that are to do with making sense of death. Answers to this are given in stage two by religions, but in this stage, questions often go beyond that:

- Why does this happen to people?
- Is there a reason for people dying?
- Isn't this unfair?
- What happens after death?
- Is death something to be afraid of or does it give rest?

If you are dealing with these kind of questions, you are touching on issues that go beyond the personal stages and into the transpersonal stages. These latter stages deal with what transcends human beings, the larger framework of life and death.

What I am to describe now is based on shared insights from the more spiritual or mystical branches of the great religions and philosophies of life. It is in these areas that they all seem to agree in their views on life and death, which may mean there is some truth in it. Then again, treat this with caution and be critical as you may have totally different insights yourself.

If you look at the world and the people in it from a perspective that goes beyond us as individuals, you will see that in essence, everything and everyone is united. Not only are we all made of the same base materials: atoms, made out of elementary particles that in turn seem to consist of a lot of emptiness and energy. But also in other aspects do we seem to be made of the same material: my consciousness, which is what makes me aware of everything, is the same as your consciousness and everything in and around us pops up in our consciousness. Our own bodies exist in our consciousness

and so do our feelings, thoughts and actions. Without consciousness, we would not be able to observe what happens inside or outside us. It is therefore that we can say that our consciousness is at the core of our being, it is effectively our essence or soul. Taking this a step further, it can be said that all our individual consciousnesses are in fact part of one common, shared Consciousness. If you accept this, you can also say that we are as humans therefore all part of that same Consciousness and that the whole world is part of it as well.

When we are alive, our bodies are the necessary vehicle for our individual consciousness in this life. When we die, the body is left behind: it ceases to function. Our consciousness, however, cannot die, for it is the essence of who we are. Therefore, if the body dies, the individual consciousness necessarily needs to leave the body.

So where does our individual consciousness go? Well, as it is already part of the common Consciousness, it goes nowhere, it simply dissolves into Consciousness. Eventually, it may become part of some individual consciousness again and form new life.

What does this mean for your mourning process? You can realise from the previous text, that the body that we bury at a funeral is nothing more than the vehicle of the consciousness or soul of who was our beloved on earth. This does not mean that we do not need to deal with the body with respect. What it does mean is, that the essence of our beloved who died is not gone, but that it has become (or, in fact, stayed) part of the world and the universe around us. That it is and remains part of ourselves, even, because in our soul, we are part of that same Consciousness.

What we lose by death is the *personal* relationship with our beloved. But what we never lose is the *transpersonal* relationship with him. Although the latter is not very tangible, it will continue in all of our memories of the moments we shared, the impact that he has had on us and the impact he will keep having on the rest of our own lives. The fact that a spiritual bond can exist, even if you are separated by death. Until it is our turn to leave this life behind and join him in the same Consciousness that we are already part of. Remember that it is that very Consciousness that inspires us, radiates from within us, supports us in the hardships we go through after losing a loved one. It is that Consciousness that is at the same time the source and the destination of our lives, that expresses itself in us human beings as pure Love and that gives you the strength and inspiration to carry on after our loss and find back the purpose of our lives.

May it be a guide in the difficult period you are going through.