Grief and Loss

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What You Need to Know

• Anticipatory grief
• Stages of grieving and common behaviors and interventions
• Factors which impede/ enhance grief process
• Pathologic responses
• Maternal/paternal differences (incongruent grieving)
• Specific circumstances
  - Chronic sorrow
  - Death of a twin (triplets, etc)
  - Repeated obstetric loss (recurrent abortion, stillbirth, preterm delivery)
  - Sibling responses
• Support systems and referrals
  - Bereavement groups
  - Parent support groups

Myths About Grief (Rando, 1988)

• All losses are the same
• Pregnancy loss and infant deaths are easier to get over because they never knew the child
• Grief always declines with time in a steady, decreasing fashion
• Family members and friends always help each other in times of loss
• Feeling the pain of loss means you do not have faith in God
• Relationships with your loved one will not continue after the loss
Truths About Grief and Loss
(Rando, 1988)

- Grief takes longer than most people think
- Grief takes more energy than we could ever imagine
- Grief is not only for the person lost but also for the hopes, dreams, unfulfilled expectations and unmet needs
- Grief can make us feel “crazy,” confused and disoriented
- Grief spasms are common
- New losses bring up grief from the past

Anticipatory Grief
- Grief before loss
- Actual or fear of potential losses
- Uncertainty
- “23 weeks and 5 days”

Uncomplicated Grief
- Typical feelings, behaviors and reactions to loss
- Physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions
Complicated Grief

- Chronic grief
- Delayed grief
- Exaggerated grief
- Masked grief

Risk Factors for Complicated Grief

- Sudden or traumatic death
- Suicide, homicide
- Multiple losses
- Unresolved grief from prior losses
- Psychiatric Instability

Disenfranchised Grief

When loss cannot be openly acknowledged or socially sanctioned
Risk Factors for Disenfranchised Grief

- Neonatal death
- Terminated pregnancy
- Child abuse death
- Unwanted/unplanned pregnancy

Effects of Grief on Family

- Related to their awareness
- Range of feelings
  - Anger
  - Anxiety
  - Sadness
  - Loneliness
  - Fear

- The parents
  - Relationship is like no other
  - Responsible for protecting child
  - Mother and father/partner have unique experiences
Grief and the Couple

- Almost always grieve differently
- Stable couples are more balanced than similar in their coping styles
- Acute grief leaves little reserve for parents to comfort one another
- Different coping styles can lead to resentments

Grief and the Couple

- Each person will grieve in their own way.
- Accepting the partners way can be difficult
- Each person searches for meaning in their own way.
- Some turn to faith, others do not
- Each person may have different ideas about mementos
- Need time for each other
- A good time to work on communication

Effects of Grief on Family

- Grandparents
  - Source of strength
  - “Double sorrow”
Children's Grief

- Can be typical or complicated
- Reactions based on child's age and developmental stage
- Symptoms unique to children

www.childgrief.org

Effects of Grief on Family

- The siblings
  - Loss of sibling
  - Loss of family unit
  - Loss of parents to grief process
  - May feel they caused death
  - Assumptions basic to sibling grief
  - Interventions for siblings

Cardinal Rules of Grief Support

Taken from RTS Bereavement Services Manual

- Respect the silence and listen
- Admit our helplessness
- Be genuine
- Be with the person in grief
- Do not judge another’s grief
- Be clear about your own issues on death
- Know your limitations
The Phases of Grief and Bereavement

"(The stages) were never meant to tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have but there is not a typical response to loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives.”

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

Phases of Bereavement

- Shock and numbness
- Searching and yearning
- Disorientation
- Reorganization and resolution

Shock and Numbness

“This isn’t really happening”

- Most intense during first 2 weeks
- Characteristics:
  - Stunned, disbelief
  - Impaired decision making/functioning
  - Memory loss
  - Denial
  - Resistant to stimuli
Searching and Yearning

“How did this happen?”

- Can occur from 2nd week to 4th month
- Emotional characteristics include:
  - Testing what is real
  - Irritability
  - Preoccupation with the deceased
  - Obsession to get pregnant again
  - Resentment/bitterness

Searching and Yearning

- Physical characteristics
  - Weight gain/loss
  - Sleeping difficulties
  - Aching arms
  - Palpitations
  - Takosubo “broken heart” syndrome
  - Lack of strength
  - Headaches

Disorientation

“I will never get over this”

- Characteristics dominant 5th-9th month and may include:
  - Feeling of “going crazy”
  - Social withdrawal
  - Guilt
  - Sense of failure
  - Exhaustion
Guilt

“I know in my heart that her little body wasn’t strong enough despite all the medical interventions, but that still does not make grieving for her any easier. We wanted so very badly to share so much more with her. I just feel like if my body hadn’t failed us she would still be kicking around in my womb. Aside from saying goodbye to her, the guilt is one of the hardest things to let go of.”

Reorganization

“Maybe I will make it after all”

- 18-24 months after the loss
  - Sense of release
  - Renewed energy
  - Eating and sleeping habits improve
  - Increased attention to self care needs
  - Acceptance

Subsequent Pregnancies

(Special Considerations)

- There may be a distrust of medical systems
- Fear of repeating a tragic loss
- Women do not have confidence in their own bodies to deliver a healthy child
- They may still be grieving acutely as they remember the trauma of their loss
- The challenge of feeling sad and happy at the same time
Subsequent Pregnancy
Helpful Interventions

- Be aware of gravity/parity and acknowledge their previous loss
- Allow parents to talk about their fears
- Provide consistent caregivers and work on building trust
- Monitor often for reassurance
- Let them know that conflicting emotions are normal