



## **Counselling for Bereavement**

When someone dies (or when we suffer a major loss of any kind), it can change our life profoundly, and can be one of the most intense sufferings we will ever experience. There are few words to describe the intense emotional pain that grief can cause (“devastating” is one that perhaps comes close), and we may find ourselves feeling lost, scared, and without hope, accompanied by a range of other feelings – guilt, regret, worry, and so on. These feelings are common and “normal” – but the way we experience them can also be very unique to us.

Time, it is said, is a great healer – and it is certainly true that over time grief will usually resolve itself and allow us to continue with our lives. How long this takes is different for everyone, and can depend on the relationship with those who have died. One way to understand grief is the “stages” model, where grief is felt in a number of different ways:

- Denial – a sense of shock, disbelief that it has really happened.
- Anger – whether it is anger at the person for leaving us, anger at ourselves, or anger at someone or something else, anger is a common element to grief.
- Bargaining – a sense of “if only” – if only you did x, perhaps this could still be changed, you would give anything to have the person back. If only I didn’t have to feel this pain, this hurt. Guilt can often be experienced.
- Depression – this is where grief deepens, and becomes real, where we feel the reality of our loss and realise that there is nothing we can do to change things, to bring back what we have lost.
- Acceptance – this is a tricky word, and doesn’t mean that everything becomes OK, that we do not feel sad any more – only that we are ready to begin to live again, and find meaning in our lives again.

As human beings, we do not feel our emotions in neat little packages, and the same is true of grief – the “stages” are only a description of what we might feel, we may not feel them in that order, and we might feel that we get “stuck” somewhere in the process (for example people can remain angry about their loss for years, or remain in depression, sometimes people can stay in the “denial” stage, carrying on as if nothing has happened). We might experience feelings that are very uncomfortable and puzzling to us – such as relief (such as when someone with a long term illness who was suffering has died).

While grief can appear to be a period of severe emotional distress, it is not a disorder, it is a natural and human reaction to this most sorrowful aspect of our existence - though it can have a massive effect on our work and social lives. People deal with their grief in very

different ways, and sometimes when families are grieving, these different ways of coping can cause conflict and further distress.

### **How can Counselling help?**

Counselling can offer a space for grief to be explored and felt safely. Our lives can get so busy there is often not a chance to find this space. Some time goes by, and people might start expecting you to be "back to normal" or to have "got over it" when you may still be feeling like you will never get back to normal or get over it. Counselling offers a chance to talk about your loss, to cry, to rant, to say things you might not wish to say to other people in your life – and to be heard without judgment. It can help to clarify what you are feeling, and how you are going to move forward.

My personal view of bereavement counselling is that it can be helpful at any stage of grief, although I will work differently depending on each client. For example someone who has experienced a sudden or traumatic loss may need support and compassion and to focus on getting through one hour, one day at a time. Someone who is experiencing later stages of grief, or who is perhaps struggling to adjust to life in the months or years after a bereavement, may need a different kind of support, and the counselling may explore other areas that the bereavement may have affected. Again, although there are similarities in all of our bereavement experiences, no two people are quite alike in the way they deal with their grief, and my aim is to work with your unique experience.

As a counsellor, I have training and knowledge, of course – but I am also a human being who has experienced – and survived – grief and bereavement. I will not be able to make your pain go away, but what I will offer is empathy and compassion and a space where you try to make some sense out of your loss so that you can, ultimately, begin to live your life again.

### **Do I Need Bereavement Counselling?**

This is not an easy question to answer. Some people may have support from family and friends, while others can feel very isolated after a bereavement. Many people find their own way through grief without ever seeing a counsellor, although the number of charities and services that offer bereavement counselling suggests that many people do feel they need some professional support.

It is a personal choice, and whether the bereavement is recent, or happened a number of years ago, it may be that you feel you need some support, especially if you feel you are not coping or your grief is seriously impacting on your work or on other relationships. It may also be an alternative to using unhealthy coping strategies such as drugs or alcohol.

I am a private counsellor, and so do charge fees for counselling. The benefits of private counselling include much greater flexibility in how you access counselling, no waiting list, and more choice.

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