Sober and Grieving

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It has been said that the only guarantees in life are death and taxes. This applies to everyone whether they are in recovery or not. Various aspects of the grieving process, however, hold special challenges for recovering alcoholics and addicts.

Everyone grieves uniquely. In the past it was thought that there are predictable stages that griever must go through to achieve acceptance of the loss. Twenty-three years of personal and professional experience tells me that, when it comes to the process of grieving, one size does not fit all. In my private practice and also at Cottonwood (Tucson where I work as a grief counselor), I have conducted grief therapy with newly clean and sober clients and found, time and again, that they required a different approach to their loss. In my own experience I have discovered that, in working with clients like these, the treatment of grief requires an individualized approach.

Grief, Addiction and Recovery

In 1997 I had been working at Cottonwood for two years. One of the assignments that patients at that time presented in primary group was a timeline in which the patient depicted significant life events and how these events impact on their lives in the present. Viewing these timelines, I often observed that directly after the occurrence of tragic life losses in these patients' lives, it appeared that their substance use spiked—sometimes dramatically. In some cases the loss triggered a downward spiral of using and depression that ultimately resulted in admission into treatment. I was drawn to learning more about how grief, addiction and recovery effect each other and how I could help newly sober people negotiate their grief more adaptively. I came to believe that if life losses were adequately addressed in treatment, the neglect of this would be a contributing factor in potential relapse. My own experience of loss also reinforced my emerging viewpoint.

My father died in February of 1986, a time when, sadly, I was not sober. My response to that loss was that I used more of the substances I was then addicted to. Throughout the initial mourning rituals of my religion, I was physically present but emotionally checked out and unavailable.

In November of 1987 I hit my bottom and began a new journey of recovery and hope. As my body and mind healed, an interesting phenomena occurred when I had about three months of sobriety. I was now remembering my dreams as my sleep pattern began to normalize.

One night I dreamt that I was in a New York City subway car. The car was empty with the exception of someone sitting next to me. That person’s role in the dream was to listen to me as I spoke of the new hope I was experiencing in recovery. In the far corner of the car a person was reading a newspaper. The paper was shielding their face.

As I spoke of my new life, the person at the corner put down the newspaper and stood up. It was my father but not as I remembered him. He was not the eighty-two-year-old who had recently died from pancreatic cancer. He looked like he did in photos I had seen of him. In his twenties, healthy, robust with dark hair—the prizefighter he had been in his youth. I said, “Dad! What are you doing here! You’re dead!” He replied, “I just wanted to tell you to keep doing what you’re doing. It’s going to be O.K.”

I woke up with tears running down my face. Shortly afterwards I went to his grave at the cemetery. Standing by his tombstone I wept as I spoke to him about my life. I walked back to my car feeling relieved— as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

Over the next ten years I continued my pursuit of recovery and eventually entered my current profession as a therapist. In 1988 my mother died of a stroke at the age of 81. I left Tucson to go to her bedside as she lay in a coma. During a seven-day vigil I stayed in touch with my recovery support system and received support from new friends I met at 12-step meetings in Florida. When my mother finally died, I was there to hold her hand and talk to her in her last moments.

My mother’s death helped me to realize that as an alcoholic working a spiritual program I was able to cope with adversity differently than when I was using substances. I was supported every step of the way and I found that I could be there for my family as well as the loved one we have lost and accommodating to a world that has changed.

The Rituals

Participating in mourning rituals often involve interactions with family members. Many cultures celebrate the passing of a loved one with wakes, funerals and the like. Participating in these ceremonies can often be problematic for those new in recovery. To be thrust into a situation where family members might be drinking is difficult enough. When this is compounded with unresolved family conflicts and mistrust of the recovering person, the chances of relapse increase. Even when we are mindful of this risk, we often feel an obligation to attend and somehow we must find a way to cope.

Many recovering addicts and alcoholics come to the realization that their grieving process had been delayed or postponed until their recovery began. This fact, I think, is evident in my story and also in the stories of many clients I have worked with. As a grief counselor I have adopted the position that I am “companioning” people in the first few steps of their journey through grief. By accompanying them on the first stage of their journey through the grief process, I am able to help them narrate the story of their loss without judgment. This task is of paramount importance.
The fact that the deceased family member might have struggled with his or her issues and represented other aspects of the grieving process. Clients sometimes need encouragement to talk about their painful experiences so that healing, forgiveness, and acceptance can be achieved.

In my work at Cottonwood and my private practice, I begin any grief counseling with a question to assess the client's need and to fully hear their story. Developing a strong and trusting therapeutic relationship with a client is essential to a successful outcome. In some cases the death is a sentinel event that has profoundly disrupted the life of a client. Prior to the loss the client may have enjoyed a fairly contented life. Understandably, their worldview assumed that their children would outlive them, that they would enjoy a long life with their partners. It is often difficult for parents to accept a child's death, especially with their own child. Sometimes this kind of thoughtfulness of substance is a sign that the well-being of the family is experiencing the grief of others. Recovering people need to give themselves permission to cry if they need to. For so long we medicated our feelings. Some of us were raised in environments where crying was considered unmanly or unbecoming. Many of us have now heard the expression “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” When the world is full of sorrow, statements like these can be cruel and insensitive. What I want to help is the presence of people who care. Support is always available at 12-step meetings. Sometimes the words of comfort are not needed but the hugs are.

Discovering Triggers
In recovery we learn to identify triggers that could lead us to relapse. Grief has its own triggers. They can arise without warning, reminding us of our pain. Photos, films, articles, songs and anniversaries can prompt thoughts of our pain. At these times the pain borne on by these reminders of our loss can elicit thoughts of using substances. In etiological prevention workshops that I have facilitated we address the grief-related risk factors that can precipitate a return to using substances.

There are ways for alcoholics and addicts to cope with loss so that the experience can be meaningful. We have learned to value a relationship with our higher power. Turning to the God of our understanding can provide comfort even when our prayers express only anger and confusion. Comforting has proven to be beneficial. Writing can be therapeutic on both a physical and emotional level. After the death of my mother I returned to the twelve steps. Completing a fourth step inventory and sharing with a sponsor proved helpful.

There are many books related to reawakening. Some may seem to reinforce the idea that grief is a predictable process. I highly encourage our higher power to help us cope with this loss. I have recommended this book to many recovering people who have similar losses. Another title that is helpful is Fear of Magic Thinking by Joan Didion. Clients who have lost spouses have been able to relate Ms. Didion’s experience to their own. I have recommended the book to younger grievers, including adolescents and young adults, the book Green Angel by Alice Hoffman has been helpful. Several years ago I introduced this book to Cottonwood’s–The Cottonwood Treatment Program for adolescents and females. One of our patients remembered a session with notes that she had taken detailing her identification with the main character’s mourning process. I often describe grief as similar to an old water heater with a safety valve. Periodically we open the valve to let some water out. When the heater doesn’t burst. Similarly the griever needs to let the feelings out. We alcoholics and addicts are notorious for repressing our feelings until they come out sideways. I recommend that after the initial grieving period, when the family and friends are no longer available, that the griever allows himself to be grief in a specific period of time each day to sit quietly with their feelings. This allows us to gradually accommodate and return focus to the business of life. Above all we need to be kind to ourselves and recognize that we have a right and a need to grieve our losses. Unpleasant events and feelings are part of life. Our primary responsibility is to not pick up a drink or a drug no matter what.

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