



Why is Bereavement so Difficult?

Let us imagine that one of your clients, Louise, tells you that her youngest daughter contracted Covid-19 at school. Within a week the whole family had tested positive. While she and the children recovered, her husband did not and Louise has been distraught.

Nearly six months later, although some days are better than others, everything seems like a huge chore, needing ten times more effort than it ever did before. Her thoughts are fuzzy, her memory less accurate and she is making simple mistakes. She feels out of her depth and overwhelmed when tackling household finances, the garden, and the million other things that she and her husband used to do together. She has been pushing away her friends because she can't find the words to describe how she feels and doesn't have the energy to pretend. She doesn't know how to support her children.

As we re-open our doors, we could soon be meeting people who have lost family members during the pandemic.

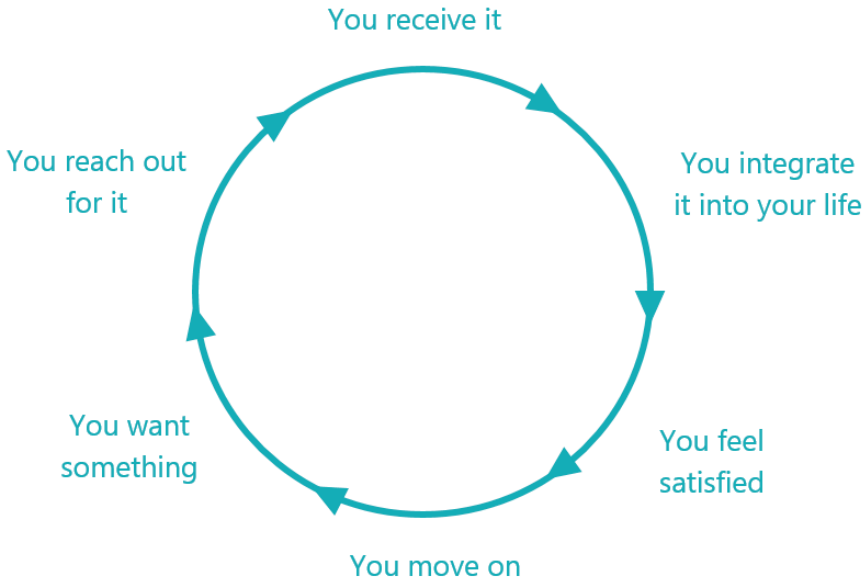
Clients may need reassuring that there is no 'right' way to grieve and no prescribed length of time. That what they are going through is normal. That grief is a specific emotion rather than a general one. We grieve the loss of somebody or something and each of us responds to that loss in our own unique way. But why is it so difficult to come to terms with loss?

Let us consider exactly what bereavement is. Louise is not only mourning the loss of her husband's physical presence - cuddling up with him on the sofa, his jokes and the way he smelt - she is also mourning the loss of their relationship. The skills, qualities and interests they shared. The intellectual, emotional and physical needs the relationship met. Her need

to give and her need to receive. Their memories and experiences. She has lost the life she had planned for, worked for and expected to have..



The Autonomic Nervous System and The Vaso-Motoric Cycle of Need



When you decide you want something, your body makes chemical changes. You may feel it as a 'charge' or a longing, a desire or an 'emptiness'.

Energy flows upwards; there is an impulse to reach out for the thing that will fill this gap and your body will help you. Your muscles may tighten. You may feel 'ready', excited or experience some form of anticipation. Your Sympathetic Nervous System has turned you towards the outside world.

Once you have received the thing you want, you feel relief. At this point your body releases a different set of hormones which switch off this feeling of need. The Parasympathetic Nervous

System (PNS) has come into play and you feel softer and happier as you relax into the enjoyment of having what you need. Your energy returns to normal.

The thing about losing a person is that no matter how much you reach out, you do not receive and the sense of completion which allows you to wallow and move on to the next thing is not met. If your need is for a cuddle and it is for a specific cuddle from a specific person, cuddles from anybody else - although comforting - do not fulfil the biological criteria enough to switch off the system, and so your body continues to yearn long after your mind has understood your loss.



A cycle like this is called an open cycle and is available to be triggered. This means that when something comes along to remind you of the person, the feelings and memories surrounding them can be as real and raw as they were at the time of their death.

Such distress can affect our boundaries and clients may feel as if they have been ‘blasted open’. You will need to work on centring, holding and protecting. Make your touch firm, slow and grounding.

Without the PNS to bring it down, energy will continue to rise, sometimes almost entirely leaving the body, or it could make a detour around the body rather than flowing through it.

Energy disappearing in this way helps protect us from being overpowered by our emotions and responses, so ideally, find a balance. Work slowly over a number of sessions and keep checking with your client that you are not bringing more energy back than they can cope with.

Sometimes when clients are unable to talk about their feelings, they may be able to sound out, draw or use movement to express how they feel.

Supporting Children

Although children’s ability to understand will vary, regardless of their age, they can be very sensitive to atmosphere. The important thing is to reassure children that people are still there for them. That they are wanted and loved and not an additional burden in an emotionally overloaded household.

Very young children may just be coming to terms with the idea that absence is temporary. Suddenly they are confronted with something very different but they have neither the language nor the maturity to voice their confusion. They may become angry and later withdrawn.

It is best to tell children age-appropriate truth, even if the circumstances are difficult. Be clear and use simple words.

As adults we can decide when we are ready to move on – a new relationship, a new house, a new area....but children don’t have that choice. If children are not co-operating, it may be because they are not ready emotionally for the change, rather than because they are deliberately being difficult.

Again, it is important to consider additional losses. They may not want to leave people, situations and places which seem so stable and secure compared to the turmoil at home – the neighbour’s dog, their friend across the road or the swings in the park.

Children may think the death was their fault, either because they did something to cause it or because something they didn’t do could have prevented it. This could be a real problem for

Louise's daughter. Louise may need to constantly reassure her - especially if other children are likely to taunt her because she was the one who brought the virus home.

It would help the children if Louise encouraged them to talk about their feelings and in turn shared her own. If adults hide their emotions, children learn that this is what they have to do as well. If Louise and her children could cry together, then the children are less likely to want to protect her from their feelings. Children may need to talk about all their feelings and it may help to bring in a relative or family friend. If the relationship with their father was difficult, the children may initially feel relief, but then feel guilty if everybody is busy not speaking ill of the dead.

It may help clients to understand their physiological responses and to adjust their expectations accordingly. Loss is something we learn to live with, something we build a new life around. Rather like a physical wound which has never properly healed, sometimes

we will hardly remember it is there; sometimes it will twinge and sometimes it will invade our whole day.

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Some Support Organisations:

CRUSE Bereavement Care:
www.cruse.org.uk

Grief Encounter:
www.griefencounter.org.uk

Winston's Wish:
www.winstonswish.org

Footnote:

The two diagrams are based on Kathrin Stauffer's depiction in *From Wanting to Having: The Vasomotoric Cycle and Receptivity*. Journal of the Association of Holistic Biodynamic Massage therapists (JAHBMT) Vol 18, Issue 1, Winter 2004/5. P.7-9.

