

# **Grief**

by

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Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

## Grief – One Definition

*“Grief is a cognitive, emotive, behavioural, and spiritual adjustment period after any loss or disappointed expectation. It may cause disturbed thoughts, disturbed feelings, disturbed actions/behaviours and a disturbed spirit for a significant period of time. The depth and length of the grief process is usually in proportion to the meaning and significance of the lost person or hope...because everyone experiences grief differently, couples, family members, close friends may find that they do not understand each other.”*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Grief, so I discovered when I moved to another city, can be a surprisingly fearsome force. C. S. Lewis in the opening sentence of his book, *A Grief Observed*, also stated, ‘No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear’.<sup>2</sup> The intensity of my emotions and the extreme range of my thoughts were to be overwhelming and I found that the saying, ‘crazy with grief’<sup>3</sup> would, at times, be true.

However, it was the social and emotional loneliness<sup>4</sup> of grief that was totally unexpected. I seemed unable to articulate<sup>5</sup> my thoughts and feelings in a way that others would understand and this created an ‘invisible blanket’<sup>6</sup> between myself and them. I was left with a sense that I was looking ‘through a glass, darkly’<sup>7</sup> (I Cor 13:12-13) as I wrestled with the painful loss of leaving behind my children, my friends, my church, my professional life, my home, and my community.

This loneliness and the realization that I knew very little about Grief has lead me to wonder how, as a Spiritual Director, I can accompany a directee when they are on their journey of grief.

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<sup>1</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 177

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed* (HarperCollins: New York, 1994) p. 3

<sup>3</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 180

<sup>4</sup> Worden, J. William. *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (Springer Publishing Company: New York, 2009) p. 21

<sup>5</sup> Moseley, Dan. *Lose Love Live: The Spiritual Gifts of Loss and Change* (Upper Room Books: Nashville, Tennessee, 2010). P. 28

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed* (HarperCollins: New York, 1994) p. 3

<sup>7</sup> Rolheiser, Ronald. *The Restless Heart: Finding Our Spiritual Home in Times of Loneliness* (Doubleday: New York, 2004) p. 7

## The Scope of Grief

Granger Westberg suggests that grief is a natural part of life and inevitable if we include all the ‘little griefs’ that may turn up on a daily basis.<sup>8</sup> The appearance of grief is unpredictable and we can rarely prepare for the impact that a significant loss has upon us, even though we may have experienced a previous loss.<sup>9</sup> Grief may arrive under a variety of guises:<sup>10</sup> as an ‘intrusive event’<sup>11</sup> such as the death of a significant other, an illness, a broken relationship, a job loss, the birth of a child with a mental or physical challenge, the loss of a pet, an accident, a geographic move, an empty nest, a betrayal.<sup>12</sup> Or grief may come as a consequence of the endings that can happen as we work our way through the transitions of the life cycle<sup>13</sup> and the developmental challenges of how to be with others, how to be creative and responsible for what we have generated, and how to discover and construct the meaning and value of our life<sup>14</sup>. There is also the possibility that our inner world can set in motion a cycle of grief, what Sue Monk Kidd calls ‘internal uprisings’<sup>15</sup>. These can be harder to discern and can range from an inner voice whispering that ‘there has to be more to life than this’, to stress and burnout, to the breakdown of an old wound that needs attending too.<sup>16</sup>

## The Impact of and Response to Grief

No two people experience grief the same way: how we grieve is influenced by our personality, our family history, the relationships in our life, our previous losses, the perceptions we have of the world around us, what our spiritual beliefs are and how we live in our culture.<sup>17</sup> While grief is a painful period of adjustment<sup>18</sup> to a significant

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<sup>8</sup> Westberg, Granger E. *Good Grief* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1971) p. 13

<sup>9</sup> Love, Anthony. W. *Progress in Understanding Grief, Complicated Grief, and Caring for the Bereaved* (Contemporary Nurse: a Journal for the Australian Nursing Profession: Dec 2007; 27) p. 81

<sup>10</sup> Westberg, Granger E. *Good Grief* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1971) p. 16

<sup>11</sup> Monk Kidd, Sue. *When the Heart Waits* (HarperCollins: New York, 1990) P. 84

<sup>12</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 15

<sup>13</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 15

<sup>14</sup> Whitehead, Evelyn Eaton and James D. *Christian Life Patterns. The Psychological Challenges and Religious Invitations of Adult Life* (Image Books: New York, 1982) p. 24 & 33

<sup>15</sup> Monk Kidd, Sue. *When the Heart Waits*. (HarperCollins: New York, 1990) P. 85

<sup>16</sup> Monk Kidd, Sue. *When the Heart Waits*. (HarperCollins: New York, 1990) P. 85

<sup>17</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 14

loss, what is significant for one person may not be so for another. This means our responses will be highly personal. We may or may not experience some or many of the following at different times, and at varying intensities during our grieving process:<sup>19</sup>

- Emotional responses: shock, numbness, sadness, anger, guilt and self reproach, anxiety, loneliness, fear, shame, relief, fatigue, helplessness, yearning, powerlessness, depressed, despair, resentment, denial, hostility, self-pity, emptiness, overwhelmed, abandonment, frustration, pessimism, dejection, agitation, irritability, regret, remorse.
- Cognitive responses: disbelief, disorientation, confusion, apathy, lack of concentration, preoccupation, ruminating, fantasizing, sense of presence, hallucinations, intrusive thoughts, worry.
- Physical responses: lack of energy, hollowness in the stomach, tightness in the chest and/or throat, noise intolerance, breathlessness, dry mouth, weakness in the muscles, headaches, physical pain, nausea, muscular aches, tension, panic.
- Behavioural responses: crying, sleep and appetite disturbances, absentmindedness, social withdrawal, dreams of the loss, searching, avoiding reminders, restless hyperactivity, sighing.
- Spiritual response: the search for meaning around the loss and the questioning of spiritual beliefs and values.<sup>20 21 22</sup>

Tim VanDuiwendyk<sup>23</sup> suggests that there are three different pathways through grief and ideally, we would make use of all of them. However, we may find that we have a tendency to use one more than the others. If we are what VanDuiwendyk calls *Think People* then we may use a cognitive pathway to process our grief; we will analyze and ‘think through’ our loss and willingly share the facts about what is happening but

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<sup>18</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 10

<sup>19</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 19-20

<sup>20</sup> Love, Anthony. W. *Progress in Understanding Grief, Complicated Grief, and Caring for the Bereaved* (Contemporary Nurse: a Journal for the Australian Nursing Profession: Dec 2007; 27) p. 74 & 75

<sup>21</sup> Worden, J. William. *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (Springer Publishing Company: New York, 2009) p. 18-31

<sup>22</sup> Rupp, Joyce. *Praying Our Goodbyes* (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, 2009) p. 17

<sup>23</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 25

we will not tend to share our feelings. As a result our emotional responses may appear flat to others. If we are *Feel People* we will use the pathway of emotion and ‘feel through’ our grief, crying openly and expressing our feelings easily. When we share our thoughts we may come across as being muddled and circular. If we are *Act People* then we will grieve through action, ‘keeping on the move’ and the folk around us will probably not know what we are thinking or how we are feeling. The only clue that we are in deep pain will be an increase in our activity; we will have become busier than ever and we will need to watch that we don’t implode or explode.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Issue of Time and Support.**

Grief is not a linear process but one that is dynamic and changing.<sup>25</sup> As we grieve we may attend to the tasks of naming and accepting the reality of our loss, processing the pain of our grief and adjusting to a life that is different from the one we wanted and we may do this, by creating a new way of living; one that gives us hope.<sup>26 27</sup> Our grieving may have an ebb and flow effect – that is, we may go backwards and forwards on tasks according to our need at any given time.<sup>28</sup> As a consequence, how long we will need to adjust to our loss cannot be predicted.<sup>29</sup> For some of us, grief may last years<sup>30</sup> and depending upon the significance of our loss there may always be little ‘*after shocks*’<sup>31</sup>, as we encounter triggers that stir the memory and feelings of our loss.

The issue of time may be further exacerbated by the expectations of others. If our grief work requires a long period of time, we may find that the support of others wanes. Our society struggles with the strong expression of emotion,<sup>32</sup> and people

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<sup>24</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 25-27

<sup>25</sup> Love, Anthony. W. *Progress in Understanding Grief, Complicated Grief, and Caring for the Bereaved* (Contemporary Nurse: a Journal for the Australian Nursing Profession: Dec 2007; 27) p. 74 & 75

<sup>26</sup> Worden, J. William. *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (Springer Publishing Company: New York, 2009) p. 39-45

<sup>27</sup> Westberg, Granger E. *Good Grief* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1971) p. 55

<sup>28</sup> Worden, J. William. *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (Springer Publishing Company: New York, 2009) p. 53

<sup>29</sup> Worden, J. William. *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (Springer Publishing Company: New York, 2009) p. 20

<sup>30</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 21

<sup>31</sup> Skylight. *When you are Grieving* (Wellington South, 2009)

<sup>32</sup> Jones, Alan. *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality* (HarperCollins: New York, 1985) p.137

often do not know what to say to those of us who are grieving or they can appear too busy to listen. They may, unintentionally, try to limit the amount time we can grieve by trying to fix us, reduce our sadness, jolly us along, talk us out of our pain and/or encourage us to ‘let go’ and ‘move on’. We can be left with a wearying sense that we are not understood and that we are alone and isolated.<sup>33</sup>

But emotional and spiritual support does ‘*dramatically affect*’<sup>34</sup> the way we adjust and heal to our loss. We are less likely to become stuck in our grief if we have empathetic people in our life; folk who are intentionally there for us and who know from their own experience that the wilderness of grief is multi-layered<sup>35</sup> and therefore won’t assume to know our grief. They are the people who will say, ‘*I don’t understand. Tell me and help me understand.*’<sup>36</sup> These folk will be alert to the loss of identity that we may be experiencing, the disappearance of who we know ourselves to be, and they are aware that while we grieve for the loss itself, we will also be grieving for the meanings and the implications of that loss, even though we may not be able to name them immediately.<sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> They are able to create a space for us to express all the pain of our grief, in whatever way we need to, and as they listen, they trust that the day will come when, like Jesus, we too will be ‘raised from our empty places of loss’<sup>39</sup>. They understand that God’s spirit and our spirit will heal<sup>40</sup> us over time<sup>41</sup> and that good grief has the potential to transform our life by deepening our wisdom and growing our ‘spiritual muscles’<sup>42</sup>. These people are aware that new life will come to us when we least expect it, usually in fits and starts, and that we don’t have to ‘do’

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<sup>33</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 38, 49, 78, 103

<sup>34</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 49,

<sup>35</sup> Moseley, Dan. *Lose Love Live: The Spiritual Gifts of Loss and Change* ( Upper Room Books: Nashville, Tennessee, 2010). p. 125

<sup>36</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 51, 138, 139

<sup>37</sup> Moseley, Dan. *Lose Love Live: The Spiritual Gifts of Loss and Change* ( Upper Room Books: Nashville, Tennessee, 2010). p. 108, 125

<sup>38</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 46

<sup>39</sup> Rupp, Joyce. *Praying Our Goodbyes* (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, 2009) p. 39

<sup>40</sup> Reeves, Nancy. *Found Through Loss –Healing Stories from Scripture &Everyday Sacredness* (Northstone Publishing: Canada, 2003) p. 8

<sup>41</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 138, 39, 72

<sup>42</sup> Westberg, Granger E. *Good Grief* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1971) p. 10

anything except wait for it to happen.<sup>43</sup> As we wait, they will wait too, assisting us, when it is appropriate, to notice the stirrings of hope in our heart, the moments of grace in our day and the times of consolation as we grieve our grief and move slowly towards a new and different wholeness.<sup>44 45</sup>

### **Application**

In doing my special project I have come to understand the complexity of Grief. While I listen to a directee's story of grief, I need to be alert, not only to their significant loss, but also to the other losses that exist within or are a consequence of the primary loss. I must not assume that all the meanings are attached to the present, for the past may also be visiting the directee, and this may be unbeknown to both of us at the time. If I am not to 'miss' the directee's deep inner turmoil I need to notice how challenging they may be finding their physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and spiritual responses and to create gaps and silences for them to express, in their own time, what they are thinking and feeling and how they are living.

The little griefs, I believe, also matter. I notice as a society that we tend not to give them enough attention and I wonder if, over time, our spirit becomes somewhat crushed and life is drained from us, because it is rare that our disappointments of life are overtly affirmed as our truth and that we can grieve for them – Spiritual Direction offers a rich space for these to be shared.

But **the** insight for me was the realization, that as a Spiritual Director who believes in the hope that comes with the resurrection of Jesus, I can be the 'holder of hope' for the directee. When their grief is overwhelming and appears to be never ending; when their future does not appear to be in sight and it is more appropriate for me to say nothing, then I hope there is something in my manner and/or my body language that leaks out and gives the directee hope that one day they will experience their own quiet resurrection and all will be (relatively) well.

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<sup>43</sup> Moseley, Dan. *Lose Love Live: The Spiritual Gifts of Loss and Change* ( Upper Room Books: Nashville, Tennessee, 2010). p. 111

<sup>44</sup> Pickering, Sue. *Spiritual Direction* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2008) p. 180

<sup>45</sup> Rupp, Joyce. *Praying Our Goodbyes* (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, 2009) p. 79

### **A Cautionary Note:**

Not everyone experiences uncomplicated or good grief<sup>46</sup>. Some people may *delay* their grief by becoming distracted with activities, or *inhibit* their grief by displacing it into other symptoms, such as headaches, and there are others who will experience *chronic grief*, slipping into severe depression.<sup>47</sup> VanDuiwendky suggests that sadness and depression is a normal, even necessary part of grieving if a person is to heal<sup>48</sup>, but he also cautions that we need to be alert for the following that signal a person's grief may have or is possibly becoming more complicated:

1. *Dramatic and unusual changes in appetite...over a six month period or less.*
2. *Dramatic and unusual changes in sleep patterns...that persist over a long period of time and affect health, work and relationships.*
3. *Dramatic and unusual changes in sexual appetite or other behaviour over a long period of time.*
4. *Lack of motivation and interest in everyday work or activities, often accompanied by fatigue and suicidal ideations or specific suicide plans.*<sup>49</sup>

The difficulty is that some of these symptoms will probably be present at some level in grief work but if we are noticing that the person's grief is impairing their functioning for a considerable period of time, then there is a place for those of us who are not clinically trained to recommend that the directee see a trained health professional.

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<sup>46</sup> Love, Anthony. W. *Progress in Understanding Grief, Complicated Grief, and Caring for the Bereaved* (Contemporary Nurse: a Journal for the Australian Nursing Profession: Dec 2007; 27) p. 76-79

<sup>47</sup> Whitehead, Evelyn Eaton and James D. *Christian Life Patterns. The Psychological Challenges and Religious Invitations of Adult Life* (Image Books: New York, 1982) p. 42-43

<sup>48</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 104-108

<sup>49</sup> VanDuiwendyk, Tim P. *The Unwanted Gift of Grief – A Ministry Approach* (Psychology Press: Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2006) p. 110-112

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