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Grief and loss associated with divorce : a counseling perspective

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Abstract

Based on grief and loss literature, as well as literature on divorce, this paper examines divorce as a loss that evokes grief in various individuals. A brief definition of grief and loss is first articulated. An emphasis is placed on the classifications of loss, such as major, physical, psychological, primary, and secondary loss. Divorce is discussed as a major and primary loss with multiple secondary losses associated with it. The perspectives of various professionals as they relate to divorce as a loss are examined. This paper also considers implications to counselors when divorce is viewed as a grief and loss issue.

GRIEF AND LOSS ASSOCIATED WITH DIVORCE: A COUNSELING
PERSPECTIVE

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Grief and Loss Associated With Divorce: A Counseling Perspective

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Based on grief and loss literature, as well as literature on divorce, this paper examines divorce as a loss that evokes grief in various individuals. A brief definition of grief and loss is first articulated. An emphasis is placed on the classifications of loss, such as major, physical, psychological, primary, and secondary loss. Divorce is discussed as a major and primary loss with multiple secondary losses associated with it. The perspectives of various professionals as they relate to divorce as a loss are examined. This paper also considers implications to counselors when divorce is viewed as a grief and loss issue.

Recently, professionals have placed an increased emphasis on divorce being viewed as a loss which tends to result in grief reactions for those impacted by it. It has been suggested that divorce can be viewed as existing on a continuum of losses that individuals experience (Rando, 1993). Though various losses may evoke grief consisting of unique features and characteristics, examining such losses together allows professionals to focus on their shared dynamics (Harvey, 2002; Rando). This emphasis on common aspects of loss and grief has the potential to result in new perspectives, which can ultimately impact interventions (Rando). Such potential can be seen by reviewing literature on loss and grief as it pertains to divorce.

Defining Grief

The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000) defined grief as “1. Deep mental anguish, as that arising from bereavement.... 2. A source of deep mental anguish” (p. 772). Based on literature, those who research the impact of grief and loss on individuals would likely agree that this definition is not nearly inclusive enough. Payne, Horn, and Relf (1999) added “bitter feelings for something lost” to their definition of grief (p.7). Muller and Thompson (2003) considered grief to be the “entire range of naturally occurring human emotions that accompany loss” (p.183). Rando (1993) also included in the definition of grief, that frequently, it is a passive and involuntary response or

reaction. Rando emphasized that grief is not a static state, but rather a continuing development.

It is widely agreed that the impact of grief goes far beyond the emotional realm (Berry, 1998; Harvey, 2002; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Payne et al., 1999; Rando, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1993; Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001; Trafford, 1982). In recent times more focus has been placed upon grief's impact on the affective, cognitive, physiological, behavioral, social, and spiritual aspects of an individual (Berry; Harvey; Johnston & Campbell; Payne et al.; Rando; Rosenblatt; Stroebe et al.; Trafford). Some of the affective manifestations of grief include depression, anxiety, guilt, anger, anhedonia, and loneliness (Payne et al.; Rosenblatt; Stroebe et al.). Grief may evoke an increase in behaviors such as social withdrawal, crying, and fatigue (Harvey; Payne et al.; Rando; Stroebe et al.). Grief impacts individuals cognitively by affecting one's self-esteem, concentration, sense of hope and reality, and thoughts (Johnston & Campbell; Payne et al.; Stroebe et al.). Grief may manifest itself by impacting physiological and somatic functioning (Payne et al.; Rando; Stroebe et al.). Such impacts may include decreased energy, loss of appetite, decreased immunity to illness and disease, and sleep disturbances (Payne et al.; Stroebe et al.).

In recent times more emphasis has been placed on, and research has been conducted related to, grief from losses other than death (Harvey, 1996, 2000, 2002; Parkes, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1993). Though it is common for society to

associate grief with death, death is not the only occurrence that evokes a grief response in individuals (Harvey, 1996, 2000, 2002; Parkes; Rando, 1993; Rosenblatt). Parkes concluded that individuals do indeed experience grief as a result of losses not due to death. Grief can occur in response to any loss (Harvey, 1996, 2000, 2002; Parkes; Rando). Grief may even occur when an awaited loss occurs (Rando, Rosenblatt).

Defining Loss

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000), a general definition of loss included "...the condition of being deprived or bereaved of something or someone..." (p. 1034). Researchers frequently relate loss to a reduction in resources in which an individual has an emotional investment (Harvey & Miller, 2000). Loss has also been described as an on-going lack of accessibility to an emotionally important figure (Weiss, 1993).

Loss is something every individual deals with through the course of life; it is a fundamental human experience; it is inescapable (Harvey, 2002; Rando, 1993; Viorst, 1986; Weiss, 1993). Ultimately, loss is a universal experience (Harvey; Payne et al., 1999; Viorst). The experience of personal loss is natural and begins very early in every individual's life (Harvey, 2001, 2002).

Individuals experience a plethora of types of losses throughout the course of life (Harvey, 2002). Loss underlies a magnitude of human emotions, spanning

both the positive and negative (Harvey). According to Rando (1993) “the most difficult experiences in life always involve some measure of loss” (p.26).

According to Viorst (1986), “losses are... necessary because we grow by losing, leaving, and letting go...” (p.16). Viorst believed that it is only through one’s losses that he or she becomes a fully developed person. One’s life losses are what one gives up in order to grow (Viorst).

Major Loss

In his examination of loss, Harvey (2002) placed emphasis on what he called “major loss”. Harvey (1996) described major loss as a reduction in resources. Such resources may be tangible or intangible (Harvey, 1996). Major loss can be thought of as the loss of something in one’s life in which he or she was emotionally invested (Harvey, 2002). Emotional investment is related to the degree to which individuals’ reactions to loss reflect that they matter to the individual (Harvey, 2002). When one is emotionally invested in someone or something, it does not leave one’s memory easily and is reflected upon over time (Harvey, 2002).

In his study of loss, Harvey (2002) examined the degree of impact that specific losses have on individuals. Harvey believed that people, through experience, come to view losses as relative. He stated that people come to view losses on a continuum which takes into consideration perceived impacts, complexity, and the degree of difficulty in dealing with the loss.

In determining the boundaries of the definition of major loss Harvey (2002) stated that one must take into consideration both subjective and objective markers. He explained that when attempting to identify a major loss both of the following indicators should be included: “(a) a subjective indication by the individual that she or he has experienced a major loss and (b) an objective concurrence by knowledgeable others” (p.7). However, he was careful to note that in certain situations, such as those in which a high degree of prejudice may exist; one’s subjective view takes precedence in determining a major loss. An individual’s own view of a particular loss may at times not accurately reflect the magnitude of that loss, such as in situations where one’s cognitive abilities are impaired (Harvey).

Physical and Psychosocial losses

Rando (1993), in her research on grief, has looked at both physical and psychosocial losses. She described physical loss as the loss of something tangible. She referred to the loss of something intangible as psychosocial or symbolic loss (Rando). Rando noted that when physical loss occurs it is typically noticed by others. Therefore others are likely to acknowledge that an individual may have feelings in response to such a loss (Rando). Psychosocial losses however are recognized by others less often as evoking feelings worthy of grief or emotional processing (Rando).

Primary and Secondary Losses

In the opinion of some researchers, losses can be categorized as primary or secondary (Harvey 2002; Rando, 1993). According to Rando, a secondary loss occurs with, or develops as, a consequence of a primary loss (Harvey). Secondary losses can be looked at as the ripple effects of other losses one has experienced (Harvey; Rando). A secondary loss can be physical or psychosocial in nature (Harvey; Rando). It is not uncommon for a primary loss to be reactivated as a secondary loss at a point later in life when another loss is experienced (Harvey; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Rando).

Divorce

One grief evoking loss that has been examined more in depth recently is divorce. Divorce can be defined very simply as “the legal dissolution of a marriage” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000, p. 528). However, when one examines the magnitude of impact that divorce has on individuals exposed to it, it becomes a more complex phenomenon than its definition might imply.

Based on their interactions with and examination of individuals involved in divorce it is the belief of many professionals that loss is always part of divorce (Baum, 2003; Berry, 1998; Johnston & Campbell, 1988). According to Berry (1998) and Georgiades and Griener (2003), divorce is not only the loss of a partner but also the loss of a relationship. In the words of Trafford (1982), “divorce shatters all dreams...” (p.121).

Divorce as a Major and Primary Loss

Based on the afore mentioned definition of divorce, and by taking into consideration the subjective and objective criteria suggested by Harvey (2002), one could infer that divorce is a major loss. Because of the multitude of losses that can be viewed as associated with or caused by divorce, it may also be fair to say, based upon Rando's (1993) descriptions of the nature of loss, that divorce is a primary loss with many secondary losses surrounding it (Harvey).

As is true of most major losses, often the loss of a loved one through divorce can lead to the same symptoms as those associated with loss through death (Berry, 1998; Harvey, 1996, 2000; Johnston & Campbell, 1988). Trafford (1982) went so far as to refer to divorce as a death, the death of a relationship. Berry believed that at times the grief associated with divorce could be even more emotionally complicated than that of a loss to death. Berry stated that "death is final, but divorce leaves people not only with feelings of loss, but often hurt, resentment, jealousy, and blame as well" (p.1).

Over time, the process of divorce can become a heavy psychological burden; it can also result in physical and practical devastation (Harvey, 2000). The ways in which a divorce impacts one's life are multiple and powerful (Berry, 1998).

Losses Associated With Divorce

As many professionals have acknowledged, divorce in and of itself is a loss (Berry, 1998; Georgiades & Griener, 2003; Harvey, 2002; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Rando, 1993; Trafford, 1982). However, when examined further, the losses that occur along with, or as a result of, a divorce are great in number and intensity. These losses could be categorized as secondary losses (Harvey, Rando). The various losses one experiences related to divorce fit into both physical and psychosocial categories (Rando).

Harvey (2002) and Rosenblatt (1993) emphasized the importance of the loss of emotional resources one experiences as a result of divorce. According to Georgiades and Griener, (2003) divorce often results in the loss of intimacy, companionship, and structure in one's life. In losing a spouse through divorce, often times one also loses the foundation upon which he or she relied for coping with loss (Rosenblatt).

For many, marriage involves constructing a significant shared reality (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). For the couple this is represented by what becomes the "us" in their relationship (Johnston & Campbell). When this is the case, divorce, the destruction of the reality of a marriage, can devastate one's self-image (Johnston & Campbell). Because there is no longer an "us", some individuals lose their identity when faced with divorce (Johnston & Campbell).

Rosenblatt (1993) noted that in losing a spouse one's definition of self changes. He believed that the loss of one's partner evokes a search for meaning, along with uncertainty about one's self, a loss of confidence, and great confusion (Rosenblatt). One's loss of self-confidence in association with divorce can both impact and be impacted by feelings of guilt or shame, which often accompany the dissolution of a relationship (Berry, 1998; Guttman, 1993). Often times such feelings are associated with the sense of failure that frequently comes with divorce (Berry; Trafford, 1982). According to Berry, it is almost certain that at some point throughout the resolution of one's marriage he or she will feel like a failure.

Harvey (2002) brought attention to the loss of social identity that often goes along with divorce. He explained that individuals become known to their friends, families, and selves as identified with a specific relationship. Therefore, as a relationship ends, those involved must negotiate an identity change (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). During the transition of divorce, titles such as husband, wife, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, may be reexamined by the individuals involved (Boss, 1999).

In relation to divorce individuals often suffer due to a perceived loss of control (Harvey, 2000; Johnston & Campbell, 1988). During such time an individual can be troubled by the fact that he or she has no control over the feelings of his or her spouse (Harvey, 2000). Individuals may also struggle with

the fact that they have no control over the decisions another is making about them (Harvey). As a result, a divorcing individual's feelings of personal security are likely to be impacted negatively (Weiss, 1993).

A psychosocial loss that is related to divorce, but is frequently left unacknowledged by most people, except for those experiencing a divorce, and many times by them as well, is the loss of one's dream of his or her future (Harvey, 2000; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Roos, 2002; Trafford, 1982). According to Trafford all of one's dreams are impacted when one experiences divorce. Harvey (1996) suggested that "...underneath the heartache of persons who have been hurt in love is a deep grief, a grief born of the knowledge that the realities of life are at odds with the way they implicitly hoped their lives would turn out..." (p. 70).

Grief Associated With Divorce

Regardless of whether or not an individual is aware of it, there is always some degree of loss associated with divorce (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). Therefore, it is not uncommon for one to grieve the loss of a marriage relationship, just as he or she would any other major loss. For this reason, it is important the presence of grief in relation to divorce be recognized and acknowledged.

It was Harvey's (1996) belief that an individual who experienced the loss of a relationship through divorce must spend considerable time grieving and

recovering, just as an individual who lost a significant other to death would.

Johnston & Campbell (1988) stressed the importance of individuals recognizing and grieving previous losses that may have been reactivated by a divorce.

An understanding of who grieves as a result of divorce is valuable when examining loss and divorce (Harvey, 1996, 2000, 2002; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Rice, 2003; Trafford, 1982). According to specialists, individuals who are close to the divorcing couple may at times feel as much grief and loss as the couple themselves (Harvey; Johnston & Campbell; Trafford). The children of the couple are highly impacted by divorce (Harvey; Johnston & Campbell). The children within a family facing divorce may be impacted immediately and/or may experience distress later in life, when the divorce is seemingly in the past (Johnston & Campbell). Inversely, the parents of a divorcing couple may also need special attention in dealing with the break up of a child's marriage (Harvey; Johnston & Campbell).

In relation to the grieving associated with divorce, individuals may continue to have memories of their former spouse (Berry, 1998; Harvey, 2002). These memories may occur unconsciously or unexpectedly as the result of a stimulus, or may come in the form of dreams (Harvey). Sometimes conscious attempts are made to dredge up emotions and images of the past relationship (Harvey). Harvey believed that due to the nature of a once loving relationship, such grief at reoccurring points throughout life is not abnormal. He did however

specify that if such memories continue to the point of obsession a healthy grieving process has not occurred (Harvey).

Berry (1998) emphasized that dealing with the grief related to divorce is a process, which individuals progress through. The pace at which this occurs varies among individuals (Berry). She believed this grief should not be rushed. Berry noted that even though a marriage may have been difficult, individuals still need time to grieve their losses associated with the end of the relationship.

Implications for Counselors

It is no secret that the divorce rate has risen substantially in recent generations. It is currently estimated that greater than 40 percent of marriages end in separation or divorce within their first 15 years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). This trend has likely contributed to increased research interest in relationships, marriage, and divorce by many professionals, across various areas of study.

Divorce has gained recognition as a major loss, worthy of grief and mourning, by various individuals specializing in grief and loss (Harvey, 2002; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Parkes, 1993; Rando, 1993). When considered along with the frequency of divorce, this has had profound implications for mental health counselors. Such acknowledgement has allowed for increased communication amongst specialists and increased opportunities for exploring grief and loss issues as they related to divorce (Rando). According to Rando,

Although the caregiver must of course be aware of the unique content, demands, strategies, techniques, and issues specific to treatment of these particular problems, placing them on a continuum of loss can provide insight into their commonality and offer a new perspective on intervention (p. 27).

According to Rando (1993), it is imperative that care providers, such as counselors, understand the role they can play for individuals coping with loss. When dealing with divorce related grief it is the job of the counselor to help individuals recognize the loss they are experiencing (Rando). Helping individuals to recognize their grief for what it is can allow people "...better understanding, increased meaning, reduced helplessness, and a greater sense of control-all of which improve coping ability" Rando (p.26).

A counselor should be equipped to assist those who experienced loss by helping them to understand their individual grief responses (Rando, 1993). Therefore, it is also imperative that counselors develop a strong working knowledge of interventions thought to be most appropriate for use with individuals who are experiencing a loss and dealing with grief (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Rando).

As a counselor, not only is it important to recognize divorce as a loss worthy of grief and to help individuals understand this, but also to acknowledge that it is not uncommon for previous losses that one has experienced to be

reactivated while grieving a divorce (Johnston and Campbell, 1988). It has been suggested that helping individuals impacted by reactivated loss, to work through previous losses and the feelings experienced related to them, be a goal of professionals working with these individuals (Johnston and Campbell).

Johnston and Campbell (1988) believed there to be value in distinguishing previous losses from those one is currently facing in association with divorce. They suggested professionals offer a supportive atmosphere where an individual could deal with denial and a range of emotions when working with someone experiencing reactivated loss.

It is also important that counselors acknowledge that grief related to divorce has the potential to present as a reactivated loss itself (Johnston and Campbell, 1988). Because clients may not recognize divorce as a loss and therefore avoid the emotions associated with such, it is always important for counselors to be conscious of feelings of loss associated with divorce that may underlie another issue for which someone has sought counseling. Once again, in such a situation, using the suggestions of Rando (1993) and assisting an individual to recognize their experience as a loss could be extremely effective.

The fact that individuals often grieve for losses that they had been hoping for and are seemingly happy for, is of great importance from a counseling perspective (Berry, 1998; Rosenblatt, 1993). For such reasons it is important that the losses one faces in divorce be addressed and grieved even though a client may

have voiced positive feelings related to the end of the relationship (Rosenblatt, 1993).

Divorce has the potential to impact, to varying degrees, those who experience or are exposed to it (Harvey, 1996, 2000, 2002; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Trafford, 1982). This, along with the fact that divorce occurs frequently, leads one to infer that more people will seek counseling due to the impact divorce has had on them. Therefore, it is important for counselors to be aware of whose emotional health is most often negatively impacted by divorce.

It has become evident that divorce impacts more than just the two individuals who are ending their marriage (Harvey, 1996, 2000, 2002; Johnston & Campbell, 1988). This means that not only does a counselor need to be open to emotional distress in individuals who are in the process of divorcing or have divorced themselves, but also to any other individuals who may have been impacted by a divorce. This would entail being open to the impact a divorce may have on children, parents, extended family, and friends of a divorced or divorcing couple (Harvey, 1996, 2000, 2002; Johnston & Campbell, 1988). This could also include being open to the fact that individuals not currently dealing with a divorce within their family or social network may be distressed by the idea of divorce, perhaps because it is a reality for so many or because of the impact they see it as having on the greater society.

When taking all of the information presented into consideration, one could infer that it is important for counselors to have at least a basic understanding of the dynamics of divorce. The fact that many professionals have come to acknowledge divorce as a loss that is frequently grieved should be helpful to counselors in this regard. However, because the number of individuals impacted by divorce continues to grow, further examination of the implications for those involved would likely benefit professionals and the individuals they serve.

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