

National Association of Loss and Grief (NALAG)

Paper

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A Constructivist Model of Grief, Mourning and Bereavement

A constructivist theoretical model of grief mourning and bereavement helps explain critical therapeutic process issues in treating people who have survived major loss. Major loss can represent psychological annihilation for some individuals. Core processes concerned with identity, sense of reality, worth, power and central social roles are sometimes threatened by bereavement. Awareness of the potential extent of this disruption can help explain the ubiquitous psychological and physical sequelae associated with major loss. In this theoretical model personality traits are not viewed as unchanging but rather as fluid personal theories or core processes repeatedly confirmed by experiences. These personal theories are complex and interrelated systems of meaning resulting in specific predictions about how their owners will cope with stressors. Individual characteristics and past personal experiences reciprocally influence these dynamic theories. Some life events that are more likely to represent a threat to core processes including those which involve impossible moral dilemmas. An environment favourable to recovery from major loss will be validating to the formation of new personal theories. It will confirm a sense of personal power, unique identity, personal value, and a reality that can make meaning out of major loss. It will be safe enough for the expression of powerful and fundamental emotions and conducive to trial and error experimentation or the trying on of new personal meanings and social roles. Helpers facilitate a sense of continuity between the past, present, and the future of the grieving person. The therapeutic strategies used to facilitate this process can be technically eclectic providing they are theoretically integrated. For instance, the free association of psychodynamic formulations could be used as a way of gently loosening constructs associated with the lost person and the exposure based treatments of the conditioning theorists can be seen as graduated trial and error experiments in formulating new meanings for such losses. Such an approach allows for both treatment versatility and theoretical coherence.