

## Exploring Aspects of Loss



Isn't loss just about bereavement?

Most people associate "loss" with the death of a loved one, but there are many other types of loss that can be experienced. But just looking at death demonstrates how complex loss can be. The grief of losing one's parent triggers a different set of grief responses than the loss of one's child, or of one's partner.

Additionally, there is a different reaction to a sudden death compared to a death after a long illness.

But loss is also experienced as a result of divorce, relocation, retrenchment, and retirement. Just the diagnosis of a serious illness in our partner, our children, or our parents can be the initiation of a loss reaction. This is not only because of the obvious threat to the life of our loved ones, but also because dreams and plans for the future are lost as a result of the diagnosis.

There are also more subtle losses that we might have experienced earlier in life. Consider the reaction of the child who loses much of his/her childhood being parent to their younger siblings because their parents work long hours. Similarly, many teenagers lose their carefree adolescent years because of the pressure to study long hours, unreasonable sport commitments, and after-school and holiday jobs. Each of these events will have some bearing on the behaviour of the individual in his/her adult life.

### **What Do Loss Reactions Look Like?**

In 1969 Dr Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published her famous book "On Death and Dying", where she first explored her concept of the five stages of death. These stages are:

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

Since then, her concepts have been seen to hold equally true in the other areas of loss.

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Additionally, our initial confrontation with actual or potential loss will normally generate a reaction of shock. In that state clients have described feeling numb, vague, forgetful, fatigued, and often experience a loss of appetite. In many other situations of loss, clients have reported feelings of deep guilt. Consider the survivors of a plane crash questioning why they lived when others died.

## **Are There Predominant Emotions In Loss?**

As an example of how varied the emotional reactions can be in loss, let us consider a journey through:

1. Divorce
2. Retrenchment
3. A partner's serious illness

1. Divorce is a very complicated and emotional experience, and the reactions differ based on who initiated the separation and who will retain residential responsibilities of any dependent children. For simplicity, let us assume that the male partner decided to depart the family home leaving the female partner to care for their young children. From the wife's perspective, there will be a very angry response to the situation. This might quickly be replaced by the more immediate concern about her and the children's financial stability. She will also have to handle the children's emotional reaction to their father leaving which will multiply the shock, panic, anger and depression many times over. In some cases, using Kubler-Ross model, a wife might even consider bargaining with her husband to return to the house and the marriage. From the husband's point of view, there might be an initial feeling of liberation, but this might soon be replaced by the guilt of leaving the children and exposing them to their mother's raw emotions.

Additionally, if the husband has been having an affair, he may question his own ethics and the way he has behaved. Many male clients in this situation have also reported deep depression after the breakdown of the marriage. Many people struggle with the loss of contact with the children and the financial loss associated with the divorce process and property settlement.

2. When working with clients who have been retrenched the two greatest emotions that surface repeatedly are anger and depression. If the client had been working with the organisation for a long time, he/she will be angry at the way the company has undervalued and dismissed their personal investment in performing their job to the best of their ability. That unmanaged anger may surface during subsequent job interviews and lessen the chances of success. When the anger subsides, most clients are left questioning their self-worth and feeling very concerned about the future and their ability to find suitable employment. Their depression may be made greater by associated financial pressures and/or the pressures placed upon them by their partner, their peers and their family.

3. For men whose partner is seriously ill the predominant initial emotion is denial. In this state, which could start as early as the time of diagnosis, his typical reaction is to avoid discussing what is happening, and often results in him working longer and longer hours to

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avoid being at home. That same denial blocks him from having discussions with his partner about her prognosis, even though these conversations are truly precious to her. Another by-product of these longer working hours is that more stress is placed on the women who, as well as dealing with her own emotional and physical reaction to her illness and the threat to her life, may need to carry the additional burden of caring for the children at dinnertime and into the evening, when her energy levels are at their lowest. This can introduce massive pressure on the marriage at the worst possible time. Since most men are brought up to be “problem solvers”, many who have the courage to go to counselling experience depression trying to understand and cope with this unfamiliar sense of helplessness and hopelessness in not being able to cure their partner’s illness. In some cases, this discomfort drives a normally confident and independent man to regress to the state of a child requiring constant nurturing and support. This also creates an additional burden on his partner at the exact time when she normally requires space to cope with her own “stuff”. Many men begin to question their role in the world since many consider themselves failures. If they can’t solve this threat to their partner’s life then what good are they? Understandably, many men also experience a great deal of anger. The plans for the future that they made with their partner are now in jeopardy and the need to blame someone (their partner, the doctor, God) is intense. Both partners are also forced to accept that their relationship is changing, and they have to undertake a re-definition of their roles. For many men, playing an active part in the upbringing of the children is a new and uncomfortable experience, and their partner’s diminished libido often leads to sexual frustration.

### **What If We Don’t Deal with Our Emotions?**

When we are confronted with new and frightening experiences in life, our body’s reaction is often intense. While remaining in the state of denial may seem a good way to protect ourselves from the reality of those reactions, nothing could be further from the truth. Without properly acknowledging and dealing with our emotional reactions to traumatic experiences, we could experience reactions in other areas of our being, whether that be in physical, behavioural or in secondary emotional ways. It is akin to pressure building up in a container. With the regular and monitored release of that pressure the container continues to maintain its shape and purpose. But if that pressure builds without release there is a risk that we will react to situations with unexpected intensity, often projecting our unresolved emotions onto the person nearest to us.