

## A Phenomenological Account of Grief and Loss

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# A Phenomenological Account of Grief and Loss

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## Abstract

This qualitative study attempted to give a further understanding of the unique, lived experiences of adults living with grief after loss. The researcher recruited participants by posting flyers asking for volunteers. The researcher asked the participants to sign a consent form, which explained full and ongoing consent, confidentiality, and de-identification of all identifying material. Three people who experienced this phenomenon participated in audio-recorded interviews consisting of semi-structured, phenomenological open-ended questions. The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim and subjected them to an interpretative phenomenological content analysis (Smith, 2008). The results of this phenomenological-hermeneutic research study strove to present rich descriptions of the experience of the phenomenon under study. The goal of this qualitative research was not to explain, but rather understand the experience of grief and loss while revealing the unique processes by which people construct meanings about their worlds (Fischer, 2006). Three themes emerged from the interviews: the point of the loss becoming real, lack of control, and an ongoing connection with the one they lost. This ongoing connection is a continuation of the relationship with the deceased through dreams, the act of continuing a legacy, or through religious beliefs. The potential use of this work is to bring comfort to those who are grieving, further understand and appreciate their unique experiences, and suggest the possible danger of the traditional language of the stages of grief.

**Key words:** grief, loss, psychology, phenomenology, qualitative, experience

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## Introduction

Through my experience, I have found grief to be a powerful and transformative experience. Day after day, I grieved the loss of those I loved. I wished I could go back in time. Not one day went by without the thought, the longing, and the feeling of loss. After I experienced the loss of these people, I felt that I had lost a part of my identity in relation to them. I struggled to find who I was without them. I questioned everything. I longed for the past. I grieved for who they used to be and who I used to be.

Ever since these experiences in my life, I have been fascinated with the different human experiences of grief. The reasons for grief are many. One might grieve any loss or change in life, whether it is physical or emotional. I am interested in the different human experiences of possession and loss.

I am also fascinated by the way our culture portrays grief. We are only supposed to grieve for a certain amount of time, after which it is considered a problem or disorder. After my loss, I felt there was a certain amount of time it was acceptable for me to grieve. I felt a change in the way others treated me; it seemed as if one minute everyone was expecting me to grieve and the next they were expecting me to be happy.

## Literature Review

### Grief Described and Defined

Grief is defined and described in many ways. Moules (1998) described grief as an experience with the phenomenon of loss. Loss can take many forms. There can be loss of another through death, or loss can be circum-

stantial, such as losses of hope, relationship, job, health, youth, and self (Moules). Moules defined grief as “the structural, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual change that occurs as a direct result of the experience of significant loss and that creates a mutable, evolving, but lifelong, relationship with the loss” (p. 5). Further, Attig (2011) referred to grieving as the entire range of our coping responses to any significant loss experience. This includes socially constructed mourning practices as well as what we do within ourselves to redefine our relationship with the deceased. He pointed out that mourning refers only to responses of loss through death. Keeping (2014) referred to grieving as the reorientation and readjustment through which we regain our grip on the world.

### **Grief Theories throughout History**

Grief is often described as a necessary and healthy response. Freud (as cited in Graeneck, 2010) suggested that grief is not a disorder, and that intervening with a mourner could even cause psychological damage. Freud claimed that the grief response was functional. It allowed one the process to disinvest in the dead and continue with life. For Graeneck (2010), the idea of long-term grief as pathology was not always the popular belief among philosophers and psychologists: “As with Bowlby (1980), he suggests that the failure to grieve, the curbing of grief, is the pathology” (p. 279). These ideas counter the ideas of Lindemann’s 1944 study which revealed grief as a mental disease, disorder, or pathology.

Lindemann (1944) suggested that psychiatrists or psychologists must intervene or play a role in aiding the mourner in grief work. Lindemann’s work was the first to exhibit an empirical study of the bereaved. He took a scientific and objective approach in documenting and understanding the grieving process. He established many assumptions, including the view that grief is a disease or psychiatric disorder. Lindemann emphasized that the amount of time a person grieves depends on how successful they are with their codified grief work.

### **Grief as a Universal Experience versus Grief as a Unique Experience**

Some of the literature on grief describes it as a predictable universal experience while some strongly denies this idea. The work of Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) on the experience of death and dying famously

listed five stages of the “normal grieving process” (p. 16): denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Attig (2011) regarded grief as an unavoidable life experience that is not predictable. He suggested that grief does not consist of stages and is not to be gotten over. Konigsberg (2011), similar to Attig, pointed out that Kubler-Ross’s five stage theory is unscientific, tends to assume more prolonged mourning and “completely omits positive emotions that are also integral to the experience of grief” (p. 45). Moules (1998) suggested that stage models and diagnosis take away from the person’s unique experiences and limit the focus to solely psychological responses like denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance while overlooking the social and spiritual domains of the experience. Like Moules, Attig felt that stages imply that grieving occurs passively in expected sequences without taking into account one’s entire life experience.

Attig (2011) pointed out that the idea of stages and the use of medical analogies may fail to resonate with our experiences when we are grieving or they may distort our self-understanding. Stage models also distort the understanding of others who wish to support or comfort us. Attig suggested that no one is a statistical or average person; instead, he argues that we are individuals whose experiences are considerably different from any generalization captured in statements of probability. Therefore, for Attig, we live and grieve in those variations.

Attig (2011) interpreted grief as an event of loss that becomes part of living in unique, lifelong and life-changing ways. He suggested that grief does not necessarily end or result in a resolution, but that it requires an incorporation of the loss into “living forward” (p. 47). There is no end to grief but instead an ongoing connection with the deceased that allows the person to continue to move forward in life (Attig).

### **Grief as a Disease**

Instead of treating grieving people as if they have a disease, Moules (1998) argued that we should legitimize their experiences. According to Moules, when we legitimize one’s grief experience, we move away from normative and prescriptive descriptions of others’ experiences. Graeneck (2013) stated, “In studying grief, I believe that psychology, in its quest to be solely scientific in approach and methodologies, has caused a deep disciplinary wound in the field that is akin to the unconscious pain suffered by individual adults” (p. 276). Neimeyer,

Prigerson, and Davies (2002) suggested that this tendency to “psychologize” grief is specifically evident in American culture. They proposed that this is aided by both advances in psychological and medical research as well as an optimistic view that psychotherapy, medicine, and counseling are the appropriate response to a wide range of problems that need to be “fixed.” Neimeyer et al. (2002) suggested that contemporary Western cultures have an essentialist understanding of grief. They argue that this essentialist view further situates grief within the person and does not take into account the broader social systems and structures. This may be a result of our cultural emphasis on individualism (Neimeyer et al.).

### Methodology and Method

Qualitative research is a process of understanding. Its purpose is to understand, not explain, the unique lived experiences of others (Fischer, 2006). Qualitative research also aims to reveal the unique processes by which people construct meanings about their worlds. Phenomenology, the study of existence, lived experience, or life world, is an important approach in qualitative research.

Phenomenological research requires what Edmund Husserl referred to as the epoché (as cited in Giorgi, 2009). The epoché is the first thing one must do in phenomenology. It is an attempt toward bracketing, which means to remain as aware as possible of one’s presuppositions and biases: “It is not a matter of forgetting the past; bracketing means that we should not let our past knowledge be engaged while we are determining the mode and content of the present experience” (Giorgi, p. 92).

Hermeneutics and phenomenology are often studied together in qualitative research. Rennie (2007) defined hermeneutics as “the theory of the operation of understanding in relation to the interpretation of text” (p. 5). Hermeneutics is a basic structure of human understanding. Phenomenology is fundamentally hermeneutic through the continual use of the epoché or bracketing. According to Walsh (2012), “The hermeneutic circle describes the process of projecting oneself into a phenomenon in order to understand it” (p. 66). In qualitative research, hermeneutics is a method of interpretation.

To further the understanding and research of the lived experience of grief and loss, the researcher interviewed three people. Those interviewed had different experiences of grief and loss in terms of what or whom they were grieving. The researcher asked participants

open-ended phenomenological questions about their experience of grief and loss. These questions assessed each person’s own unique experience of the phenomena, how they made meaning of the phenomena, and how they defined the phenomena.

Next began the interpretative phenomenological content analysis of the interview. Content analysis included latent and manifest content. Latent content is that which is in need of further coding. It is the interpretable content. Manifest content is the literal message that is assumed to be straightforward and written clearly in the text. First, the researcher sorted the manifest content from the transcription. Sorting required unpacking and separating textual parts that are of face-value, socially shared, and literal.

Next, the researcher coded the transcripts, identifying and labeling the manifest meanings within the transcript. The researcher coded information she believed was meaningful. Coding assumes that there is more to the literal meaning of a word or phrase; therefore, coding is the interpretation of meaning. Coding allowed the researcher to effectively interpret the latent content as the researcher aimed to always ground the latent content in the manifest content. The researcher extracted words and phrases from the text that she felt were charged or meaningful. The researcher then chose words or phrases that had potential for multiple meanings. The researcher looked for connections within the data. She actively sorted, grouped, and clustered these words, phrases, sortings, process notes, and theoretical notes together to form concepts. These concepts may be pre-existing in the world but are always grounded in the unique experience of the participant. After reducing the three interviews to the conceptual level, the interviewer looked between the content, performing the eidetic reduction. The researcher juxtaposed the derived concepts from within the content, a process known as constant comparative analysis. Following coding, the researcher participated in the process of free imaginative variation in which the researcher freely extracted concepts in an effort to find structural invariants (themes) or what must exist for the phenomenon to be what it is.

### Results

Many themes emerged from the data. The researcher extracted three themes believed to be essential components of grief. These themes were present in unique ways in each of the participants’ stories. They are: the

journey of the loss becoming real, lack of control, and an ongoing connection.

### **The Journey of the Loss Becoming Real**

The feelings of loss may be too painful to feel at first. Grief can be powerful, transformative, and overwhelming. Many who experience loss gradually reach the point at which the loss becomes real to them. This gradual process may involve questioning. One may question the actual process of the death of their loved one, contemplating whether the loss was truly final or truly real. Participants may describe this process as a period of complete disbelief or a separation with one's self. Participant one said, "My grandfather. Where is he? What is he feeling? What is he doing? He no longer has flesh, no longer an outer shell, he's just flesh nothing. But is he nothing? You know what I mean?" At the very moment of his grandfather's death, participant one described the feeling as if what was happening was not real. He felt that it was "unbelievable." He said that a few minutes after his grandfather's actual death, the loss had not "hit" him yet; it was still unreal to him. Participant one stated:

I wondered why I wasn't at the weeping stage. Like, I was like, when am I going to wake up because, like, my grandfather...the person that I love with all my heart, the person who was the greatest in my eyes, was literally no longer here, you know? That was the thing. It was so real. It was unbelievable, like my body or my psyche, my mind or my heart, wasn't allowing it just it...my mind and heart didn't believe it neither. That's why I wasn't at that point yet. You know what I mean? These guys [pointing to head and heart] were still trying to figure out.

Participant two believed that the "shock" did not "hit" her until later. She then described the moment her aunt's death "hit" her. She said, "It was probably later on in the morning that the shock set in." She continued to say, "And for a very long time after that, still even now, it's kind of that feeling that you can't believe that person's gone."

One who is grieving may question over and over again why they are not at the point where they fully feel the total loss. Once this point is reached, the pain can be overwhelming. The griever's realization of the loss can feel like a shock during a time of such confusion and sadness.

Participants described this gradual journey to the loss becoming real as a separation within one's self. The mind and heart can feel they have not caught up with each other until the loss becomes real. The mind may continue to question the experience in order to protect the heart from fully feeling the pain and reality of the loss. The feelings of loss become real after a buildup. Once this point is reached, one might feel that the mind and heart have caught up with each other. In other words, the mind and heart are now working in sync instead of working as two separate entities thinking and feeling differently. Participant three felt empty and could not feel anything. He said,

It wasn't fear, but it was just like frozen in a moment again the people talking to me. I kind of remember them saying things, but I don't really think I was processing it. Like my mind was hearing it and my ear was picking up on sounds; my mind was processing words, but something else was going on in my mind where I didn't feel that I didn't feel anything. I felt pretty empty, and that emptiness wasn't really the weightlessness itself of...I think the weightlessness itself was just feeling like I wasn't in a moment where I actually was.

Participant three believed his mind was trying to remove him from what was happening in the moment. He said, "My mind started to separate myself from what was happening, so I think that's probably what that weightlessness came from, so that sense of I'm here but I'm not here." The feelings of mind/heart separation during the journey of the loss becoming real may be a way to escape the painfulness of the experience. Participant one said that his heart and mind were still trying to figure things out, which is another reason why the death of his grandfather did not yet feel real until a moment during his freshman year of college. He said, "My heart was feeling some type of way because I lost somebody, but my mind was just like, 'Wait, is this real?'"

### **Lack of control**

Grief and loss can involve feeling as if one has no control over the emotions and mind. It can feel like a shock or hit that comes to one suddenly and aggressively. All three participants spoke of grief in this way. This time of loss may feel like a period of darkness in which one has no control, with an external force making them feel an unwanted way. The experience of grief can also



feel like one is frozen in a moment in which one is not really in control of the way one is experiencing life. This sense of being frozen, “hit,” or “shocked” from the experience of loss reveals a sense of a lack of control with how and when one’s unique feelings of loss are experienced.

Grief can bring one to a place of darkness where there is a feeling of a lack of control over the mind. This darkness can feel unescapable, as though it will not allow one to be happy at every moment. Participant two felt a “dark feeling” over her after her cat’s death. She said, “It felt like it was like hovering over me and clenching on, trying to make me feel like shit all day.” After participant two was asked by the interviewer to further describe this, she said, “Yeah, it’s one of those feelings like you forget about...like you do other things and you just try to move on or do something to make yourself happy...It was like a presence like an evil devil or like a dark cloud; it was like making me keep being sad.” She continued by saying:

That’s what it felt like, it just kind of like covering me, giving me like blinders, just focus on how shitty you feel and saying: Remember he’s dead and he’s never coming back and you’ll never see him again and like all those negative feelings you can’t help but feel.

The darkness feels as if it will never end; but as the experience of grief continues and evolves, the darkness becomes something else, gains a different meaning or goes away. Participant one felt he is no longer in that “dark place” although “spurts of it” do come back. He said:

Yeah, dark meaning...I’m discouraged. I no longer have any hope. I no longer have hope, reason, no longer have a bright future, I’m not going to amount to anything. it’s like this dark mass is, like, hovering, grabbing me by the head, and it’s, like, demon-like, it’s dark; it’s like two hands wrapping my head; it’s, like, and that’s exactly what I was feeling for three months straight.

Grief can cause one to feel as if something external controls their mind and emotions, and that it is beyond their power to stop it. It “hits,” “shocks,” “grabs,” “hovers over,” or “terrorizes” the griever.

### Ongoing Connection

Grief and loss do not come to a complete end, but instead evolve into an ongoing connection with the de-

ceased. The person experiencing the loss expresses this in different ways. This ongoing connection provides the griever with comfort in knowing that the loss is not truly final, but continuing to evolve and grow in its own unique way.

All three participants spoke of some kind of ongoing connection with the one that was lost, whether it was a continued connection through dreams, the afterlife, or in the form of a passion for their legacy. Whether it was strength, freedom, motivation, passion, or a positive self-image, all three participants described something positive coming from their experience of grief and loss. Participant one felt that he is continuing his grandfather’s legacy and that his grandfather is still an important part of himself. He said, “He is a part of me and that he lives on in that way because he taught me how and still is teaching me how to be a good man.” He continued to describe how he continues to make his grandfather a part of his life. He said:

I love talking about it because it’s him I’m talking about. Despite the subject matter is his death, it gives me more reasons to talk about his life; and I find myself going into little, like, side bars, you know what I mean?...but, um, I find comfort talking...though you saw me cry, it was comforting, like I felt good in a way because those tears are no longer...these tears are no longer...wow. These tears are no longer grief. These tears are passion.

Participant two said she felt a “coping sensation” when she was able to visit her aunt at the cemetery. Once she saw her aunt’s burial site at the cemetery, she felt like her aunt was not gone. She found comfort in seeing her grave:

I really liked the setup because she has a really pretty urn. It was white with blue flowers, and they have a picture next to it of her, so [it was] like, ‘Here you are, you’re not gone, you’re still here.’ And that felt very good to see you [deceased aunt] again...it was so comforting to see be able to see my aunt at the cemetery and know where she is and if I wanted to see you [deceased aunt] again you’re still here.

Participant three described the dreams he had of his father. In these dreams, it was as if his father was trying to talk to him and give him wisdom, although participant three could not hear what his father was saying. Participant three found meaning in these dreams. He said, “The most meaning I find out of it is like I kind of still have a

relationship with my dad.” He then said, “Even though I’ve had all these years not having him physically in my life, we still kind of connect when those dreams happen; and it’s weird that when I wake up and I realize I’ve had the dream for a moment, I kind of go back into that surreal feeling.” He believed that he continues to connect with his father through these dreams:

Like once I realized I had this dream and its starting to go through my memory, like I kind of, like, have a moment like again I’m just frozen in that time even if I have to go to work even if I have an appointment or something like that I always take a moment or two just to stop and reflect on it, you know, before I go on with the day. Yeah, kind of like I try to take a picture of it in my mind; but like a dream is not a picture, it’s a movie more like a motion picture, but I try to take a snapshot of what occurred and then kind of follow it away.

The participants express this ongoing connection in many ways. One may feel that by continuing the legacy of the deceased, there is a continued connection with the deceased. One may find comfort in continuing to tell the story of the life of the one who was lost. In this way, the mourner’s grief becomes passion, a passion to continue to spread the loved one’s story and carry on their legacy. One can still sense a continued communication with the deceased in these ways. The experience of grief and loss becomes part of a person, and in this way, there is a continued connection with the loss.

### Discussion

This study illuminated and revealed the unique experiences of grief as well as demonstrated the importance of deconstructing the traditional “stages” of grief and loss. Each person’s experience of grief and loss is unique, and each person makes meaning of their experience in their own way. Each participant described a different timeline of their experience of grief.

Participant one continues to live his grandfather’s legacy by continuing to live in a way that makes his grandfather proud. He has made meaning out of his loss by looking at his grief process as transformative. He experienced a dark time in the beginning, but he has embraced his grief and now acknowledges it as more of a feeling of passion—a passion to continue to be the man his grandfather would be proud of. He feels his grief did not end but instead transformed. He did not feel he was in denial; rather, he felt that his heart and mind were

working separately. His mind was not allowing his heart to feel the intensity of the experience. He expressed that he does sometimes go back to that dark place but does not stay there as long.

Participant two has found her experience of grief to be overall positive, as it showed her how much support she has from the people around her. She also finds comfort in knowing she can visit her aunt’s grave and that she can still be close to her aunt in that way.

Participant three felt his father’s death has shaped who he is today. He has experienced much pain but has chosen to look at the dreams of his father as a continued communication in which he finds comfort. He does not believe his grief will ever end.

This study confirmed the literature discussed above. Attig (2011) interpreted grief as an event of loss that becomes part of living in unique, lifelong, and life-changing ways. Attig pointed out that grief does not necessarily end or result in a resolution. He suggested that grief is an incorporation of the loss into “living forward” (p. 47). All three of the participants described their ongoing connection with the one lost. These connections occurred through dreams, by continuing their legacy, seeing them in the afterlife, or making their lost one their passion. This also confirmed Moules’s (1998) view that grief is an evolving connection rather than a severance of the relationship with the deceased.

One may feel that if the feelings of grief end, the connection with the deceased loved one will end. This can bring a sense of fear and guilt. The pain of loss can be debilitating if it remains stagnant; therefore, the ongoing connection can express itself in the form of a passion and love for the person that continue to evolve and change as the griever continues to evolve and change. This provides a continued connection between the griever and the deceased in the form of everlasting unconditional love. The researcher hopes this study helps those who feel stuck in grief to have hope that their relationship with grief can continue to grow and evolve into a positive ongoing connection of passion and love with the one who was lost.

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