

Grief (2 of 5) Elements of Grief

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Welcome to this second talk on grief, a topic and a state of being that can be very difficult. It can also be very deeply connected to our love, the depths of who we are, and what we think is important in this life. It's very important to be able to learn how to be present for grief, to recognize and get under the surface of it, to see grief more clearly. Grief is not an enemy, an illness, or a problem. Grief is part and parcel of human life. Becoming wise about it, and knowing how to be with grief, is one of the great benefits of mindfulness practice.

I'm defining grief as the pain arising in the emptiness born from loss. This definition, I'm hoping, will span all the different ways in which grief is experienced. There are an infinite number of ways that grief is – sometimes it's more emotional, physical, or relational in nature. Different cultures grieve in different ways. Different cultures experience the pain of loss in different ways.

Because it involves a loss, that loss means there's now an emptiness, an absence of something. That absence, that emptiness, can be huge. Some people feel it's so huge that nothing will ever fill it again – we will always be in this great vacuum or great meaninglessness, loneliness, or loss. The bigger that emptiness is, the bigger that absence is, the more it gets filled with many things.

Part of mindfulness practice is to begin to enter into the world of this emptiness, to be able to see clearly what it is that fills the emptiness. What is it that characterizes this pain, this discomfort, that comes with loss? Rather than taking it as being a singular thing, "my grief," we can put a little question mark after it. What is this? Maybe we don't really know the grief. What is this grief? To sit with it, be with it. Not so much to investigate it or think about it, but rather to enter into grief as if it's a temple, a sacred spot, or a place we enter into quietly, peacefully, non-assertively, without our needs, demands, and wants. To really be present in the middle of this emptiness, to make space and room for what's there.

See all the different elements of grief. One of the key things to think about, which I find helpful, is to not give a lot of preferential treatment to the world of thinking, to thoughts, stories, memories, and meanings that we assign to the situation. Rather, enter into this emptiness and start seeing there are stories, meanings, thoughts, ideas, and associations there. Those are part of the big picture, including the emotions and feelings. Begin seeing and making space for all the component parts. Grief is a composite of many different pieces and parts.

Some of them are very personal. Some of them are cultural. Some of them come from our life experience. Some of them come from our hopes and aspirations. Maybe the rug has been pulled from under them. Enter into this carefully, and make space and quietude to really recognize, "Oh, this is what's happening." Make space for it and become quiet.

The thinking mind can become quiet in relation to grief. This is not easy, but it's probably one of the most respectful things to do – to make room for the natural, inner process that our body has for being with grief. Allow grief its space and time.

To begin understanding the component parts of grief, I want to talk a bit about what these might be. One of them is the kind of grief it is or the source of the grief. Some grief is very relational in nature. It has to do with the relationship that has been severed and lost, like a death of a parent, a child, a spouse, a sibling, or a friend.

That relationship was so important. A lot about that relationship comes into play with the grief. There might be a divorce and that relationship comes into play with the grief. That relationship is the emptiness, the loss that has created the absence. Understand the quality of the relatedness that's no longer there or is lost.

Other kinds of grief are more functional – not so much a relationship with another person, but we're losing our abilities. There's grief about aging when many of our abilities become less and less. There's grief from an accident if some abilities or functions we have no longer work. Maybe we've been paralyzed by something. We'll never be able to do things we did before because our body doesn't function the same way. The loss of functioning of abilities that we've had.

There's a loss of roles. Sometimes when people retire, they've lost the role that was so important for who they were. Children leave home, and the role of being a parent is no longer there. The grief is not being able to take care of someone, or have breakfast ready for someone. Someone dies, and part of the grief is not only the loss of the relationship. Another part of it is now we can't have that role of caregiver, lover, or friend that was so valuable for us, such an important part of our identity.

There's more clearly the identity itself, being some person. You can't be that person anymore when this kind of loss has occurred, and not the way that you experienced it before. The loss of identity, loss of who you thought you were and who you thought you were going to become. Your spouse dies, and you expected that you'd be in retirement together, traveling around the world, or playing bridge. Now the spouse is gone, and the anticipated future is no longer there.

Some people are grieving lost futures – lost anticipated ideas of what was going to come, or lost identities of who we were going to be. We lose material goods, we might lose all our money in a stock market crash, and our identity as someone financially stable, secure, or even wealthy is gone. Our identity as someone who can do certain things that require money goes away, and so it's grieving that loss of identity.

There's a loss of material goods, loss of wealth, like I said, money. Losing a valuable piece of property that we have, losing our financial security, losing a home. Many times in divorce we lose something important to us. These are all different kinds of losses that come into play when people experience grief around these things.

Some grief is very personal in nature. Some grief is more social and interpersonal. For example, in an individualistic culture like the United States, many people are not living in a rich, dynamic social sphere of family, clan, or tribe. Maybe a couple has been living together alone. They're old, and maybe no one is taking care of them. If one person dies, and because they're not part of a rich network of family, the grief is very individualistic, very alone. Grief can be very lonely.

Other people might be living in an extended family in a compound, a town, a village, or a tribe. If the elder of the tribe dies, the grief is very social. It's collective. It's something that everybody shares, and the social dynamic of the village has changed with this death. Their whole social world begins shifting and changing. This grief takes a very different form. It's not so lonely. It's collective. When it's collective, it's more cultural, and cultural aspects come into play with how we grieve.

Grief is a composite. It's made up of many different things. Grief is not a singular thing, though each powerful grief that we experience might seem like this is the end of the world. This is it. This is the thing that is so huge and how could anything ever be the same again.

Enter into the world of your grief, maybe in meditation, and let the mind become quiet. This is one of the gifts of meditation. That is to enter into what's difficult, be present for it, but don't let thinking get the upper hand. Feel, sense, and begin allowing the pieces of it to show themselves, and to be recognized and known. Some very different things can happen with grief when we're not churning, thinking, spinning, and living in the thoughts, ideas, histories, and memories – they become quiet. Quieting the stories. The stories are important, but there's another way.

I hope this has given you something to consider. In the emptiness of grief, we fill it with many things. To sit quietly in the middle of it, so all the different component parts can be recognized. That which is extra, those component parts of grief that are not needed, can quiet and settle. Some of that has to do with the stories we tell ourselves and the meanings we assign to grief. That'll be the topic for tomorrow.

Care for yourself well. Think of mindfulness as a powerful way of protecting yourself, caring for yourself, and loving yourself. Not asserting your desires and needs on top of yourself, but rather to listen deeply, to respect here.

Thank you.