Grief and Loss in a Trauma and Attachment Context

Marc Anson, LCSW
Grief and Loss Defined by Dictionary.com

• Grief
  – keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret
  – a cause or occasion of keen distress or sorrow

• Loss
  – detriment, disadvantage, or deprivation from failure to keep, have, or get
  – the state of being deprived of or of being without something that one has had
  – death, or the fact of being dead
  – the accidental or inadvertent losing of something dropped, misplaced, stolen, etc.
  – a losing by defeat; failure to win
Kubler-Ross Stages of Grief

- Denial
- Bargaining
- Anger
- Depression
- Acceptance
**Trauma and Attachment defined once again by Dictionary.com**

- **Trauma**
  - an experience that produces psychological injury or pain.

- **Attachment**
  - an emotional bond between an infant or toddler and primary caregiver, a strong bond being vital for the child’s normal behavioral and social development.
  - an enduring emotional bond that develops between one adult and another in an intimate relationship.
Establishing the Construct

- **Grief** is the physical and emotional response to a **Loss**
- A **Loss** can rise to the level of being considered **Traumatic**
- **Attachment** is what can be disrupted by **Trauma**
A Closer Look at Attachment

• How is it formed?

• Why is it important?
How is Attachment Formed?

- Arousal Relaxation Cycle (1)

1. **Child Experiences Distress**
2. **Child Signals for Relief**
3. **Parent soothes child**
4. **Child relaxes and trust is built**
**Brain Stem**
Regulates breathing, heart rate, etc. Most basic functions to maintain life. Forms very early in utero.

**Amygdala**
Emotion Center; Fight, Flight, or Freeze. Where we feel fear or pleasure. Present in utero and at birth.

**Hippocampus**
Short-term memory. Helps regulate the Amygdala. Develops by age 5.

**Orbitofrontal Cortex**
Social/Emotional Control Center. Works w/ Hippocampus to regulate Amygdala. Develops by age 25.
Why Is Attachment Important?

• Our ability to regulate our own emotions is dependent on our first experiences with co-regulation.

• Our behaviors are tied to our emotions.

• We behave to soothe negative emotions or increase positive emotions.

• Emotional regulation is a skill we must have in order to behave in positive and pro-social ways.

• The brain will either become strong with ability to hold soothing memories, or it will be deficient to manage necessary life tasks.
Attachment Milestones

- Infants attach to parents
- Children try to fit in with siblings and peers
- Teenagers start trying to fit in romantically
- Finding a life partner
Attachment where the rubber meets the road

- All of these milestones are important and when successfully navigated, we feel belonging and are more emotionally healthy.
- Since all of us have had some level of difficulty, there is some level of trauma in all of us.
- Addictions are the means our society seems prone to use for dealing with intense feelings of not fitting in; which brings a deep sense of loss.
Attachment helps grow our brains’ ability to handle loss.
3 Ways Our Emotional Regulation System Becomes Damaged

• We can have struggles because we never built a proper brain structure for co and self emotional regulation, due to traumatic care.

• We can have genetic predispositions towards conditions like anxiety, depression, etc.

• We can suffer later insults to the previously intact emotional regulation system due to loss and the resulting crippling grief.
Our Nervous System

Central Nervous System (CNS)
- Brain and spinal cord
- Integrative and control centers

Peripheral Nervous System (PNS)
- Cranial nerves and spinal nerves
- Communication lines between the CNS and the rest of the body

Sensory (afferent) division
- Somatic and visceral sensory nerve fibers
- Conducts impulses from receptors to the CNS

Motor (efferent) division
- Motor nerve fibers
- Conducts impulses from the CNS to effectors (muscles and glands)

Sympathetic division
- Mobilizes body systems during activity ("fight or flight")

Parasympathetic division
- Conserves energy
- Promotes "housekeeping" functions during rest

Aueronomic nervous system (ANS)
- Visceral motor (involuntary)
- Conducts impulses from the CNS to cardiac muscles, smooth muscles, and glands

Somatic nervous system
- Somatic motor (voluntary)
- Conducts impulses from the CNS to skeletal muscles
Nerves Do Not Exist In a Vacuum

- There is a connection between the social world and our biological world
- Our experiences have an effect on our nervous system
- Losses and the resulting grief have a major impact on our nervous system
- The use of relationship to help a person regulate their internal states is a logical step
- We see the need for more than just Cognitive approaches, since we are dealing with internal states that are deeply dependent on lower brain structures.
## Window of Tolerance (Poly-Vagal Theory)

### State of Hyper-Arousal
- Sympathetic system activated: Acceleration of autonomic nervous system response – increased heart rate and blood pressure, increased blood flow to large muscles, etc.
- Fight/flight response activated: state of hyper-vigilance, anxiety, perception of danger
- Thinking is either rigid or chaotic
- Pre-frontal cortex not activated – processing through limbic/brainstem/survival mechanisms of the brain
- **No new learning can take place**

### Optimal Zone of Arousal – Window of Tolerance
- Ventral vagal nerve/parasympathetic system stimulated: Deceleration of autonomic nervous system response – body regulated, fear modulated, greater access to intuition and insight
- Social engagement system activated (connectedness with others)
- Self-soothing/emotional regulation system activated
- Full activation of pre-frontal cortex
- State of mind is calm, alert, relaxed, aware, mindful, flexible, accepting, energetic, coherent, empathetic
- Experience full range of emotions with a sense of control and awareness of options
- **New Learning can take place**

### State of Hypo-Arousal
- Dorsal vagal nerve/parasympathetic system activated: Extreme deceleration of autonomic nervous system response – decreased heart rate and blood pressure, dissociation of awareness, etc.
- Depression
- Isolation/withdrawal, flop/shut-down response
- **No new learning can take place**
Lessons from Poly-Vagal Theory

• According to Poly-vagal theory: trauma, loss, or other stressful events can really mess with our autonomic states, and therefore our behaviors follow in response to try and modulate those autonomic states.

• Our digestive system along with other internal organs are also affected by our stress.

• People who have suffered trauma or who never really developed a healthy emotional regulation system have a more difficult time regulating with the ventral vagal nerve, and may swing back and forth from Hyper Arousal or Hypo Arousal or may get stuck on either side.

• Staying in the window of tolerance is adaptive and helpful for our emotional and physical health.

• The idea is to help a person stay in the window of tolerance through connectedness, relationship, soothing and they will be optimally repairing the grief from the losses they experience.
The Effects of Traumatic Losses

• The earlier the traumatic loss the more profound the effects may be.

• Major losses, even if it is a loss of trust in a safe world, can be seen as disruptions in the development of a healthy brain’s ability to regulate the emotions.

• There is a disruption in the ability to effectively and appropriately signal others for help soothing. (Arousal Relaxation Cycle or Circle of Security models)

• When others do try and help it may not be as easily recognized as helpful.
The Effects of Traumatic Losses

• Losses can happen at any stage in our lives.
• We are deeply affected by the loss of what we once organized our ability to regulate our emotions on.
• Think about how a person has to readjust at the loss of a parent.
• Without a healthy functioning emotional regulation system there is more reliance throughout the life span on substances or other instant gratification means.
Applications for Treatment

• Effective treatment for losses should focus on the very same pattern that helped us feel safe and soothed from the beginning: Our attachment relationships.

• We can not ignore the underlying losses that clients are experiencing.

• Easier to focus on behavior rather than see the underlying hurts

• Cognitive therapy is not likely very effective when major trauma is involved; Cognitive theory is dependent on higher cognition (Cortex level)
Applications for Treatment

• Help clients tap into their attachment resources
• Help them increase their ability to seek out, signal, and effectively get others to nurture them
• Get to the deeper issues with substance abuse or other addiction issues
A Substitute for Attachment?

- Is it any wonder that one of the highest risk times for substance abuse is with the loss or feared loss of close interpersonal relationships?

- With so much hurt on the line, should we even form attachments?

- If we never do, we never form the true capacity for emotional regulation and are forced to regulate from substance to substance or from instant gratification to instant gratification.

- Ever searching and never feeling true satisfaction.
The Power of Social Networks

• Why is it that men seem to die sooner after their spouse dies compared to when women outlive their spouse?

• “He (Espinosa) found men who are grieving after their wife's death experience a 30% increase in mortality. For women, there is no increased chance of dying due to the loss of their husband.” (5)

*Study done by Javier Espinosa, who led the study at the Rochester Institute of Technology in America*

• One possible explanation could be that women seem to have stronger social networks.
The Big Picture of Treatment

As we approach treatment of grief and loss:

1. Understanding
2. Identifying
3. Accepting
4. Changing
Understanding:

“The man with insight enough to admit his limitations comes nearest to perfection.”

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
“The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches, but to reveal to him his own.”

– Benjamin Disraeli
Acceptance:

We cannot change anything unless we first accept it. Condemnation doesn’t liberate, it oppresses.

– Carl Jung
Change:

“On the Plains of Hesitation bleach the bones of countless millions who, at the Dawn of Victory, sat down to wait, and waiting – died!”

– George W. Cecil

“Finding ourselves takes time. It is hard work and it is worth doing.”

– Anne Wilson Schaef
References

2. Beyond Consequences by Heather Forbes and Bryan Post
4. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1868418/