

GRIEF IN PRISONS: HOW PVS VISITORS CAN BEST RESPOND

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"You cannot mourn in jail. You have to be macho: any sign of weakness and you will be beaten, robbed or raped...The energy blocked from mourning goes to violence instead...The jails are violent because they contain anxious, frightened men who have been deprived of the numbing power of drugs that so many of them are used to using as a means of not feeling. As a result, many are left with only violence to help them balance their inner worlds. If they had the safety to mourn, they might have a chance to learn other means of coping, but the jail culture does not allow for this." (Marta Green, D.Min, a Mental Health Specialist in Rikers Island Prison)

GRIEF

Grief is acute sorrow or deep sadness caused by loss, misfortune or disaster. It is very personal. It is also a back and forth process. At times the person feels the pain of the loss and at other times needs to seek relief by concentrating on other things like going to the yard, reading, religious services, school or work. It is also not something that one gets over. It becomes part of a person's life history.

FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE GRIEF

- 1) The nature of the relationship with the deceased.
- 2) The circumstances surrounding the death. For example, an older person or a child, expected or unexpected, traumatic (murder, suicide) or natural.
- 3) The role the deceased played in the mourner's life.
- 4) *Previous life experiences with loss and death.*
- 5) Social, ethnic, generational and religious background of the griever.
- 6) Sex role conditioning.
- 7) Presence of concurrent stressors or crises.
- 8) Addiction in the mourner's life.

BOWLBY'S PHASES OF GRIEF

- 1) Phase of numbing. This lasts from hours to weeks.
- 2) Phase of yearning and searching for the lost figure. Can last for months and sometimes for years.
- 3) Phase of disorganization and despair where the reality of death can no longer be denied.
- 4) Final phase as the mourner adjusts to the loss.

STAGES OF GRIEF

- 1) Shock and denial. This cannot be happening to me.
- 2) A sense of reality. This really is true.
- 3) A sense of loss of control. Some wonder if they are going "crazy".
- 4) Adjustment. There is a sense of acceptance and regaining control of one's life.

TASKS OF GRIEF (Dr. J. William Worden)

- 1) To accept the reality of the loss.
- 2) To experience the pain of grief.
- 3) To adjust to the new environment of one's life.
- 4) To withdraw emotional energy from the past and begin to live in the present reality.

NORMAL GRIEF REACTIONS

- 1) Physical—Tightness in chest, throat, hollowness in the stomach, weakness, lack of energy, dry mouth, breathlessness, etc.
- 2) Emotions—Sadness, anger, guilt, loneliness, shock, relief, numbing, anxiety, etc.
- 3) Behaviors—Sleep and appetite disturbances, sighing, restlessness, crying, dreaming of the deceased, withdrawal, inability to concentrate, etc.
- 4) Cognitive—Disbelief, confusion, preoccupation, a sense of presence, hallucinations, etc.
- 5) Spiritual—Trust in God/Higher Power, anger at God/Higher Power, can't feel God/Higher Power's presence, etc.

COMPLICATED GRIEF—Also known as dysfunctional grief. This is grief that is unresolved and disrupts a person's ability to function. It often causes or coexists with substance abuse, anxiety, major depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (which is especially likely if a death is unexpected).

Signs of complicated grief include the following:

- 1) Inability to accept the death and to move on with life.
- 2) Extreme, persistent feelings of irritability, sadness, guilt, self-blame, bitterness, or anger about the death.
- 3) Denial or inability to express grief.
- 4) Difficult performing daily activities.
- 5) Withdrawal from activities.
- 6) Difficulty with trust.
- 7) Trouble enjoying life or holding the belief that life has no meaning or purpose.

8) Suicidal thoughts or attempts.

Risk factors:

- 1) History of mental illness or childhood abuse.
- 2) Substance abuse.
- 3) Many losses occurring in a short time.
- 4) Poor coping skills.
- 5) Lack of a support system.
- 6) Traumatic or violent death of the deceased person.
- 7) A relationship with the deceased person which was estranged, "unfinished," or lacking in legal rights (for example, that of an unmarried partner).

UNIQUE GRIEF ISSUES

- 1) Murder.
- 2) Suicide.
- 3) Death of a child.
- 4) Death of the parental figure.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE LOSSES THAT COME WITH INCARCERATION

- 1) Ending of a relationship by divorce or just moving on by the person in the community.
- 2) Loss of material goods.
- 3) Loss of a job.
- 4) Loss of control.
- 5) Loss of traditional parenting responsibilities.
- 6) Loss of parental rights.
- 7) Loss of dreams and goals.
- 8) Inability to be with family during special times, i.e. birth of a child or grandchild, marriage, graduations, the illness of loved ones, etc.
- 9) Loss of health.
- 10) Loss of spirituality.
- 11) Loss from death of family and friends (inside and outside the walls).

SUFFERING

"The bearing of pain, distress, injury, grief..." (Webster's New World Dictionary)
"The state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person." Eric Cassel

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS THAT COME FROM SUFFERING

- 1) Who was I before incarceration? What did my life mean? Was I selfish? Giving? Did I care for myself? Others?
- 2) Who am I now?
- 3) Who will I become?

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- 1) Support the incarcerated person through visits and reminding them they are still cared for.
- 2) Companionship for those incarcerated who are grieving. This involves the following:
 - a) Companionship is about honoring the spirit; it is not about focusing on the intellect.
 - b) Companionship is about curiosity; it is not about expertise.
 - c) Companionship is about walking alongside; it is not about leading or being led.
 - d) Companionship is about being still; it is not about frantic movement forward.
 - e) Companionship is about discovering the sacred silence; it is not about filling every painful moment with talk.
 - f) Companionship is about listening with the heart; it is not about analyzing with the head.
 - g) Companionship is about bearing witness to another person's pain; it is not about taking away or relieving the pain.
 - h) Companionship is about going to the wilderness of the world with another human being; it is not about thinking you are responsible for finding the way out.

(Dr. Alan Wolfelt)