



Grief and mourning rarely follow a checklist.



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Foundational Fact: Grieving is something we do, not something that is done to us.

Adapted from the original by Dr. Bill Webster

We need to better understand not only what people experience after a loss, but also why grief affects people so uniquely and individually. We do not passively and inevitably go through a series of stages or tasks. Rather, the grief process involves many choices, with numerous possible options to approach or avoid the situation at hand.

No good paradigm of grief will simply propose re-establishing pre-loss patterns of emotion or behavior, expressed in comments like “getting back to normal.” Life has changed and will never be the same again! But that does not mean it cannot be good. The challenge is how we can support the person in integrating these changes into their life.

We all write a script for our lives. I wrote mine as a teenager, a scenario that included going to school and university, having a career and marrying the most beautiful woman in the world. As the plot progressed, we would work hard, have children, do things as a family and when the kids were grown we would travel, then retire, and ride off into the sunset together. Think about your own script and where it leads.

But often, life does not go according to the script. Not everything works out the way we planned. And while we have little choice over where we are born or our genetic or cultural influences, who we ultimately become is powerfully influenced by our experiences and how we allow them to affect us. In this statement we find an important key for life and living. Stuff happens! The key is in enabling people to make good choices about what they are going to do about what has happened.

We need to place the loss in a context of meaning, which can be done in two ways. First, we can reaffirm what we formerly believed about life; or second, we can establish a new belief system about the meaning of life. In other words, does this experience make sense according to what I believed about life before, or do I have to adapt my way of interpreting how life can still be meaningful? The challenge is to find ways to integrate the experience into life as it now is, and to adopt new assumptions about our world which has been shaken and even violated by the loss.

Caregivers, families and those seeking to support grieving people need to recognize the unique and personal meanings of loss. We must go beyond clichéd expressions of support or preconceived ideas of what a particular loss feels like to any given griever. Any loss should prompt us to listen intently for clues as to the unique significance of the bereavement experience for each individual.

Helping people through grief means more than understanding the emotions they’re expressing. It means supporting them as they reinterpret how life can be meaningful even in the light of loss, empowering them to define life as it now is and finding ways to make the most of what they have left. ■