Grief: Beyond Kübler-Ross

South Carolina Society of Chaplains
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Learning Objectives

- Describe long-held assumptions about the grief experience that are now challenged by recent developments in grief research and theory.
- Discuss the importance of considering one’s experience of grief in light of one’s style of attachment to God.
- Engage the grief experience through a narrative perspective that considers disruptions to one’s narrative as one of the primary challenges of grief.
- Present the contemporary constructivist perspective which understands the reconstruction of meaning following narrative disruption as a/the central task of grieving.
- Propose possible interventions and strategies of care with those in grief that emerge from this contemporary work.
Grief:
Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry

Fortress Press, 2010
Types of Loss

- Material loss
- Relationship loss
- Role loss
- Systemic loss
- Functional loss
- Intrapsychic loss

Program I

Grief: Beyond Kübler-Ross
Where the Grief Field Has Been

- Cultural limitations
- Psychoanalytic/Standard model
- Stage theory
- Attachment theory
Historically, much cultural bias and neglect; “universality” in grief

Paul Rosenblatt:
- Death appears to be always difficult
- Great cultural variation
- What we think we know: a “temporarily solid base”
Critique of Standard Model

- A ‘normal’ way to mourn; not particular
- Return to pre-loss status
- Intrapsychic process
- Ignores social/relational features
- Always affective
- Affect is painful
- Purpose of mourning: decathexis
- Meanings of loss not considered
- Time-limited; full resolution of loss

(drawn from G. Hagman, 2001)
Critique of Stage Theory

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: stages of dying
- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

Used indiscriminately to describe grief
Prescriptive, rather than descriptive
Attachment Theory

- A critical cornerstone of grief work for many years
- A preferred framework for many grief specialists for understanding grief
Program II

Grief Through the Lens of Attachment to God
Attachment Theory

- Long a preferred framework for considering loss
- John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth
- Attachment behavior is instinctual, constitutive of being human
- “from the cradle to the grave” (Bowlby, 1979)
- Substantial role in one’s capacity to form secure relationships later in life
Language of Attachment

- Caregiver responsiveness: “willingness to act as comforter and protector” (Bowlby, 1973)

- Caregiver availability: both the accessibility and responsiveness of the caregiver

- Set Goal: seeking caregiver/attachment figure availability

- Expectations regarding caregivers/others are functions of internal working models
Secure:
expect caregivers to be accessible and responsive to needs; feel more confident to explore and engage with the world

Anxious-ambivalent:
chronically fear rejection; preoccupied with eliciting comfort and security

Avoidant:
anticipate rejection or lack of responsiveness; suppress attachment feelings and behaviors as defense against rejection
Attachment figure as a “secure base from which to explore” the environment (Ainsworth et al. 1978)

Bowlby’s use of “secure base” to describe parenting and the role of the analyst
Attachment Theory and Grief

“The common core to grief…is rooted in the attachments that we make to the people and objects around us” (Parkes, 2001)

From an attachment perspective, loss may be very difficult because we resist ongoing separation from our attachment figures and try to reestablish their proximity and care.

When faced with permanent loss, we may demonstrate attachment feelings and behaviors (Bowlby):

- (Numbing)
- Protest
- Despair
- (Detachment) Reorganization
According to Bowlby, how we respond to loss will reflect how our attachment system has come to be organized over time.

For many with anxious-ambivalent or avoidant attachment styles, the distress following loss may be great.
What Has Often Been Missing?

The possible place of attachment to God in the experience of grief
Attachment to God

- An important and largely neglected "psycho-religious construct" (K. Pargament)

- An important lens (not exhaustive or comprehensive) for understanding experience of loss

- Some empirical work (Belavich & Pargament 2002; Kelley 2003; Kelley & Chan 2012) shows strong correlations between style of attachment to God and attempts to cope with stress or loss
Voices on Attachment to God

- **Gordon Kaufman**: God may function as “absolutely adequate attachment figure”

- **Philip Bennett**: with God as ultimate secure base, people may better negotiate separation and loss

- **Lee Kirkpatrick**: at the forefront of innovative theoretical and empirical work
Kirkpatrick’s Work

- A personal relationship with God is at core of monotheistic religions, especially Christianity.

- Believers of non-Christian traditions often have personal relationships with gods, deities.

- For many, perceived relationship with God provides form of love like infant-mother love.
Many features of religion/religious behavior may reflect dynamic attachment process:

- intended to achieve *proximity* to God
- intended to seek God as *haven of safety*
- portray God as ultimate *secure base*
What Role Does Attachment to God Play in Coping with Stress or Loss?

- A study of 155 people waiting for a loved one in surgery
- Secure attachment to God related to positive spiritual coping
- Positive spiritual coping differentially related to better adjustment

- A community-wide study of 93 people who had experienced a significant death in prior year
- More secure style of attachment to God seemed to buffer people from depression and grief.
- Secure attachment to God led to greater meaning, greater stress-related growth, and more positive religious coping.
What Might This Look Like?

The Case of Alison

What are the losses?
What do you wonder regarding style of attachment?
What would you be curious about regarding attachment to God?

The Chaplain’s Role regarding Attachment to God

- How might your work in spiritual care attend to place of attachment to God in responding to loss?

- We want to pay attention to what we are picking up about attachment to God, or talk explicitly about it
  - in anticipation of a significant loss
  - and then following a significant loss

- The spiritual care relationship may be a means of leading to a more secure relationship with the Divine
  - Consistency of care
  - Consistency of message
  - Secure base

- Importance of other sources of moving toward greater security in attachment to God – especially the faith community
Program III

Grief as a Meaning-Making Enterprise
Narrative and Loss

- We are people of stories
- We think of our lives in terms of stories – received and created
- Central elements:
  - Plot
  - Theme
  - Characters
  - Timing
  - Continuity
  - Sense/Coherence
Narrative Disruption
The Great Challenge of Loss

“Like a novel that loses a central character in the middle chapters, the life story disrupted by loss must be reorganized, rewritten, to find a new strand of continuity that bridges the past with the future in an intelligible fashion.”

- Robert Neimeyer
Narrative and Meaning

Why is narrative disruption so challenging, painful?

Stories often convey the MEANING or MEANINGS by which we live

Narrative disruption may disrupt or destroy MEANING

Narrative disruption may leave people adrift in MEANINGLESSNESS
What is meaning…

Function of meaning…
What are some of the meanings with which people may struggle during and after loss?

How does one make sense of self, of others, of the world?
Spiritual or Theological Meaning

What are some of the spiritual or theological meanings with which people may struggle during and after loss?

How does one make sense of God or the Divine?
Contemporary constructivist work (e.g. Neimeyer):

- Grief is not about stages, resolution, returning to normal.
- The central task of grieving is at the level of meaning-making. After struggle, loss, crisis, it is often meanings that must be healed.
- My story may be able to absorb the loss, and I may be able – with time – to affirm my meaning.
- If my losses have disrupted my story and shaken my meaning, I must rewrite my story and thereby reconstruct meaning.
Meaning and Grief

The central task of grief:

the affirmation or reconstruction of meaning in response to loss
Program IV

Grief: Where Do We Go From Here?
The Chaplain’s Role in Meaning Making

- How might your work in spiritual care attend to narrative disruption following loss?
- How might your work in spiritual care attend to threatened meaning following loss?
- How is the spiritual care relationship a means of co-constructing meaning?
- What are other sources of meaning for those you work with?
The Chaplain’s Role in Meaning Making

“We had the experience but missed the meaning”

T.S. Eliot

- Meaning is co-constructed
- We need others to help us
  - Hear our story
  - Notice the narrative disruption
  - Listen for meaning
  - See where meaning has been shaken
  - Support our efforts to write a new story and make new meaning

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Some topics to attend to:

- What are the multiple losses one may be facing?
- What is the life story one has been living – or wanting to live – up to now?
- How do these losses fit or not fit within the ‘plot’ of one’s narrative?
- Do the losses represent a disruption of one’s narrative?

more…
The Chaplain’s Role

- What is happening to one’s sense of meaning?
- Is one struggling with loss of meaning, sense?
- Where is God in all of this for the person?
- What faith/theological meanings is the person drawing?
- Is God a secure base for the person – holding the person in the midst of all that is falling away?
- Is God inconsistent or utterly unavailable to the person?
- What sort of faith community is available to the person?
As long as we are alive,

- The story is not over.
- A new plot can emerge.
- Meaning may remain.
- New meanings are possible.

How can I affirm what’s possible or suggest new possibilities?

How can I connect this person with others and with communities who can support them in their meaning-making efforts?

How can I model the security of attachment that God offers?

How can I affirm or ‘lend’ hope to the other for a future with our loving God?
Program V

Questions and Conversation
Contact Information

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