Chapter 2

Symbolic Loss

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Many different losses in life engender grief reactions. Loss that is not tangible, through a death, is referred to as symbolic loss. Examples of symbolic loss are divorce, placement in foster care, retirement or losing a job, and diagnosis of a serious disability or chronic illness. Individuals and families at all stages of life are vulnerable to symbolic losses. A major difference between loss due to death and a symbolic loss is the lack of acknowledgment of symbolic losses. Those grieving a symbolic loss may not receive the same kind of support as those grieving a death since the griever or others may not identify the loss. While the majority of research on grief has focused on reaction to death, we can apply some of what we know about grief in reaction to death to help inform our understanding of grief related to symbolic losses. Sharing this understanding with clients who have experienced a symbolic loss, but not acknowledged it, may be of great help to a client who is confused by his or her own grief reactions.

CORE COMPETENCIES IN THIS CHAPTER

*Competencies in bold are addressed significantly in this chapter.*

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Distinguish symbolic loss from tangible loss
- Identify sources of symbolic loss at different stages of life
- Identify symbolic losses associated with life situations such as foster care placement, substance dependence and divorce
- Understand the impact of symbolic losses in vulnerable populations
SUGGESTED DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Discuss the types of symbolic losses that you have observed in the lives of individuals and families that you have encountered.
2. Discuss the differences you have observed in the ways that individuals and families acknowledge tangible losses (from death) and symbolic losses.
3. Discuss the possible symbolic losses that occur with the diagnosis of a serious medical condition such as cancer or diabetes.
4. Discuss the possible symbolic losses experienced by children in foster care and the emotional reactions that might be manifestations of their grief.

SUGGESTED CHAPTER ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS

1. Exercise: Research related to symbolic loss:
   - Choose a symbolic loss that you are likely to encounter in your practice. (For example, if you are a human resources professional, you might encounter employees who are applying for disability benefits due to a serious medical condition). In other settings the loss might be divorce, job loss, the “empty nest”, foster care placement etc.
   - Search the Internet for professional literature that addresses this type of symbolic loss. Compile the most useful references into a grief resources catalogue for your future use
   - Conduct a second Internet search of Government and Non-government organizations that provide information to the public about coping with this same kind of symbolic loss. Add the most useful sites to your grief resources catalogue.
   - Compare the information obtained from both sources—the professional literature and the public information sources. Is the information provided similar? Make note of any discrepancies or deficiencies in either source.
   - Continue to add to or delete from the resources you collect as you complete this course or text.

2. Understanding the experience of symbolic loss:
   - After you have researched the professional literature and Internet resources available related to a specific type of symbolic loss, it will be helpful to hear directly from individuals who have experienced this type of loss.
• One way to do this is to interview a person about their reactions.
• If you do not know someone to interview, you can search the Internet for blogs and other web pages on which individuals post their own narratives. (An example is the video streamed interview with Susan Leigh on infertility after cancer diagnosis on the Livestrong web site www.livestrong.org)
• As you listen through the interview, pay attention to the verbal and non-verbal expressions of feeling by the interviewee as he or she discusses the symbolic losses they have experienced.
• Make note of the similarities and differences between the feelings expressed by the interviewee about their symbolic losses and the feelings you have heard expressed by someone grieving a death.

3. Video
• Choose one of the videos listed below to view. As you watch, identify the symbolic losses experienced by the characters in the video. Make note of how the characters manifest grief in reaction to these symbolic losses. Discuss your observations. Next discuss your thoughts about if, how and by whom the symbolic losses were or were not acknowledged. Discuss the support the characters in the video received for their grief reactions to the symbolic loss.
• Videos: Stepmom, The Squid and the Whale, My Life as a House, Lorenzo’s oil, Seabiscuit, The Fighter, Crazy Heart, Smoke Signals

SUGGESTED TEACHING TIPS
A journal may be a useful tool for students, particularly for documenting and reflecting on their own emotional reactions to the material in this course. You may want to include this in assignments and even assign weekly topics (such as “symbolic loss in my own life”). Students who have completed this kind of journal often say it is a very useful way to address their own feelings that are triggered by course material. It is also a useful self-care tool for many helping professionals through their careers.
ASSESSMENT FOR IN-CLASS USE

The following assessment has been created for in-class use. This assessment may be available through Pearson’s MyTest website—allowing for easy access for creating your own tests. This assessment may also be offered in a Blackboard/Angel/D2L/WebCT package. Please contact your local Pearson sales representative to learn about the options available. Visit, http://www.pearsonhighered.com/replocator.

Multiple Choice Questions

Difficulty: 1 = Easy; 2 = Medium; 3 = Challenging

Choose the BEST possible answer for each of the following.

1. Which of the following is NOT considered a symbolic loss?
   a. A death in the family
   b. Separation of the family due to divorce
   c. Separation from family due to foster care placement
   d. Diagnosis of a disabling medical condition such as Alzheimer’s Disease

   Answer: A
   Difficulty: 1
   Competency: Practice Contexts

2. Which of the following makes symbolic losses different from actual loss due to death?
   a. The grief experienced in reaction to symbolic loss is not as intense as grief in reaction to a death
   b. There is no research on symbolic losses
   c. Symbolic losses often go unacknowledged by others
   d. There are more support services available for people who have experienced a symbolic loss than for those who have experienced a death

   Answer: C
   Difficulty: 1
   Competency: Human Behavior
3. Symbolic losses experienced by persons who have emigrated to the U.S. from other countries may not be acknowledged by professionals for which of the following reasons?
   a. The symbolic losses associated with emigration are secondary to legal issues that must be addressed
   b. Professionals may lack awareness of the customs of the country of origin
   c. Immigrants may not disclose their immigration status
   d. There is choice involved in immigration so the impact of loss is less than an involuntary loss
   
   Answer: B
   Competency: Diversity in Practice

4. Individuals who experience a symbolic loss may not take time to grieve for which of the following reasons?
   a. The loss may not be identified as a loss
   b. There is no time to grieve when so many symbolic losses demand practical adjustments
   c. Peers may provide all the support that is needed, circumventing a grief reaction
   d. Grief is delayed when symbolic loss occurs immediately following death
   
   Answer: A
   Competency: Human behavior

5. Which of the following grief theorists was first to use the term “symbolic loss” in the text Grief, Dying and Death?
   a. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross
   b. Sigmund Freud
   c. Eric Lindeman
   d. Therese Rando

   Answer: D
   Competency: Human Behavior

**Essay Questions**

1. Identify a symbolic loss that a client or someone you know has experienced. Describe the grief reactions you observed in the individual following the loss. Describe the type of support the individual received and compare it to the support you have observed in the case of a death.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books


Journals

Websites


- http://www.alexandrakennedy.com

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Child Welfare Information Gateway web site has many useful articles relating to loss in foster care and adoption

- http://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/casework/helping.cfm

The National Resource Center for Respite and Crisis Care Services provides many useful information sheets. ARCH encourages readers to copy and make use of them, but to credit ARCH when doing so.

- http://www.archrespite.org/ARCHfact.htm

Several articles on helping children grieve in different situations, including divorce, are published in Ladies Home Journal. Example: When Children Grieve

The unique needs of grieving foster parents are discussed in this article


The Lance Armstrong Foundation’s Livestrong web site includes many first person accounts of cancer survivors

- http://www.livestrong.org