



Francis A. Martin, Ph.D.

For approximately 40 years, Dr. Martin has been a mental health care provider, through clinical work, research and publishing, teaching, and leadership. He has conducted counseling and psychotherapy in private practice, hospitals, universities, and agencies and provided clinical supervision for numerous individuals who pursued their degrees and, later, their licenses. Currently, he is the Executive Director of The Center for Clinical Training (TCCT) in Nashville, TN.

© 2023 BMS Holdings Group, LLC. For questions and/or permission to reprint this article in whole, or in part, for any purpose other than personal use, contact inquiries@theBMSproject.org.

"Loss, Grief, Change, and Adaptability" by Francis A. Martin, Ph.D.

Understanding Loss and Change

Naturally and inevitably, as we emerge into the world, we begin to suffer losses. The pacifier that calms us disappears. And we suffer. More deeply, grandparents or others die. And, we suffer. From these losses, we learn that some losses cause great pain. Then, there are momentary losses, such as "losing" friends because they move away. Or, the family relocates from Amarillo, Texas, to Richmond, Virginia, causing us to lose many familiar places and people. For some children and adolescents, these things are catastrophic.

And, then, there is change. A fact of life is that life involves change. The toothache that emerges on Tuesday wasn't there on Monday. And, then, the girl or boy who was a playmate next door becomes the potentially romantic and sexual interest next door. Change can be as tormenting as it is exhilarating.

The importance of this discussion about loss and change is that those of us who experience these things often feel like we are "going crazy." Usually, although loss and change may not feel good, they are not indicators of mental illness or personal failure. The changes may be stressful, but the stress is not a sign of sickness. Instead, they are demands that come with life and that challenge our ways of adapting and coping. Here are some of these demands.

Death and grief: Losing a loved one to death is the loss that is felt most deeply simply because the loss is immensely important, permanent, and life changing. Often, the pain of losing someone comes with added demands, such as relocating from one home to another or from one city to another.

Compromised health: In athletes, the possibilities of compromised health usually involve injuries, but may involve diseases, such as diabetes. Nevertheless, no matter which kind of compromised health it is, its impact sometimes overwhelms us. The injury may lead to the demand for lifetime change. Good change: Most of us do not associate good change with distress.

Good change: Most of us do not associate good change with distress. However, the list of stressful, good changes is quite long. Surely, it includes hard and disciplined training toward competing effectively in sports. While effectively competing is desirable, it can also be very stressful.

Loss of a relationship: Just because there are so many of them, all of us know about the breakdown and dissolution of a childhood friendship or an adolescent romantic relationship. While this is not always stressful, it often is, leaving children and adolescents with emotional scars, fears about other relationships, and sometimes expressions of anger or depression.

Continued...

Loss of a cherished goal: This is a loss that is particularly important for children and adolescents who compete in athletics. The goal is clearly a visible one, if it is a state championship, for example. However, the failure to achieve the goal for one child may be radically different for another child. Both of them feel disappointment, but one of them moves on and the other one doesn't. For the second child—the one who can't move on—the loss is deeply felt, but may also lead to a confusing, isolating, and unusually long experience.

Clearly, these losses and demands for change are an incomplete list. Many more could be added. For example, the death of a beloved pet or loss of personal security that follows a school shooting or the many losses that come with the personal injury or victimization of a friend or family member, they may be overwhelmed by the impact.

Coping with Loss and Change

While all of us must cope with loss, we are not likely to find a pattern or plan to follow. Even without a plan to follow, almost all of us do, at least, two things when we grieve: hurt and adjust. Neither hurting nor adjusting is welcome or desirable. Probably, the most hurt and most demanding adjustments follow the death of someone we love.

Death and grief.

When someone close to us dies, we grieve. It doesn't feel good. Typically, most of us feel the pain of grief, but slowly move beyond it. However, sadly, dying and grieving are sometimes complicated by tormenting circumstances. An adolescent girl says, "God, I hate her for what she did. She was my best friend and she killed herself. I loved her so much."

The word "death" sounds like an ominous one, when it refers to someone important to us. We do not hear the word comfortably. Instead, we hear it with dread and foreboding, knowing that we will be grieving for a while. We expect to live permanently without someone we needed in our lives. We expect to be hurting.

Grief, then, is the hurt we feel, after an important personal loss. It is an emotional and physical reaction to this loss. These reactions are quite normal.

Grief is painful. It hurts. In fact, in the few days that follow a death, it hurts so much that we feel and think of almost nothing else. We are more aware of the tightness in our throats than feeling ordinary hunger. We are more aware of a disturbed stomach, or even nausea, than our need to sleep. We feel uneasy, sometimes wondering whether a disease of some sort may have afflicted us. These things, along with many other reactions, make us wonder what's happening to us, but they are normal responses to a major loss.

Grief is directional. This is important. Grief does not sit still. It moves. This fact tells us that we will inevitably move beyond grieving.

Grief is personal. If you are grieving, you know that grief is personal. You feel grief your way, not exactly like anyone else. Your feelings and your unique loss may be shared with others, but no one feels your feelings exactly the way you do. This may add to a sense of loneliness. It isn't loneliness. It is a sign of your deeply personal responses to loss.

Continued...

Grief is more than hurt. If you ask anyone what it feels like to grieve, almost universally you will hear, "It hurts." If you were to ask more questions about feelings, you would hear about other ones, like confusion or guilt or others. Usually, we need to be reminded of the fact that all of these feelings and maybe others come because we loved and lost someone. We lost to be sure, but we loved.

Grief may be as good as it is bad. It feels bad, but it is natural and healthy. Typically, grief is a response to a real and significant loss. Feeling bad does not make grief good. It is feeling bad because of the loss of someone you love that makes it good. Grief is an affirmation of love. Without love, grief would not be felt. But there are other features of grieving that are important for us to keep in mind. As you grieve, keep in mind that your grief is personally yours, unlike anyone else's.

In our hearts, we all know that death and loss are inevitable parts of life. In fact, they give meaning to our lives because, at least, they remind us how precious life is. Discovering this meaning, though, may not be as easy as it sometimes appears to be. Grieving is often an inconsistent process that may confuse us. At one moment, we may be tempted to deny that the loss happened, preferring to blame the other team for cheating or the officials for being biased. At another moment, the loss may provoke determination to improve our athletic talents. At another moment, we may feel guilty for not contributing as much as we should have to the team's efforts. Or, we could add humiliation to our losses. Sometimes, our loss disappoints others. Or, instead of pain from losing, we can enjoy knowing that we gave the team and the game our best effort. Or, maybe, we feel gratitude for being able to share the game with good friends. Along with many others, all of these reactions are normal, if not universal. These feelings are normal and common reactions to loss.

So, What May You Do?

Coping with death or other losses is important to your mental health. As a good beginning to effective coping, you may need to coach yourself to remember that grieving and coping are entirely natural responses to losses. Grieving is not a disease or a sign of personal weakness. It is natural. With this in mind, what may you do with your grief? Here are some suggestions:

Seek out caring people. Find relatives and friends who can understand your feelings of loss. Join support groups with others who are experiencing similar losses.

Express your feelings. Tell others how you are feeling; it will help you to work through the grieving process.

Take care of your health. Get good sleep, as best you can. Eat well. Avoid alcohol or other drugs to help you with grieving. If needed, contact a professional counselor or your physician.

Accept that life is for the living. It takes effort to begin to live again in the present and not dwell on the past.

Postpone major life changes. When you are in the storm of grieving, making major life changes may not be a good idea.

Be patient. Moving beyond losses is almost never quick and easy. Allow yourself to take the time you need. In the most challenging grief, this can take months or even years to absorb a major loss, such as the death of a parent, and accept your changed life.

Continued...

Seek outside help when necessary. If your grief seems like it is too much to bear, seek professional assistance to help work through your grief. It's a sign of strength, not weakness, to seek help.

Help others to grieve. No doubt, if you are the one grieving, you can be helped by others. Take this seriously. Likewise, you may help others to grieve. Here are some added suggestions.

Share the sorrow. Allow them — even encourage them — to talk about their feelings of loss and share memories of the deceased. Avoiding false comfort—"It was for the best."—show respect for the pain of grief that others feel. Provide a caring presence as they grieve.

Offer practical help. Baby-sit. Deliver a meal. Mow their grass. Send supportive cards, text messages, or e-mail messages. Run needed errands.

Looking to the Future

Remember, with support, patience and effort, you will survive grief. Someday, the pain will lessen, leaving you with cherished memories of your loved one. Someday, the sting of losing a deeply desired and energetically sought softball championship will disappear and be replaced by memories of making friends and, maybe, eating cold pizza, along with knowing that you faced real challenges and met them with good sense and received great benefits from them.

Readily Available, Consumer Friendly Publications

"Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Disasters and Other Traumatic Events: What Parents, Rescue Workers, and the Community Can Do"

This is a free booklet from NIMH. It may be downloaded or ordered in hard copy.

Link: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-disasters-and-other-traumatic-events>

"Counseling Connoisseur: Children and Grief"

Link: <https://ct.counseling.org/2018/11/counseling-connoisseur-children-and-grief/>

"Children and Mental Health: Is This Just a Stage?"

This is another NIMH product. It is a fact sheet. As such, it is focused—to the point.

Link: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/children-and-mental-health>

"Teen Depression: More Than Just Moodiness"

This is another NIMH product. It is a guide sheet. As such, it is focused—to the point.

Link: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/teen-depression>

The New York Life Foundation has free materials for grieving children. Other Resources SAMHSA's National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

For immediate help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK

-End-