

Kanawayimik's Counselling Corner

The Kanawayimik Communicator

This newsletter will talk about grief and loss and how it is different for each person. There is no one way to grieve it is important to remember everyone is unique and will experience the loss of a loved one differently. This information is only meant as a guide. If you have recently lost a loved one and are having trouble coping I would encourage you to contact our agency to talk to someone or reach out to someone you trust and who will listen to how you feel. Emotional pain does not last forever and when although losing a loved one is difficult it is important to remember that death is part of the circle of life.

What is grief and loss?

When talking about grief and loss there are three words that are often used loss, grief and mourning. Loss refers to damage, trouble, or pain caused by losing someone or something important (Sinykin,2007). Grief refers to deep and painful emotions experienced because of a loss and mourning is the expression of those emotions of grief (Sinykin, 2007). Mourning occurs in response to an individual's own terminal illness or to the death of a valued being, human or animal. The bereaved refers to the individual who has suffered the loss. Mourning and the complex stages of the grieving process all have an important role in the healing process. Right after the loss of a loved one can feel intolerably painful, it is healthy and normal for a bereaved person to experience intense emotions this is a natural reaction to loss (CMHA, 2013).

It takes time to heal. The period of grieving depends upon the situation and varies greatly from person to person. Grieving is not a weakness; it is a necessity. Refusing to grieve is damaging. Grieving helps each person come to terms with losing someone and helps to re-focus on the present time and toward the future (CMHA, 2013). Time does not truly heal emotional wounds, however, it does provide distance from the memories and emotions the person has experienced. The passing of time, without action when someone has lost a loved one, does not complete the grief process (Sinykin, 2007). When emotional wounds are left unresolved the bereaved person is unable to fully heal and let go of the loved one and this creates internal stress and conflict for that individual. CMHA explains the death of someone close is one of life's most stressful events. People fear the loss of companionship and the changes the loss will bring. Each person responds differently to the loss of someone or something.



*Healing can bring freedom.
Freedom is letting go.*

Stages of Grief

There are five stages of normal grief that were first proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book "On Death and Dying". When looking at the stages of grief each person spends different lengths of time working through each step, age and cognitive ability will affect this process. The five stages do not automatically occur in order and most people move between stages before achieving a complete acceptance of death. When understanding the stages of grief look at the stages as a guides to the grieving process to help understand where you are at . Hospice Yukon has developed a model of the grieving process referred to as the Grieving Wheel, which is based on the circular design of a First Nations' Medicine Wheel. This news letter will integrate the two approaches. The Grieving Wheel starts with "life as usual" and similarly to the stages of grief explains that people go back and forth between the four phases. Life as usual is a time when the daily routines are predictable.

1. Shock Denial and Isolation/Grieving Wheel: Shock

Both processes start with shock as the first reaction to learning of terminal illness or death of a loved one. When a person is in shock the first reaction to deny the loss has happened. It is common to rationalize intense unpleasant emotions. It is a defense mechanism that cushions the immediate shock (Axelrod, 2013). This is a normal responses and the appearance of numbness is a normal reaction to a death or loss and should never be confused with an absence of caring (WebMD, 2013). This stage of grief serves as protection and can be useful when the grieving person has to take some action such as planning a funeral, notifying relatives, or reviewing important papers. As the experience and its impact sink in, the early denial and disbelief will lessen (WebMD, 2013). This is when the reality of the situation becomes more real.

2. Anger/Frustration Grieving Wheel: Chaos

Both processes explain as reality sets in, emotional pain will surface. To cope with the intense hurt, pain, sadness and the feelings of helplessness and vulnerability this emotion is redirected and expressed as anger (Axelrod, 2013). Remember anger is a surface emotion, and it is easier to express and feel anger than the deeper painful emotions. Anger may be directed at non-living objects, strangers, friends or family or at the deceased loved one. The mind knows the deceased person is not to be blamed but the emotional self may resent the person for leaving or feel guilty for being angry (Axelrod, 2013). Anger may be also directed inward, this is known as frustration, and is common. The grieving wheel talks about letting go of resistance and experiencing intense and painful emotions such as: sadness, fear, anger, guilt, despair, loneliness, depression and hopelessness. When the emotions are overwhelming it feels like "chaos", as predictability has now changed and life as usual is no longer what it was.

3. Bargaining & Confusion /Grieving Wheel: Chaos

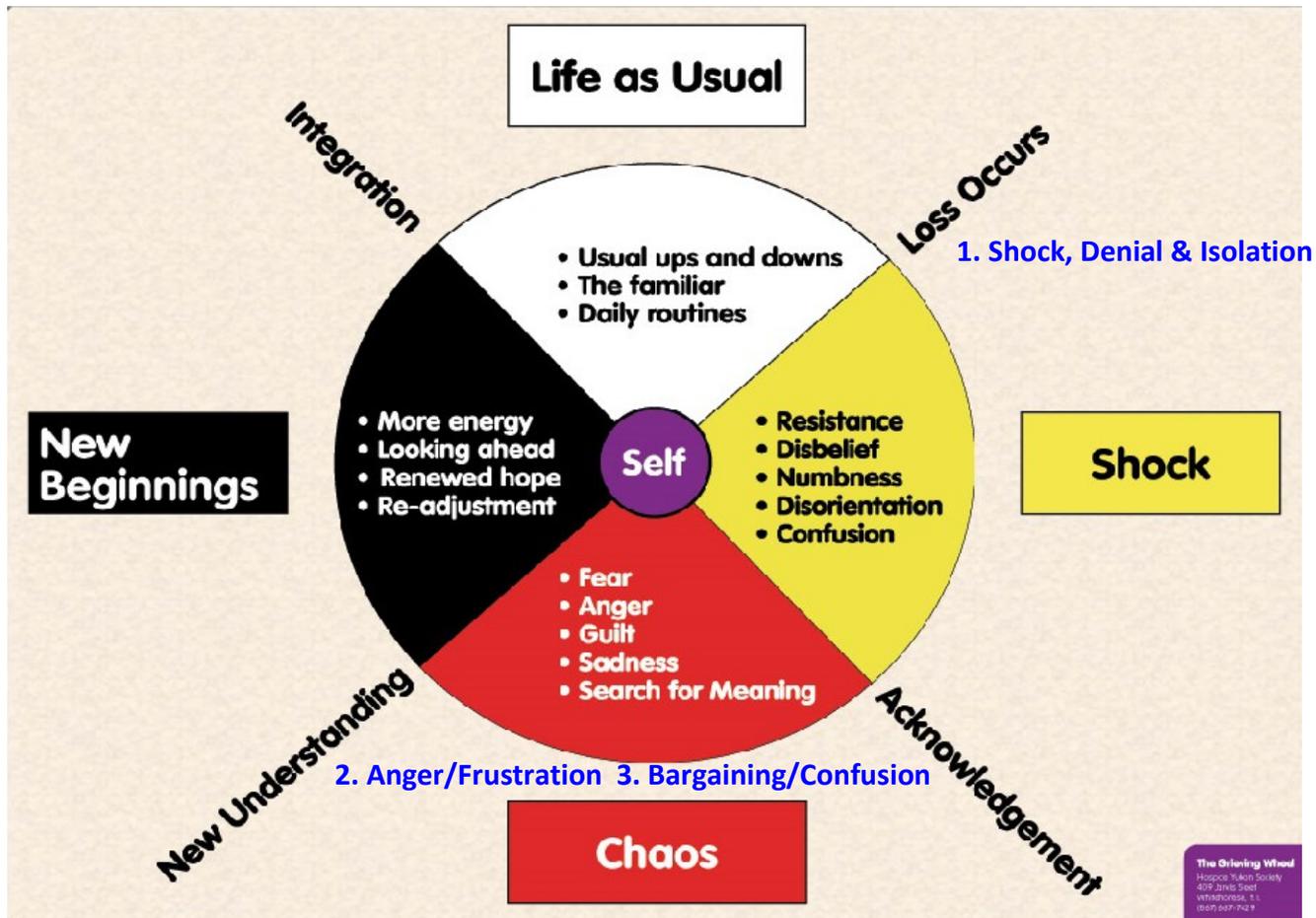
The normal reaction to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability is often a need to regain control and to find answers why did this happen? Death is a natural process of life but this doesn't make dealing with it any easier. This stage of grief can be explained by persistent thoughts about what "could have been done" to prevent the death or loss. Some people become preoccupied with thinking about specific ways things could have been done differently to save the person's life or prevent the loss. If this stage of grief is not dealt with and resolved, the bereaved may live with powerful feelings of guilt or anger that can delay the healing process (WebMD, 2013). Feelings of guilt can actually cause a person to be stuck in this stage which is why if you do feel intense feelings of guilt and frustration this can be a sign you should seek professional help. The Grieving Wheel explains the time of chaos is difficult but essential to the journey around the wheel. Understanding the grieving process can help because the grieving process explains this intense suffering will not last forever and will lead the person towards healing.

4. Depression & Despair/Grieving Wheel: Chaos

Two types of depression are associated with mourning. The first one is a reaction to the loss and what feelings are associated with this. Sadness and regret are the main feelings in this type of depression (Axelrod, 2013). The second type of depression is more private as people prepare themselves to separate and to attempt to say good bye, or let go of their loved one (Axelrod, 2013). This is the stage where the bereaved starts to realize and feel the true extent of the death or loss. Common signs of depression in this stage include, but are not limited to, trouble sleeping, poor or increased appetite, feeling tired, lack of energy, and crying spells. Feelings of self-pity, loneliness, and isolation are also common (WebMD, 2013). The Grieving Wheel points out that this grieving experience will lead to a different perspective of the world as the loss will change how the bereaved perceives the world. As life without their loved one becomes easier this creates a new way of thinking about life which leads to a new beginning or an acceptance of the loss.

5. Acceptance Grieving Wheel: New Beginnings

Reaching this stage of mourning may require professional help, especially if the death is sudden and unexpected. In this stage the bereaved feels calm but is more withdrawn. This is not a period of happiness or peace but rather a state of accepting the reality that the loved one is gone (Axelrod, 2013). In this stage the individual has come to terms with the emotions and feelings experienced when the death or loss occurred (WebMD, 2013). Remember everyone's experience is unique and grieving is a process that will be different for each individual. As the bereaved moves towards acceptance this creates a new beginning and the individual has come full circle on the Grieving Wheel and is back in Life as Usual.



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Do you need to get professional help?

After a significant loss not everyone needs professional help, but when grief takes over your life and you begin to feel hopeless, helpless, and worthless, this is a warning sign that you need to seek professional help. Counselling can be beneficial in moving through the grief process. It is important for friends and family to understand the grief process can not be rushed and no one should be forced to seek professional help unless they are ready and willing to take this step.



Works Consulted

Axelrod, Julie. (2013) From <http://psychcentral.com/lib/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/000617>

Clinical Practice

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