

Chapter 10

Grief

When we think of grief, perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is the grief of losing someone. Grief is a result of loss in the past and can be a result of many things – losing employment, status, safety, friendship and others which are not necessarily related to physical death.

Grief for things other than physical death can be very problematic because the person may live in hope that the situation will be resolved in the future. For example, if a person grieves because a valued friendship has ended, this can have a significant impact if the person continues to hope the friendship may be re-established at a future date. In this example, the grief may never be allowed to be resolved, whereas in physical death there is a grieving period which (in general) does resolve feelings of grief.

Another important factor in how a person experiences grief is the culture to which they belong. For example, in some cultures (such as Japan) the ‘grieving process’ is long, and there are rituals to maintain some contact with those who have physically died for many years. In others, the ‘grieving process’ is very short (sometimes as short as a couple of days) and attention is quickly turned to the practical matters of today and tomorrow.

As with all feelings and emotions in human beings, grief is a very useful emotion which enables us to cope with the physical death of a loved one. Grief becomes problematic for someone living with PTSD when intense feelings of loss (in many aspects of the person’s life) become overwhelming and difficult to cope with or get a perspective on. This may inhibit the grieving process by the person avoiding natural responses to grieve and not allowing their emotions to do what they have to do to be able to cope. It is the grief generated by the loss of aspects of the person’s life that we are going to look at more in-depth.

If you have been experiencing a feeling of grief for a long time, you may feel as though it has become part of you, or part of your life – almost habitual. You can change this by adjusting your perspective and control these feelings, rather than letting these feelings control you.

Do you grieve?

Not everyone living with PTSD is able to recognise that the feelings and emotions they are experiencing may be (at least) partly grief. In the illogical tangle of ‘stuff’ that comes with living with PTSD, it can be difficult to distinguish one emotion from another when they are associated with loss.

A very simplistic way to have an idea if you are experiencing grief is to think if you have very deep feelings of loss. The feelings will be associated with something you feel you have lost since your traumatic experience occurred. Perhaps in thinking about these feelings, you also have feelings that you are searching for the thing(s) you feel you have lost, or have a deep yearning for them.

Some of the things you may feel you have lost could be loss of:

- Employment
- Social status
- Self-esteem
- Independence
- Close relationships
- Good feelings
- Being able to do certain things
- Being able to think in a certain way

As with everything we have covered so far, each person is different and what you feel the loss of someone may be pleased to see gone from their life.

Exercise fourteen

This is a very simple exercise and is designed to help you identify the things which you have a deep feeling of loss about which you have lost since your traumatic event. This is not about what you think you may have lost, but about definite things you have a deep feeling of loss about.

So, as with other exercises, write Exercise Fourteen and the date at the top of the page. You can list them in any order as you think of them.

When you have completed your list (or as much of it as you want to right now) take a look at the things you have written about. Are there several things which could be grouped together? For example, are there several things about personal relationships, or things about how you feel about yourself? If so, try a new list with the things you have listed under different headings so they are grouped together. Example headings could be:

- Personal relationships
- About me
- My lifestyle

Coming to terms with your grief.

During exercise fourteen, you have identified things which you feel you have lost since your traumatic event. Some of these things may be about you (perhaps self-esteem), some may be about other people (loss of a friendship or partner) or about more practical aspects of your life (such as work, education, leisure activities etc.).

In a practical way, perhaps the feelings of grief are because we have lost something that we feel we still want in our lives. The trouble is, they are not (and probably never will be again) be part of our lives in the same way they were before.

To be able to make our lives better, we have to let go of them and move on. This does not mean that we have to abandon hopes, dreams and aspirations, it means that we have to

adjust our perspective so we can allow new and interesting things in our lives. If we are continually trying to make things as they used to be there is no hope of moving on and we waste a lot of energy on something which is futile – because we already know we cannot change the past but we can make the future a brighter place, and this is where we need to concentrate our energy and resources.

They are gone – let them go.

Imagine you are at a buffet and you are holding a plate which you can fill with anything you like from the table. What kind of things are you going to fill your plate with? You may take time to look at the food on the table to pick your favourites and fill your plate with them. As you eat them, you will have more room for the things you like until you are full and contented and have enjoyed the experience of eating. But what if you had filled your plate with all of the food you hate! You may have had a nibble at them, perhaps used the little space you have created to put some of your favourite food on, but overall you will not enjoy the experience and go away feeling empty and unfulfilled. You may abandon the plate and the food will slowly become less palatable – perhaps even begin to rot. Of course, you don't want these things hanging around, so you deal with them by throwing them in the bin and cleaning the plate. The plate is your mind and the food is the stuff YOU put in it. If you leave unpalatable things in your mind they will begin to fester and rot, and will be there until you deal with them.

Putting feelings of grief in perspective is something which you can do. The aim is to reduce the impact of intrusive and debilitating feelings so they become natural memories. When you have learned to cope with these feelings, memories of the things you have lost may still come and go, and you may still have feelings of sadness – but these will be in proportion to other things in your life.

When you gain perspective and the feelings of grief start to subside, your mind will have more 'space' where new and interesting experiences will start to materialise. The more new, interesting and positive things fill the space, the more the negative feelings of grief will reduce.

The first thing you must do is stop trying to find the things you have lost. You will never get them back in the same way you had them – so there is no point in trying to find something which does not (and cannot) exist. Whatever you do from now on it will be something new.

For example, if you feel you have lost a friendship, there is no point in trying to regain the friendship in the same way it was before your traumatic event. However, this does not mean that there is no hope of developing a new friendship with the same person. It means that any friendship you develop with someone will be a new experience. You may still have 'history' together, but how your friendship develops TODAY will be different. You can look on this as a positive experience, where it gives you the opportunity for a fresh start – perhaps doing new things.

Similarly, if you are experiencing intense feelings of grief because you have lost a job or social activity – think about how you can develop new ones. Treat this as an opportunity to

re-build your life in new ways and replace those things you are grieving for with something new, better and exciting.

You have to be realistic about trying to get things back in your life you may have lost. If you want them back just because they were familiar and safe, you are not giving yourself the opportunity to let them go, therefore you will be in the grieving process until you get a realistic perspective on them. If you want them (or would like them) back, you have to think about how you are going to do it. There is no point at all in trying to get things back which are unobtainable. For example, it is pointless wasting time and energy on trying to get back a partner who has left you if that partner has moved on in their lives and is no longer interested in being with you. However, if a previous partner still has some interest in being with you then you need to approach this from a fresh perspective and establish a new relationship.

Similarly, if there was some work or social aspect of your life which you still feel as though you want to pursue, you need to approach this from a fresh perspective. It may mean that you have to go to new places, meet new people, find new ways of achieving what you want. In a way, you have to start from nothing to build something which is what you want and is meaningful to you NOW – not continually try to go back in time in the vain hope that some kind of normality will return to your life.