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“A man who as a physical being is always turned towards the outside, thinking that his happiness lies outside him, finally turns inward and discovers that the source is within him.”

(Søren Kierkegaard, 1813–1855).

Teaching Self-Compassion and having an Attuned Relationship with One’s Self as a Way of Transforming Vulnerability and Abandonment in Bereaved Individuals

By Michal deWilloughby, Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

The overwhelming grief experienced after the death of a loved one may be the first way a human being encounters acute pain and suffering on all levels.

Indeed, a trauma such as a death of a loved one can be compared to an internal straight jacket, which stifles the unfolding of our very being. It can strangle our ability to move forward in life, disconnecting us from ourselves and others, and leaving us feeling extremely vulnerable and abandoned.

Conversely, when met with mindful self-compassion, and upon learning to have an attuned relationship with one’s self, the encounter with grief

can awaken or serve the bereaved as a catalyst to becoming more than the person thought they were. It can free up possibilities within and show hidden gifts – often in the guise of ‘unknown/ disowned’ emotions or aspects such as vulnerability and abandonment, which can ultimately help bring meaning to the lives of the bereaved (Levine, 1997; Seigel, 2010; Shear 2015).

Grief, Relationships and Identity

“The people we most love become a physical part of us, ingrained in our synapses, in the pathways where memories are created” (O’Rourke, 2012, p6).

Literature describes bereavement as a relational phenomenon, as it is always about at least two people: the bereaved person and the deceased. Bereavement is also about the loss of a significant attachment relationship. These attachment relationships, if supportive, help regulate psychological and biological functioning, including a healthy relationship with one’s self, reciprocal relationships with others, and one’s ability to explore the world. However, bereavement often disrupts these attachment systems and forms of functioning, consequently activating the separation or abandonment response. This can produce a loss of wellbeing, or acute grief, meaning our adult functioning temporarily collapses, leaving us feeling



“... the successful interventions that stand out in the literature are the ones that encourage clients to have supportive, compassionate relationships, both externally and within.”

shattered, confused, and doomed to loneliness (Anderson, 2013). This may feel amplified when there is trauma and/or complications attached to the loss (Jordon & Neimeyer, 2002; Parkes & Prigerson, 2013; Shear 2015). Ogden and Minton (2000) concur by saying, people who feel traumatised are like young children who are at the mercy of their physical sensations, emotions and reactions, and are incapable of regulating these functions.

Additionally, the bereaved anecdotally describe this overwhelming experience that follows a death, like the aftermath of a cataclysmic earthquake. The changed landscape and the image staring back at them in the mirror are unrecognisable. Explained in literature as the ‘shattering of the assumptive world’, the bereaved often label this ‘new terrain’ with names, such as; ‘the underworld’, ‘hell’, the ‘place not yet’ and countless others (Kauffman, 2002). Susan Griffin (1992) in her book *A Chorus of Stones* aptly illustrates this experience in the following quote:

“In the shadowy aftermath of death, a shadow self is born to me, stricken with grief and rage. The vast order of life has somehow excluded me, placed me shaking at its edges, a provisional

unlicensed driver. Yet the underland of death has its own power, that is unrecognisable and seems forbidden” (Griffin, 1992, p153).

The emotions, or aspects of self called vulnerability, abandonment, anger and others that abide and/or are discovered in this place, are often thought of as being overwhelmingly scary and unwanted. They are blights the bereaved believe need to be ‘discarded’ or ‘eliminated’. Many being unaware these emotions/aspects are inherently necessary to being human.

What Helps: Acknowledgement of Vulnerability and Abandonment Using the Three Cs – Curiosity, (Self) Compassion and Companionship

“To hurt is as human as it is to breathe.” (Rowling, 2008, p57).

Given that grief is about the loss of a significant relationship, in order for a bereaved person to mourn effectively and integrate their grief, it must be done in the realm of supportive, compassionate relationships.

Additionally, if the relationship with the deceased, and the inner representations of identity (or loss of) that have arisen as a result of the death are not acknowledged, or are disregarded, complications unique to grief may occur (Rubin, 1999). Stroebe and Schut (2010), concur by saying that adaptation after experiencing a death includes the acquisition of skills such as managing social interactions, identity reformation and life management in a changed world (Fisher, 2015; Neimeyer, Burke, McKay & Stringer, 2010; Shear 2015).

It can be expected then, that the successful interventions that stand out in the literature are the ones that encourage clients to have supportive, compassionate relationships, both externally and within. This is because (self) compassion, (likened to receiving a hug), stimulates oxytocin, serotonin, parasympathetic balance, enhances the immune system and promotes social connection and bonding (Germer & Neff, 2013; Ogden & Fisher, 2015; Yalom, 1980). For clients, this means having curiosity and mindful self-compassion whilst they discover, acknowledge and reintegrate previously unknown, or unaccepted emotions or aspects. Various authors (Anderson, 2014; Brown, 2010; Ogden et al., 2015) say that when we allow ourselves to get to compassionately know and integrate our vulnerable and abandoned emotions/aspects, we become freer to authentically participate in being human and can support this in other human beings as well.

An Integrated Grief Journey: Self-Compassion and Attuned Relationships

“Some gifts are obvious, and others are more subterranean” (Atwood, 1994 speech).

As previously stated, the literature suggests integrated grief work opens up possibilities for wellbeing and supports a transformational process in grieving individual’s lives. Therefore, the following key points are necessary for the bereavement professional to promote in their clients: integration and being compassionately present, both to one’s self and others.

1. Promote supportive outer relationships and companionship

These are required to promote optimal mourning and can be in the form of family, friends, colleagues and support groups.

2. Help clients cultivate, and engage with a curious, compassionate, witnessing, wise self

This supports the innate wisdom of the client and expands mindful awareness around their bereavement journey so that it can be compassionately held and processed.

3. Offer psycho education

A top priority is to teach clients to mindfully regulate arousal, and keep the frontal lobes/observing self online (i.e. the wise adult/functioning self).

Healing can happen when the functioning/wise self compassionately connects to and resources the vulnerable or abandoned self, i.e. helping the client to create a 'dual awareness' of different or opposite emotions/aspects. Normalise that healing unfolds slowly and it takes lots of practice.

4. Give client's arising emotions/aspects radical acceptance

Model and assist clients to mindfully 'just notice' their disowned emotions/aspects unfolding. Use language that embraces chaotic, overwhelming and/or perceived punishing emotions/aspects.

Be relentless in reframing emotions/aspects and behaviours.

5. Use of interventions such as mindful creativity/right brained imagery exercises

These exercises encourage an oscillation, which is optimal for processing and integrating painful information. This means mindfully addressing pain such as vulnerability and abandonment, and allowing space for positive emotions and behaviours such as self-compassion to be present (Germer & Neff, 2013; Ogden & Fisher, 2015; Seigel, 2010; Shear, 2015).

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Letter From the Editor



Welcome to the Spring 2015 edition of *Bereavement Practice for Clinicians and Service Providers*.

In this edition, our feature article has been prepared by Michal deWilloughby, Specialist Bereavement Counsellor at the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement. Michal's article, entitled *Teaching Self-Compassion and having an Attuned Relationship with One's Self as a way of Transforming Vulnerability and Abandonment in Bereaved Individuals*, explores both the impact of loss and the importance of attuned relationships that cultivate a supportive environment where clients can understand their experience through curiosity and compassion. It helps us consider various strategies that facilitate the integration of loss through a mindful lens.

Alongside the feature article, we have also included an interview with a bereavement practitioner; a book review and the latest information regarding the Australian Grief and Bereavement Conference 2016.

As always, I welcome your feedback around the topics you'd like covered in this publication, and hope that the resources and articles provided are useful to your work in the grief and bereavement field.

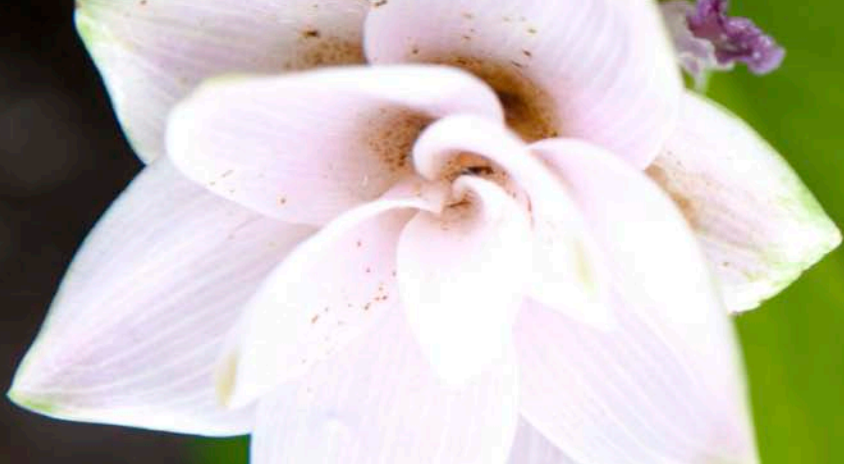
I wish you well and encourage you to support yourself from a place of self-compassion

Warm regards,

Jenny Field

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Interview with a Bereavement Practitioner

Janice Butera is an Intake and Bereavement Counsellor at the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

What brought you to this field of work?

After the completion of my Masters Degree in Counselling, my family were faced with the devastating news that my mother had terminal cancer. I am forever indebted to the bereavement support we received from staff after my mother's death, including the pastoral carers and social workers. It was my mother's death that gave me the strength to pursue a vocation in this field in her memory. I was accepted to complete studies with the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) in 2011 as well as a subsequent 80-hour internship. Today I am now an employee with ACGB, assisting people who are facing their grief journey.

How do you bear the sadness you witness or people share with you?

In my role as an intake worker, I am privy to some dreadful stories that really resonate with me, especially when the caller is distraught or choking back tears. I feel that my personality type gives me the ability to listen to a story but not let it seep into my unconscious and I always remind myself too of the resiliency people have. Knowing and understanding that the initial call will always be sorrowful allows me to foresee that with support from ACGB, post-traumatic growth can occur and the sadness will change colour over time. I hold hope for every caller, which gives me the ability to do my role.

How do you support yourself when clients' stories or circumstances resonate with you?

I am very vocal in getting support from my peers. If someone's story resonates with me and I feel that as a result it may be too close to my own story then I will stand up and walk away from my desk. I tend to debrief with someone so that it doesn't become 'stuck' somewhere in my body. I also make sure I listen to music or the radio on my drive home, which helps dissolve any work-related anguish, or I call my husband and we discuss dinner plans and things that are non-grief related, taking me out of work mode and back to everyday family life.

How do you help people understand the complexities of grief and bereavement?

Psycho-education is key here. Once you start explaining the differences between the way people grieve, people start to appreciate how others around them grieve or why they mourn the way they do. It's always important for me to explain the differences between an intuitive griever and someone who is more instrumental. This helps normalise and validate

people's grief reactions. Showing visual diagrams can also be very useful. One of my favourites is Lois Tonkin's 'Growing around Grief'. I also like using the analogy of 'The Grief Storm', which really resonates with people. This assists clients in understanding that their grief will change form and shape every day – e.g. they may start the day smooth sailing but be quickly catapulted into the helplessness of a storm by evening.

What is the most challenging aspect to your work in grief and bereavement?

The most challenging aspect of my role is when someone expresses suicidal ideation. Even though most people will express that they wish to be with their deceased loved one, there are a small proportion of the population who have a plan and are very forthright in disclosing how they will do this. The difficulty for me is when people call the centre thinking we are a crisis service. These callers are desperate and don't want to disclose too much about themselves, including an address or telephone number. This makes it very difficult for me to call their local Police or CAT team, as is my duty of care. I always have the caller identify their protective factors to me so that rapport is built and I am able to obtain a phone number or address by just listening and being patient. These situations are always challenging and prove to us how debilitating and overwhelming grief can be.

What would be your three pieces of advice/insight for those working in the field of grief and bereavement?

1. Have a sense of humour and embrace those child-like mannerisms that enable you to laugh at yourself.
2. Don't overthink the literature, even though it's an important aspect of the work we do, it's not what will connect you to clients.
3. Liaise with people who work in the field, and develop good peer support networks.

What are some ways you have engaged in self-care in this intense field of work?

I exercise most mornings at the gym. Interacting with other people by doing something physically exhausting can help with endorphin release. I also volunteer to work at my children's school once a week and have recently taken up drum lessons; fulfilling a desire to re-learn a musical instrument and make a lot of noise. Music has been a wonderful healer for me and tuning into a digital radio station (80s mix of course!) gives me unlimited music all day, which is where I receive the bulk of my self-care.

Australian Grief and Bereavement Conference 2016



BEREAVEMENT IN A MODERN WORLD: GLOBAL AND INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES

Bayview Eden Melbourne, 11th–13th May 2016

Keynote Speakers

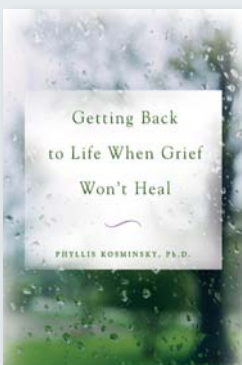
- Dr Colin Murray Parkes (UK)
- Dr Robert A. Neimeyer (USA)
- Dr Edward K. Ryneerson (USA)
- Dr Mary L. S. Vachon (Canada)
- Dr Sandra Bertman (USA)

Two one-day, pre-conference workshops, conducted by Dr Neimeyer and Dr Ryneerson, will also take place on 9th and 10th May 2016.

Call for abstracts and registrations opening soon. For further information, visit the ACGB website at: www.grief.org.au



Book Review



By Phyllis Kosminsky
AUD \$22.95 (Inc. GST)

Getting Back to Life When Grief Won't Heal (2007)

The subject of grief and trauma is gaining increased social attention in a world where mainstream and social media invites exposure to many events we may experience as traumatic, including death. Unfortunately, coupled with the immediacy of social exposure, is our acute awareness of ways our lives may have been impacted by grief and trauma. Too often there is an absence of avenues that support us to make sense of these experiences. Many may experience feeling stuck and unable to move through their experiences in a way that lends a sense of meaning.

In her book, *Getting Back to Life When Grief Won't Heal*, Dr Phyllis Kosminsky offers her compassion and wisdom, both clinically and from a client perspective, around the impact of events that are experienced as traumatic, such as death. Having supported many people in rebuilding their lives, Kosminsky understands that for some, this is difficult. Often people experience complicated mourning, the feeling of being stuck in their sorrow, frustration and unresolved issues.

This book looks at many different kinds of grief, providing recognisable examples, which allow the reader to identify with one or more scenarios and find good advice for moving forward. Indeed, in providing real, intimate stories of people who managed to find a pathway through their grief, readers are given the chance to make sense of their own experiences and to find inspiration, insight, deeply felt advice, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of hope.

Getting Back to Life When Grief Won't Heal is applicable to both professionals and those who have experienced loss and trauma. It will resonate deeply and support one's capacity to make sense of experiences that are often life changing. A worthwhile read for anyone seeking to further understand the complexities of grief, loss and trauma.

Jenny Field,
Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

This book, along with a range of other useful resources, can be purchased from the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement.

To order, visit www.grief.org.au
or email info@grief.org.au



Our Services

Newsletter enquiries

For all enquiries about this publication, please contact Jenny Field on (03) 9285 2100 or email j.field@grief.org.au

Bereavement Counselling and Support Service

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) operates a statewide Specialist Bereavement Counselling and Support Service for Victoria. This program is supported by the Victorian Government Department of Health and has counsellors located across metropolitan Melbourne, and in regional areas (Grampians, Gippsland, Hume, Barwon South-West, and Loddon Mallee). For further information, call (03) 9265 2100, or email counselling@grief.org.au

Support groups

ACGB operates a range of support groups, including groups for adults, children, bereaved partners, loss of a parent and more. For further information call (03) 9265 2100 or email support@grief.org.au

Practitioner Consultancy Service

This service provides free information, consultation and support for practitioners who are working with bereaved clients experiencing complex and prolonged bereavements. To access this service, call 1300 664 786 during business hours.

Internships

ACGB has a limited number of placement opportunities for experienced counsellors seeking to advance their knowledge and skills in bereavement counselling. For further information contact the Centre on (03) 9265 2100 or email counselling@grief.org.au

Education and training

ACGB offers quality education and training opportunities for health professionals, students, volunteers and any other individual or agency desiring to enhance grief and bereavement knowledge and practice. Education and training programs are offered as seminars, workshops, short and long courses, conferences and customised training. For full details of all programs and services offered, go to www.grief.org.au/education

Bereavement Courses

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement offers research-informed, high-quality courses, including post-graduate

training program, the Graduate Certificate in Bereavement Counselling and Intervention (nationally accredited). For more information contact the Centre on (03) 9265 2100 or email courses@grief.org.au

Customised training and consultancy

ACGB offer a range of customised training and consultancy services that provide research-informed, high quality professional development programs that meet the specialist training needs of organisations, groups and individuals. For further information contact the Centre on (03) 9265 2100 or email education@grief.org.au

Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement

Published by ACGB three times per year, this journal encompasses both academic and applied aspects of grief and bereavement and is a ranked journal with the Australian Research Council as part of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative. To find out how you can subscribe to this journal, call (03) 9265 2100 or email griefmatters@grief.org.au

Membership

Access a range of benefits through the ACGB membership program, including discounted education workshops and three editions of *Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement*. For more information about membership options and benefits go to www.grief.org.au or call (03) 9265 2100.

Donations

Donations over \$2 are tax deductible and allow ACGB to continue to provide services including bereavement counselling, support groups, newsletters, events, education and training. To make a donation, visit www.grief.org.au or call (03) 9265 2100.

We value your feedback

If you have feedback about this publication, or any of the services delivered by the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, we'd love to hear from you. Contact us on (03) 9265 2100 or email newsletters@grief.org.au



The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

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