



WHAT IS GRIEF?

ONLINE TRAINING WORKBOOK

PROGRAMME OUTLINE

This workbook accompanies the first lesson of the online training course for professional coaches who are concerned about how best to help a client who shares that they have experienced a sudden bereavement or significant loss.

The course is designed to give a quick, informative overview of the key things a professional coach should know about coaching grief and loss.

With the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and increased instances of grief and loss emotions experienced, both individually and collectively, it is more likely than ever that grief and loss will need to be considered as part of current and future coaching engagements.

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LESSON 1: WHAT IS GRIEF?

An introduction to grief and typical grief responses and how these might affect a coaching client

2

LESSON 2: MODELS OF GRIEF

Looking in more detail at four different established models of grief and how these apply to coaching a grieving client

3

LESSON 3: ADAPTING YOUR SKILLS TO GRIEF

How to apply your existing coaching expertise in the grief context, while challenging and debunking some common myths of grief and how these might affect your coaching approach,

4

LESSON 4: CONTRACTING CONSIDERATIONS

The final part of the programme covers how to modify the contracting approach when coaching grief, including key warning signs to help to identify when a more experienced grief professional might be better suited to help the client.

WHAT IS GRIEF?

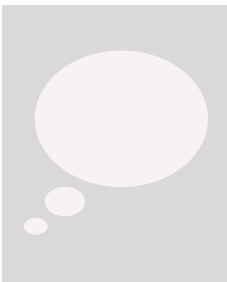
Grief is your body's emotional and physical reaction to loss. It is not a purely intellectual experience (although many people try to address it this way, and disregard the importance of the emotional and physical response).

Most important of all - it is entirely normal.

In fact, I would go further to suggest that it is necessary to experience grief in order to fully process it and heal from its effects. We often associate the term grief with the emotions felt after the death of someone important in your life, but in reality we experience grief in relation to a wide range of losses - the end of a relationship, loss of health, loss of a job, or one of the over 40 significant life events that evoke the emotions that are associated with grief.

So if grief is normal, what's the problem?

The problem is that while grief is a natural emotion, it is typically very complex and confusing, and our understanding of it is compounded by most of what society teaches us about it and how to deal with it. You can't fix a feeling using a rational argument, yet our friends, family and sadly too many professionals do this every day.



Consider the following comments in relation to a range of traumatic losses:

“at least she’s out of pain” (following death after illness)

“he had a good innings” (following death in old age)

“it’s their loss – you’ll find another job” (following redundancy)

“plenty more fish in the sea” (following relationship break-up)

While these statements may be true, they don't help a griever to address the emotional pain of the loss. They've moved the subject away from the griever's feelings which feels like the emotion felt is being disregarded.

WHAT IS GRIEF?

When someone says to us 'time heals', what they are really referring to is that there are things you need to do over that time in order to address the emotions you are feeling in relation to the loss you have experienced. It is these actions that will help you to heal – not simply the passing of time.

If a broken bowl simply sat in a cupboard, it would inherently be no different no matter how much time passed. It is the process of reassembling the pieces, figuring out how they fit back together, and carefully and thoughtfully applying the glue to the edges of each piece to put the bowl back together that are the crucial actions needed.





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The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths.

These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern.

Beautiful people do not just happen.

ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS,
PSYCHIATRIST & AUTHOR OF ON DEATH & DYING

THE VUCA WORLD OF GRIEF

GRIEF IS VOLATILE

Grief is highly volatile and totally unpredictable. You can't put it in a box and leave it at home to deal with later. It chooses when to make its presence known. It will catch you unawares and when you least expect it.

You may think you are 'over' certain feelings, or that once a certain period of time has passed you will no longer feel a certain way. While it is true that the frequency and intensity of grief may change over the course of time, the nature of those feelings can remain extremely unpredictable for a long time.

One of the hardest things to cope with when grieving is its volatility, and the impact this has on our professional life. You might wake up one morning, feel perfectly fine, and go to work. And from completely out of the blue, a wave of grief will come crashing through you. It has no respect for timing. It doesn't care if you are in an important client meeting or need to concentrate to get a report finished. It will just hit you when you least expect it.



GRIEF IS UNCERTAIN

There is no timeline to grief. It is not logical - there are no convenient stages to go through or to tick off as completed so that you can move onto the next stage.

The idea of grief stages evolved from the ground-breaking work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, an American psychiatrist in the 1960s who studied the emotions experienced by terminally ill patients. She found that there were typically five emotions experienced - denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Over time this change curve of emotions was extrapolated and attributed to grief and loss.

Unfortunately, this has created the illusion that there is a linear process to grief that we can and should follow. This is simply not true, and something later confirmed by Kübler-Ross herself, who stated that the stages she had identified were neither linear nor predictable.

GRIEF IS COMPLEX

Grief is multi-dimensional – it impacts the way we think, the way we feel and the way we behave.

It is arguably the most complex blend of emotions we will ever experience. We can oscillate quickly from anger to devastation to fondness to guilt. In truth, so many conflicting emotions can be present at the same time, and this can be incredibly confusing.

It is this conflict of emotions that makes it so incredibly complex. When someone has died after a long illness, we may feel relief and pain in equal measure. Intellectually we understand both emotions, but instinctively we feel guilty for feeling relief, as this is in conflict with the pain associated with having lost someone we love.

Another complexity lies in the comparisons we inevitably make between the different losses we experience, and how we think we should feel in each situation, based on what others tell us. Should I feel worse when a parent has died, than when a grandparent has died? Is it better or worse for a death to be unexpected or anticipated?

We will explore more about how unhelpful it is to look at grief in terms of this sort of hierarchy. When we intellectualise grief, we think about the event in terms of how we should respond. This is completely counter-intuitive – your emotional response to the loss that is the most important factor.



GRIEF IS AMBIGUOUS

Everyone experiences grief differently.

It is as unique and individual to us as our personality.

Despite the fact that we all experience loss at some point in our lives, the emotions we each experience are entirely unique to us. There is no 'right' or 'normal' way to feel when you are grieving.

One of the most common questions I am asked is 'am I supposed to feel like this?'

Let's put this myth to bed. There is no 'right way' to feel. As with all typical behaviours, not everyone experiences grief in the same way. The emotions identified by experts around the world are simply an aggregate of all emotions observed, and therefore if you don't feel a particular emotion, there is nothing wrong.

This can be particularly confusing when you and a loved one are experiencing the same loss (eg loss of a child, loss of a parent etc). There will probably be similarities to your grief experience, but there will be a myriad of differences too. Overall you will each experience the same loss differently. Without going into too much detail here, there are many reasons for this. Your relationship with the person you have lost is unique to you, in much the same way that your personality, your genetics, and other life experiences that will have shaped you along the way are different too.

These and many other factors mean that the grief you are experiencing is unique to you. While we take comfort in sharing the common ground of our experiences, it is important to also recognise that your emotions are unique to you.



Take a moment to consider how these descriptions can be applied to coaching a client who is grieving.

What other words would you use to describe the experience?

Grief is not an illness or disorder. Grief is a normal reaction to loss, and a process of adjustment to the new normal of life in the aftermath of the loss experienced.

Many people are able to process their grief experience and safely recover over the course of time, and with the right amount of attention given to the grieving process.

Where someone gets 'stuck' or triggers something else in either their loss history (previous grief experiences) or a mental illness such as depression, there could be complications to consider.



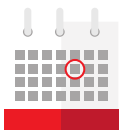
Grief

Spans a broad range of reactions to loss, from the more demonstrative and expressive to the more closed and reserved, depending on individual beliefs, differences, personality and practical needs.



Complicated Grief

Characterized by long-lasting and severe emotional reactions, often as a result of acute or traumatic forms of loss such as suicide, or when the grief adds to an existing mental health condition.



Anticipatory Grief

Grief before the loss occurs eg when a loved one is dying from a terminal illness or the anticipation of the death of an elderly relative. Also more abstract situations such as fear of contracting Covid-19,



Cumulative Grief

Typically results from multiple losses in a short period. Can also be experienced when a loss adds to delayed feelings and symptoms of grief over a much earlier loss not addressed at the time.



Secondary Grief

When you experience additional losses—of financial security, social network, quality of life, significant change of routine etc.—incurred as the result of the primary loss.



Disenfranchised Grief

Can occur when society does not acknowledge the loss in the same way eg the death of someone you loved in an illicit relationship, an abortion. or suicide, or death of someone who committed a crime.

ONLINE TRAINING

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What myths and beliefs did you hold about grief?

2. Are any of these myths or beliefs now questioned, changed or clarified for you?

3. What external resources, responses and expectations have you experienced?

4. What resources have been helpful/unhelpful to you?

ABOUT YOUR COACH

Gemma is an ICF qualified coach and HR Consultant, with over 20 years of experience.

In 2010, she experienced a sudden bereavement, and although an experienced coach and HR practitioner, was not prepared for her own hugely emotional response and the impact it would have on her ability to do her job.

She has since combined specialist grief and bereavement training with a Masters in Positive Psychology, to add to her coaching qualification and senior HR experience, and now uses this blended skillset to offer a range of proactive grief-related wellbeing interventions and programmes to coach and support individuals to positively address and recover from all forms of traumatic change and loss, including redundancy, divorce and bereavement.

More information about her HR and coaching background can be found here:

www.gemmabullivant.co.uk
gemma@gemmabullivant.co.uk



 www.linkedin.com/in/gemmabullivant/

 www.twitter.com/Gemma_Bullivant

 www.facebook.com/GemmaBullivantHRandCoaching

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