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Loss Can Be Painful – But It Can Open the Door to New, and Even Better, Life Experiences

Loss is embedded in the process of living. It happens to everyone and it is inevitable. There is no such thing as constant gain in our lives. Despite our wish to live in the security of abundance and perfect health, we necessarily must lose something, over and over again throughout our lives. Time itself eventually creates loss. We come into this world with everything to gain and leave it with everything to lose. And in between we go through a series of gains and losses, ups and downs. Learning to accept both is a sign of wellness, maturity – and even wisdom.

Losses can be catastrophic, such as the death of a partner, parent, child or close friend, or they can be minimal, such as losing a favorite houseplant or finding the first dent in your new car. Obviously, we usually accept minor losses quite well, but major losses can rule our lives for years with feelings of helplessness, confusion and overwhelming sadness. If our losses are not handled adaptively, they can drain us of energy and interfere with our ability to live fully in the present. If we are not able to deal with our losses and then let them go, we can spend our lives under the spell of old issues and past relationships, living in the past and failing to connect with the experiences of the present.

There are many reasons why we may find it difficult to deal with losses. In the first place, contemporary society does not prepare us with adequate rituals and support to



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help us handle loss. We focus on gaining, acquisition and the promise of the future – and there is little social support for grieving loss and letting go. Indeed, we often avoid those who suffer loss just at the time they need the most support. On a more personal level, we may have difficulty in coping with loss because we never gained the tools for accepting loss. If we have problems with self-esteem, unresolved anger, jealousy, depression, excessive dependency, or poor interpersonal boundaries, we may find it difficult to shoulder loss. When we experience a series of losses without resolving them as they come along, it may be difficult to handle yet another one.

We face numerous losses throughout the course of our lives. Some of our losses are built into the normal developmental milestones that are an expected part of the life process. Humans feel impelled to move on, to explore, to grow. But each time we move on to a new phase of life, we must lose something of the old.

Here are some of the typical lifetime losses that we experience:

Separation-individuation – The infant must inevitably break the early bond formed with a parent. Young children, to be healthy, must see themselves as separate beings with their own sense of identity. The separation-individuation phase is the child's first introduction to loss. If it is facilitated by a supportive parent, the child may be able to handle future losses more adaptively.

Sibling rivalry – Little babies have a special place in the life of a family. They usually get lots of attention. Older children may feel abandoned when their place in the family has been replaced by a younger sibling, and they may show aggression toward the infant or signs of withdrawal and depression.

Adolescence – As we grow into teenagers, we lose the old family bonds we have always known. We may begin to give more attention to our friends than to our families. Adolescence is a time of tremendous growth with the acquisition of new social skills and life responsibilities, but it is at this time that we must necessarily say goodbye to the play, the pleasures and the nurturance of childhood.

Friends – Friends leave – especially in our mobile society. They move, or marry, or sometimes they just drift away from us. The loss of a close friend, one who has seen us through life's ups and downs, can be devastating. We may feel that a lost friend-

ship will never be replaced, but our challenge is to appreciate what we had in our old friendship, to retain our memories, and to carry our skills into other friendships in the future.

Marriage – Those who marry normally shift their attention and allegiance from the family they grew up in, as well as their old single friends, to the creation of a new family. Modifying the old ties to family and friends can create a severe crisis, but there is a world of exciting new possibilities to replace this loss.

Letting go of children – When parents watch their children grow into adulthood, they lose a part of their old sense of identity and purpose. To cling to the old parental roles past their time is to invite conflict, yet many endure this conflict rather than simply grieve their loss and then move into new life experiences.

Losing our parents – When our parents die, we must adjust to the stark truth that we are next in line. This can raise issues about our purpose in life and what we have accomplished. Saying goodbye to the ones who have known us the longest can dredge up very deep questions, both pleasant and unpleasant, but we can learn life lessons from this crisis and use this knowledge to build more meaningful and richer lives for ourselves.

Middle age – The mid-life crisis is a time of giving up those things we no longer need in life and consolidating and building on those things we value and want to make a part of the rest of our lives. The loss of youth and physical vigor can present a tremendous struggle for some people, but middle age can also be a time of sharing wisdom and pursuing pleasures one never had the time for before.

Growing old – The losses of old age can bring on depression. Our bodies are no longer what they once were, we retire from jobs that have been a crucial part of our lives, and we experience the deaths of family and friends. Those who have learned to deal well with loss, however, can gain from their wisdom and fully enjoy each day. For some, old age is the best time of life.

Facing death – The death of those we love can be

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the harshest loss of all. And ultimately, we must face our own death. Grieving death is a very personal experience and one of the most painful to endure. It takes time to get through it. Bereavement can be a journey into the depths of our lives that can ultimately reveal our strength of character.

Dealing with loss is one of our most important life skills. It encourages us to explore our humility and sense of powerlessness. Grieving loss can be described as time in the shadows rather than time in the light. We need to look at life from both sides, from win and lose. When loss comes your way, remember that –

- *Every relationship is temporary*
- *You need to stay aware during the adjustment to loss*
- *Tears are a sign of strength, not weakness*
- *It takes time to process loss*
- *You will not always feel the way you do now*
- *You need to share your loss with those who can be trusted*
- *Nobody else can do this for you*
- *You will be happy again*



Guidelines for Dealing with Loss

The goal of the person dealing with loss is to move through the various stages of the loss process, to learn from and appreciate the impact of the loss, and to achieve closure so that life in the future can be experienced more fully with integrity, insight and wisdom. Here are a few suggestions that may prove helpful:

Don't try to do it alone.

Isolation is difficult for most people, but it is especially challenging for a person adjusting to loss. Seek out people who can be trusted and can listen well. During times of loss we need to talk and share the intense thoughts and feelings we experience when we are alone. Many people seek the help of a professional therapist who may be better prepared than most to empathize and guide the process productively.

Submit to the loss in order to get through it.

Some people try to ignore their losses and refuse to think about them. They may feel that time itself will heal things, but this is not necessarily true. Accept the loss as an important and necessary part of your life experience. Integrating the loss into your life is a way of living completely and with integrity.

Realize that intense feelings are normal and expected.

We may feel during times of loss that we are losing our minds and that we will never be the same again. Our dreams, fantasies, anger, tears, guilt and loneliness may be more pronounced than we have ever experienced before. But we need to expect losses to dredge up these intense feelings. Sometimes we have not achieved closure on past losses so that another loss may mean having to come to terms with both the present and previous losses. If you process the loss productively, these feelings will pass in time.

Seek spiritual comfort during this time.

Spiritual support often makes our losses more meaningful. It is during times of loss that many people ask questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of their lives. Meditation, prayer and reflection help us soothe the turmoil which accompanies loss.

If possible, avoid making long-term decisions.

Times of crisis decrease our ability to make rational decisions. We tend impulsively to come up with plans that we think will put an end to our pain – despite the ultimate consequences. Put important decisions off until you have achieved some closure on your loss and things have settled down to a more stable pattern. If decisions are necessary, seek the advice of people who can be trusted.

Take care of your health.

During our adjustment to loss we may be more prone to letting ourselves go – and this opens the door to health problems and even accidents. Try to get enough sleep, but don't oversleep. Maintain a nutritious diet, but allow yourself some extra treats during this time since self-nurturing is also important. Be sure to exercise, even if it is only a daily walk. Avoid alcohol and drugs during times of adjusting to loss. They may provide temporary relief, but you need to stay aware as you process loss, and abusing substances will forestall this goal.



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Our Typical Reactions to Loss



Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, an expert on adjusting to loss, identified five stages of adapting to loss. Not everyone goes through all stages and no two people will experience the process in exactly the same way. These stages should not be seen as sequential – that is, we don't have to complete the first stage before we can move on to the second. Rather, we move in and out of each phase at various times during the adjustment process.

Denial – Even when a loss is expected, the first reaction is usually a sense of disbelief, shock, numbness and bewilderment. The person may experience a period of denial in which the reality of the loss is put out of mind. This reaction is not necessarily maladaptive since it provides the person some time to deal with the pain that must inevitably be faced.

Anger – If we experience loss in the form of death, it is often difficult to express anger. Who do we get angry at? If the loss involves a divorce or losing our job, expressing anger is easier since we can target our anger at an identifiable source. In any case, we often engage in self-reproach for not doing enough prior to our loss, like saying the right things, making amends, or trying harder. When we are in the anger phase, we may become irritable and quarrelsome. We may interpret signs of good will from others as rejection. Normal everyday stressors may trigger off episodes of rage.

Bargaining – This is a period of self-reflection that emerges out of the grief process. We come up with ideas that help us forestall the inevitable grieving that must follow loss. “If I do good things for people, I won't lose anyone else to death.” “If I keep a cleaner house, my wife will come back to me.” “If I'm friendlier to people, I can get my old job back.”

Grieving – Grieving must be endured. It is our way of saying goodbye to the old so that we can open our lives to the new. Grieving involves suffering, and it may be intense. There are periods of increased energy and anxiety followed by times of sadness, lethargy, fatigue and emptiness. The person in the grieving phase may find it difficult to experience pleasure and may want to avoid other people altogether. One's dreams may be intense during this time. Physical symptoms may accompany the grieving phase – sleep disturbance, changes in appetite, weakness, headaches, back pain, and indigestion.

Acceptance – One day you wake up and realize that life is normal again. This is not necessarily a time of happiness – but it is normal. And if the adjustment has been carried out to completion, with support and personal reflection, you can emerge a stronger, wiser and healthier person.

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