



Dealing with grief

Dennis Sleigh

Some years ago, an experienced colleague of mine attended a staff development program on mental health and heard for the first time about autism. Returning to school with a head full of new terms and concepts, this teacher met with a parent the next day and, confident of knowing all about the issues at stake, advised the parent that her son was autistic. You don't need to be a genius to guess the result of that conversation. Suffice it to say that the Principal spent a lot of time during following weeks in convincing both parties that this off-the-cuff assessment had been somewhat premature.

This highlights a problem facing any professionals – not just teachers – operating outside their specialism. Medical doctors should not advise patients on legal matters; accountants should not offer clients any ideas about building

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design; plumbers should not tell their friends how to wire up an air conditioner. The practice of teaching beyond our field is full of risk.

Where the problem emerges, I suggest, is that each of us in our chosen career learns bits and pieces of current knowledge about other fields – and we incorporate this new but incomplete awareness into our personal data banks. When we first learn it, the knowledge might be correct, but because it is not our chosen field, we are generally denied any opportunity to update it –

and therein lies the problem. A classic example of this would be the question of dealing with grief.

Teachers and educational administrators often have to handle grief in its various manifestations. It might be that a pupil has lost a favourite pet, or that a classmate has been seriously hurt in an accident; it might be a family facing marriage break-up or it might be a death by suicide – to name just a few of the possibilities. There is often no warning of the impending disaster and the grief experienced by our students might be horrendous. So what do we do about it?

Old ideas no longer accepted

Perhaps we might recall Freudian psychology from years ago and believe that grieving is a short-term experience that will end once we are

able to sever our emotional ties to the deceased (in a case of death-inspired grief), readjust to our new life and build new relationships. This view, current for about 50 years, has now been dismissed, along with the idea that moving on to 'normal' functioning is an antidote to grief.¹ More recent students of grief became very familiar with the ideas of Kubler-Ross, and her contemporaries, who advocated a stage theory. For these authorities, the grief process was a series of predictable stages and the grieving person, by following these steps, would avoid most complications. I have certainly been a devotee of this school of thought and I was amazed to learn from Hall that "Stage theories ...are incapable of capturing the complexity, diversity and idiosyncratic quality of the grieving process." For those of us who have previously pontificated about the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance), it is hard to learn that this theory is "...without any credible evidence base." An added difficulty is that if people are convinced that the grieving process is a sequential series of stages, and a grieving person does not comply with this pattern, we could fail to address the real needs of that person.

If we have become comfortable with the theory, unaware of the more sophisticated awareness that has replaced it, it stresses the

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importance of more up to date knowledge. Somehow, we must be more open to recent theories, no matter how comfortable the old ones are. Our pupils and their families deserve nothing less.

A more recent theory, developed by Stroebe and Schut in 1999 and named the *Dual Process Model* suggests there are two dominant responses (loss orientation and restoration orientation) with the griever oscillating between the two. However, its proponents admit "the focus of coping may vary from one moment to another, from one individual to another, and from one cultural group to another." It would be dangerous, therefore, for amateurs to interpret just what is happening at any particular moment.

Another phasal conceptualisation is that of Worden (2008) who argues that grieving involves engagement in four tasks: accepting the reality of the loss, processing the pain of grief, adjusting to the world without the deceased, and establishing a new connection with the deceased as part of one's new life. These steps are

in turn influenced by certain determinants that will impact on the grief, such as the method of death, the person who died, and the relationship between the two parties.

Other ideas have also been presented to help us to understand the grieving process, and it goes without saying that a person's own philosophy of life will impact on their grief. If one has a strong personal spirituality and sees the connection between this life and a life after death, this will have an impact in any search for meaning. On the other hand, if the death was a sudden one, or a death by suicide, or a death of a young person, each of these has strong implications, and each will influence one's response. The key lesson here is that orchestrating any response is not something that should be left to those of us whose knowledge is limited. Current research, sound theory and clear values are all important prerequisites for those handling the support process. Certainly in my view there is a strong case for the provision of current and comprehensive grief education for teachers – preferably well before the school community actually has to cope with such an experience.

I would suggest that such a program should be school-based, so that all staff are hearing the same thing, all can relate what they learn to their local circumstances (such as a recent bereavement) and all can discuss the learning

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over an extended period.

In the meantime, it is consoling because of the relevance of the matter for teachers, to realise that a great deal of material has been published on the web, material that will offer practical guidance on how to respond to grief, even if it does not always include explanations of the underlying philosophy.

A suitable example is the fairly brief summary offered by Edutopia called *Five Tips for Supporting Grieving Students*.² Among the points it makes is this advice: our role as teachers is primarily to 'be present' to the grieving students as they share their emotions. Leave the heavy lifting to the trained counsellors, even if you have been previously briefed by them. The main reason for the suggested briefings by experts is to help us clear our minds of misconceptions, not to turn us into surrogate psychologists.

We are also advised, in this article, to use honest language. Sugar-coating key terms, by replacing terms like 'death' with 'eternal rest' can be very confusing, especially for youngsters. When it comes to speaking with older students, we need to be sensitive enough to realise that their first choice of an audience might be their peers, so we should not 'force the conversation'.

If we remember that our role is not "... to take away the pain of grief, but to allow an opportunity for children to express it" we will be more inclined to listen more and talk less. Drawing comparisons from our own life is frowned on, as is trying to look for the positive side of the story – e.g., "Well, at least he is no longer in pain."

Finally, if we assist parents or caregivers in any way, this may reduce some of the tension surrounding the crisis, and offering affected students additional educational support (such as extensions on due dates, or extra tuition for missed work) may also be greatly appreciated.

Long term affects

One common misperception is that grief has a set life-span, and that after a certain interval, the griever will 'return to normal' – whatever that might mean. We might sense this from the

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traditional response by system authorities when they allocate additional counselling services to a school for a period after the trauma. This timed support should not be seen as indicating that people are expected to overcome their feelings after a set period; instead, it is the economic reality that such professional resources as additional counsellors are not limitless and so they can be allocated only for a brief time. The withdrawal of the support must not be seen as a sign that 'grieving is now officially over'.

If a death has been expected (the result of a lingering illness, for example) it often happens that grief is briefer than if the death was traumatic (a car smash), 'socially awkward' (death by suicide) or otherwise totally unexpected. In the latter cases, the period of grieving might be very long indeed – at home and at school. A very good coverage of this issue is found in Dyregrov & Dyregrov, a readable work for those who want better to understand just how a school or a family might best cope with the demands of grief.³

This brings me back to the risk of hanging on to discredited theories of grief because some people operate as though there is a single legitimate response to a loss, and if their family members, work colleagues or social contacts do not comply with this so-called 'official protocol', serious friction can occur, further exacerbating the challenges of a very sensitive event.

As an educator, I certainly do not have the expertise to critique psychological theory, but I am confident in saying that guidance is available, either in person or in print for those who need it. We must make sure that, as in so many other areas of our life as teachers, we do not cling to

old ideas if they have been proved inadequate (and I might bolster my argument about the demise of the stage theory by referring to the book *Effective Grief and Bereavement Support* by K & A Dyregrov, p.24). We cannot hope to keep up to date with all the information we have picked up over our professional lives, but it seems sensible that, just as we learn new ideas when we do our First Aid refresher courses, so we should be willing to relearn any other topic that can have such an impact on the lives and happiness of our pupils.

In this brief article I have really tried to make five points:

- As teachers, we often confront grief issues
- Most of us are not trained counsellors
- Psychological theories change over time
- We must be aware of and open to such change
- On-going professional development will help us to understand current wisdom and thereby enable us to better serve our students.

Endnotes

- 1 This brief paper draws heavily on an article by Christopher Hall, the Director of the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, entitled Beyond Kubler-Ross: Recent developments in our understanding of grief and bereavement. (<https://www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/2011/december/hall>)
- 2 <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/tips-grief-at-school-2-chris-park>
- 3 K & A Dyregrov (2008) *Effective Grief and Bereavement Support*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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