

# **Grieving the Losses That Come With Disabilities and Mental Illnesses**

## **An Adult Sunday School Lesson**

### **Goals**

1. To identify the losses that we experience when we or a loved one has a disability or a mental illness.
2. To identify healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to those losses.
3. To encourage people to grieve the losses in appropriate ways.

### **Introduction**

When we think of experiencing a loss we often think about death or dying – the losses individuals face when they know they are dying and the losses people suffer when a loved one dies. While these losses are very significant and need to be grieved in appropriate ways there are many other losses that people also need to grieve. Today we want to talk about the losses people face when they live with a disability or a mental illness, as well as the losses people close to them experience.

### **Case Studies on Grieving**

Divide the group into seven small groups and give each group one case study to discuss. Give them the following questions to guide their discussion. Spend approximately 5-10 minutes.

- a) What are the losses experienced in this scenario?
- b) If this was you what might be your initial response?
- c) What other responses might follow within the next few weeks?

### **Case Studies**

1. Your 19-year-old son, who was very active in sports, music and the church youth group, is now attending Bible college in another province. You get a call from the dean saying that your son is not well, he is not attending classes, he's quit the basketball team and is spending most of his time in his room. He has seen the doctor and been told that he is dealing with serious depression. The dean wonders if it would be better for him to come home than to stay at the college.

2. You and your husband have been looking forward to having a baby. Both you and your families are very excited when you discover you're pregnant. When the baby arrives, however, you sense something is wrong. Several days later the doctor confirms that your child has cerebral palsy.

3. You have a lovely 13-year-old daughter who has been delightful to have around. But right now her first year in junior high is causing you concern. She seems to have lost interest in her

schoolwork, she is often sent to the principal's office because of inappropriate behaviour, and when you talk to her about it she doesn't seem to understand that anything is wrong. You begin to realise eventually after much frustration that your daughter is affected by an alcohol-related neurological disorder and that nothing you can do will make it go away or get better.

4. You are a 13-year-old girl who has lost interest in school. You are constantly being sent to the principal's office for inappropriate behaviour. Your old friends don't come round anymore and you find new friends who accept you. You hang out with them in places your parents don't approve of, but you don't know why your parents are upset. Finally they take you to see a pediatrician who diagnoses you with an alcohol-related neurological disorder. This is a very long title you don't understand. You get extra help at school but you still have lots of fights with your parents, and you begin to spend more and more time with friends who sometimes get into big trouble.

5. You are 23 years old when you're involved in a car accident. You lie unconscious for weeks and are hospitalized for months. You work hard at regaining ability in your legs but as time goes on you realize that you will probably never walk again.

6. You're a precious little girl with beautiful brown eyes and a happy personality. Your parents and a speech therapist talk to you patiently and diligently. They're good to you and you are happy. But as time goes on you discover that you are different from other children. You talk using signs and your parents and teachers sign when they talk to you. But the children on your bay don't know how to sign and they don't understand when you want to talk to them. Sometimes they just run off and leave you behind and you know they don't want to play with you. You begin to realize that you are different and that not all people treat you as kindly as your parents and the therapist do.

7. You are a 47-year-old man who is living in a seniors' complex in a small town. You grew up in the community but your family never fit in. Your father was in a mental health centre most of his adult life and your family was poor and never really accepted in the church or community. You've been hospitalized for mental illness too, and are now living in the seniors' place because it is one of the few places you can afford. Again you feel isolated and on the fringe. You know that you need to take responsibility for your life but you don't know where to turn.

## **Discussion**

List the various losses from each of the case studies. Label them as feelings, thoughts or actions.

## **Summary**

Summarize the following information for the class:

All these feelings, thoughts and actions are normal. They are part of the grieving process. You go through this process when a loved one dies and you also experience it as you face other losses.

Initially, when losses occur it is normal for people to not believe the loss has or is happening. Sometimes we call that denial. They will also experience a wide variety of emotions,

such as anger, fear and discouragement. They often struggle to think clearly and make good decisions. Often it seems as if God is very distant; they may even feel that God has abandoned or rejected them. Some people pull back from relationships while others want more support from their friends and families than these people can give. Then they feel even more rejected. This is a very dark time in people's lives and it seems as if there will never be joy again. People need to process these dark feelings in healthy ways. (Later in the class we will look at a handout on how to grieve in a healthy way.)

This is a long process, but they will find new joys, new insights and new meaning in their lives. They may go on to make significant contributions in their community. Many develop a passion to help others who are experiencing the same losses and give much care and support to them. On the contrary, if people do not process the losses well they may become bitter, resentful or stuck in their grief. They may be unhappy for the rest of their lives.

### **Reading of a Psalm**

In the book of Psalms we find many laments. Listen while we read some verses from the Psalms. In particular, try to identify thoughts and feelings expressed by the psalmist that are similar to the words and ideas we listed when we looked at the case studies.

Have someone read Psalm 38. Discuss the following questions as a group.

1. How do the feelings, thoughts and actions in this psalm compare to the list we made following the case studies?
2. When you think about those psalms what ideas do you get from them about grieving in healthy ways?
3. What other things have been helpful to you in grieving in the past?

Pass out the hand-out called *Healthy Grieving*. Give a few minutes to read through it.

1. Are there any ideas in it that we have not yet listed about grieving in healthy ways?
2. The hand-out also gives some ideas about unhealthy grieving. Do you notice anything we have not already listed?
3. Think back to the case studies. What further losses would people experience over a longer period of time? What would they need to do as they become aware of other losses?

### **Conclusion**

Grieving the losses that come with a mental illness or a disability may never end. Thus learning to grieve in healthy ways whenever we experience them is important.

Close with a prayer such as: "Gracious God, we know that you care about our grief and losses. We bring them to you and ask for your healing in our lives so we can be whole people in spite of the losses we have experienced due to long-term illnesses and disabilities. Amen."

## **Appendix**

### **Healthy Grieving**

#### **Why Is Grieving So Important?**

- So it doesn't become bad grief. If we do not allow ourselves to grieve we may end up suffering from bitterness, resentment, depression, and withdraw from life.
- So we can heal, learn from our pain and go on to reconstruct life.
- So we can comfort others as we have been comforted (2 Corinthians 1: 3-7). If we aren't in touch with our grief and don't experience such things as hurt and tears, our ministry to others who are grieving will be limited. We may even run from people who are grieving. We may find it easier not to speak to them and rather excuse ourselves or leave the room when they talk about their pain.
- So we don't ruin our health. Bottling up grief may also cause us to express anger inappropriately.
- Because we have been created as people with feelings and emotions, and we need to express them appropriately. It is very important to realize that we don't need to feel guilty when we experience negative emotions. For example, Jesus cried at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35), he got angry at injustice and wrong (Matthew 21:12-17), and he pleaded to have the cup of suffering removed because he was in anguish (Luke 22:39-46). David also expressed intense emotion: "My God, why has thou forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1). Anger, disappointment and despair are all evident in this passage. Sometimes people are reticent to express negative emotions. Jesus and others Biblical figures, such as David, are good role models for us.

#### **How Does Grief Work?**

It is helpful to understand the grieving process in order to grieve in healthy ways.

In her book, *On Death and Dying* (MacMillan, 1969), Elizabeth Kubler-Ross describes five stages of grieving. Other writers have classified the stages in different ways. What is crucial to understand is that grieving is a process, and that it does not happen quickly or easily. People move back and forth between these stages, sometimes many times, before truly accepting the loss.

#### **Kubler-Ross's Stages:**

##### **Stage 1: Denial**

For example, parents may respond to a teenage child's overuse of alcohol by pretending it isn't happening or saying it isn't serious.

##### **Stage 2: Anger**

This is the stage when people say such things as: "Why me?", "Why, God?" and "It's not fair."

##### **Stage 3: Bargaining (often with God)**

In this stage people say: “If only..., then....”

#### **Stage 4: Depression**

In this stage there is a loss of energy, feelings of self-blame, and a desire to die. The grieving person says: “It’s no use....”

#### **Stage 5: Acceptance**

This is when we let go and stop attempting to control our life. It is a choice after a long process. The struggle is over and we experience relief. Habakkuk 3:16-19 is an example. Acceptance is not resignation; rather, resignation may lead to bitterness or resentment, and is likely to occur if we don’t go through the process and reach the point of acceptance.

#### **How Can We Learn To Grieve In Healthy Ways?**

- by allowing ourselves to experience a full range of emotions B sitting with the pain, not rushing it, or running from it
- by allowing ourselves to cry as much as we need to
- by talking about feelings with those who care, saying them aloud, and writing about them
- by listening to music that evokes feelings
- by crying with others B something that can be very difficult for some people but has much potential to lighten the burden and help the healing process
- by telling our stories to caring listeners
- through honest prayer
- by looking at pictures, mementoes, and significant objects
- by taking time for ourselves to think and reflect

#### **How Do We Hinder Our Own Grieving?**

- by denying the pain, pretending it isn’t there or doesn’t hurt, or squelching it when it surfaces
- by trying to be super strong, with an >I can handle it’ attitude
- by being busy and running from the pain
- by praying deceptively, pretending to be strong, and not acknowledging our weakness to God.

From Appendix B, *Becoming a More Caring Congregation* (MCC)

Read Article [\*A Grief Encounter: Grieving losses other than death\*](#)