

Grief



Stages and Steps to Recovery

by Francis Smith

I was a little boy when I had one of my first experiences with loss and grief. It happened the day my best friend died. "Tinker," an Eskimo spit and collie mix, had been my faithful companion for many years. Sometimes I would sit beside him and talk to him about my problems. He would sit patiently and look at me lovingly with his eyes as if to say, "I understand." The day I discovered he died, I felt a heavy sadness as I lay on my bed crying, not knowing what to do with all the feelings and thoughts churning inside me.

Sooner or later everyone experiences this universal human crisis called bereavement or grief. Usually one thinks only of the loss of a loved one, but grief is also the normal and natural response to the loss of an object or to a change in a relationship. Some examples are death, divorce, retirement, job loss or moving from one house to another.

The Word of God is full of accounts testifying to losses and grief. Abraham and Jacob both lost loved ones as they

traveled to the Promised Land. "Sarah died in Hebron in the land of Canaan; there Abraham mourned and wept for her" (*Genesis 23:1-2*). Jacob lost his wife Rachel while giving birth to their son Benjamin (*Genesis 35:19-21*). The people of Israel mourned the death of Moses for thirty days (*Deuteronomy 34:8*). When Jesus' friend Lazarus died, Jesus saw Mary and others weeping over their loss. Jesus' love and compassion for others moved him to tears (*John 11:28-44*).

Simple first aid in our society gets more attention than death and emotional loss. We're taught how to acquire things, not how to lose them. Over time the pain of unresolved grief accumulates and can rob a person's capacity for happiness.

If you or someone you know is experiencing loss and grief, consider the following suggestions.

☐ Recognize that the following commonly held misconceptions are harmful to our grief work: Just give it time; replace the loss; grieve

alone; and, regret the past. These misconceptions must be replaced with truth that leads to healing and recovery.

❑ Give yourself and others permission to experience feelings related to grief. Some of these feelings may be:

- sadness
- loneliness
- shock
- helplessness
- anxiety
- yearning
- guilt
- hurt
- low self-esteem
- anger
- self-blame
- despair
- numbness
- lack of control
- depression

❑ Never say "I understand how you feel," because you don't, even though you may have experienced a similar loss. Instead, encourage the expression of feelings without making judgments about the feelings you're uncomfortable with. You may say to the person, "I don't know what you are

feeling. What is it like for you to be going through this?"

❑ Be aware of changes in behavior and physical symptoms of grief. This may include changes in eating habits, sleep disturbance, decreased work productivity, social withdrawal, aggressive behavior, headaches, fatigue, constipation, and tightness in chest or throat.

❑ Identify the stage of grief. There are typically five stages of grief:

1. Acknowledging the loss.

Recognize shock, disbelief, anxiety, depression, etc.

2. Experiencing the pain.

Feeling disoriented and fearing loss of control are common.

3. Re-adjusting to the loss.

Allow time for adapting to loss and expect to continue struggling with new roles and responsibilities.

4. Reinvesting emotional

energy. Enjoy the healing and hope of developing new environments, relationships, and activities.

5. Reconciling the loss.

The loss is remembered with less pain, which leads to new directions and opportunities.

❑ Choose to recover, but realize that you cannot recover alone! Instead of detaching from our feelings which leads to isolation, we must invite God and others into the recovery process as partners. The psalmist said, "I look to the mountains; where will my help come from? My help will come from the Lord... " (*Psalms 121:1*).

❑ Recognize that you are powerless over the loss. Surrender your life and will to God. Invite Him to accompany you through the pain. Read the promise of God to rescue his people in Isaiah 43:1-5, 18-19. As I mentioned earlier, the Word of God deals with loss and grief, but it also instructs us in hope, encouragement, and restoration.

❑ Some churches have started grief recovery support groups as part of their pastoral care ministry. Your local Hospice may also have a grief counseling and support center. Re-

member if depression, withdrawal, grief or family problems are getting out of control, seek the help of a pastoral counselor or other professional.

© **Francis Smith, M.Div.**,
Assistant Pastor for Missions
at Calvary Baptist Church.