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Shadows of Grief: Experiences of Loss Within Transitional Families

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Grief reconciliation may be seen as the reconstruction of one's life story, a personal meaning-making activity that occurs within a social context (Nadeau, 1997; Neimeyer, 2001). Family, as a concept, might be defined broadly as the web of social interaction within which we live, grieve, and heal. Grief has the capacity to isolate family members from each other, to separate and divide instead of integrating and bridging. Families who are blending as a result of transitions such as death or divorce have unique characteristics of grief. They often need counseling assistance in understanding the diverse perspectives coexisting within the family unit. In order to extend best practice intervention, a counselor will be well served to explore models of grief as they apply to families in transition and to utilize the concept of *shadow grief* when assisting families in understanding each other. The hope, from a counseling perspective, is that family, as we define it, might act as a harbor as an individual shifts and expands the narrative after loss.

Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies (2002) described grief "psychologically as a response to the disruption of personal assumptions and relationships that sustain a sense of self" (p. 235). The life story or narrative includes facts, perceptions, and interpretations that compose the ever-evolving process of the construction of meaning in our lives. The personal narrative may be viewed as the dynamic story of the legacies one lives, the people to whom one belongs, and the connections between who one has been and who one will be. When seen in this way, loss disorganizes the story and disrupts our sense of autobiographical continuity and coherence.

One reconstructs their story in the aftermath of the disruption of loss within the web of relational understanding and support one has at that time. The social web maintains, modifies, and informs the individual's reconstruction of meaning. Nadeau (1997) explored ways clinicians might expand the conversation within families who are grieving so that the unit might provide supportive contribution to the meaning-making activity of its members. It is important for counselors to recognize the uniqueness in the experience of witnessing the grief of another when both have been affected and are managing the pain of the transition process themselves. It is helpful to understand the subjective experience of each affected family member and how that experience colors the family. One member's way of constructing and reconstructing meaning can even collide and conflict with another's. There is a complex relationship between the subjective and social contexts of meaning transformation (Neimeyer, 2001).

One of the intentions of this article is to equip counselors with a conceptualization of the shadow grief nuances inherent in making new family units (Davies, 1999). The blending process within the family system includes a movement from what was to what can be and may be understood as an unfolding grief experience. Through this grief lens, we are better equipped to assist the adults in making proactive decisions along the way of blending that strengthen the bonds of the new family. Parents need to be able to assist the children in moving toward a healthy reconciliation of what has been lost. The understanding of family blending as a grief process and of the shadow grief experiences of individual family members can aid our roles as consultants, educators, advocates, and clinicians when dealing with diverse family configurations. With broader sensitization, clinicians will be better equipped to offer presence to each member of a blending family.

Shadow grief weaves private and personal layers of loss not completely visible to others and often outside the conscious awareness of the griever. The layers display the subjective experience of the loss for that person. Shadows create a complex transformation of narrative that unfolds over time. They are an invaluable part of the individual's construction of meaning within loss (Davies, 1999).

Each family member constructs and reconstructs meaning as the layers of ramification of an original loss event ripple and unfold over time. The long-term journey of grief is not to escape, but to travel well within the shadows. Shadow grief is enduring, permeating, and potentially isolating within a family. Shadow grief may be triggered by external reminders such as sensory associations or anniversary dates. However, these reminders are indicative of the larger symbolism of what is at stake for this individual given this loss event.

A case of a family in process of blending exemplifies the issue of individual shadow grief. This particular family came together as a result of divorce of the mother and death of a spouse of the father. Three children were the original formation of this new family unit. The mother's daughter from a previous marriage did not view her new father figure with the same authority or respect that her mother would have preferred. At a later date, when the child's stepfather died, she was misunderstood as not being sad enough over the loss of her father.

To this child, *her* father was still alive. Her sense of what was lost at the time of her stepfather's death was not what her mother expected. The mother and the daughter engaged in years of misunderstanding about the daughter's expression of grief at the time of the death of her stepfather. The need for recognition and support around what was at stake continued unfulfilled for the daughter. For the mother, the shadows included the death of the more responsive father of the two men. She sought understanding about that. For the daughter, the shadows included the death of the stepfather with whom she had been given a home and the presence of a living, biological father to whom she was connected. The two individual members did not share a similar symbolic construction of meaning about the event of death within the family unit.

Shadow grief exists as the family changes evolve over time. Special anniversaries for some in the family may be different from others and may receive no recognition over time. The two other children of this case example lost their mother to death. As the new family emerged through marriage of the two adults, this death anniversary marker was not legitimized. The children were viewed as being difficult at this time of year. The family counselor had to retrieve the importance of this event in the meaning-making construction of the narrative of these children. It is through the reality reminders of such events that these individual children answer the questions, "Who would I have been without this experience?" and "Who will I be now?" These questions are important to the evolving sense of identity within a developing person, particularly at developmental periods such as adolescence when identity issues are central.

As the individual shadow grief experiences occur, other unique characteristics of families in transitional blending must be considered. First, communications can begin to include secrets, omissions, and taboo subjects. In the case already mentioned, the daughter did not feel the freedom to talk about her own personal grief experience when her stepfather died. She felt pressured to closet her unique experience of him given he was not viewed as her father in her meaning construction. Second, blending families must confront the threat of change. The family system may respond to the unknown dimension of what has not yet been created with rigidity as opposed to flexibility. Families may then hold the norm of what has been as expectations or rules without a curious, open posture as to what might be.

A third unique characteristic for counselors to consider is the resistance that may occur as family rituals and traditions combine the past and the present. Rituals that honor and recognize what has been before are important gestures to assist in grief reconciliation. The daughter from a previous marriage wanted her holiday celebrations with her own father included in the larger family planning of these special occasions. Finally, individuals will develop answers to the question, "Who am I to these people and who are these people to me?" Identity is transformed within the changing social context of the blending family. These questions are the fabric of cohesion and continuity of our own autobiography.

Samuel T. Gladding (2002) used a metaphor of tapestry weaving to describe how families integrate the past with the future. Family relationships form and are reformed over time. As clinicians, advocates, consultants, and educators, we can assist families in creating this beautiful tapestry through their familial relationships. It is crucial that we hear each family member's story as an individual and within the family context. It is also essential to recognize the importance of each story, regardless of age, familial status, or continuity of family involvement. In other words, the story of the head of the household is equally imperative to the reconstruction of the family experiencing loss as is the narrative of the youngest child.

Of what importance is this perspective to those of us who are privileged to journey with families in transition? Our recognition of family blending as a unique grief process in and of itself is a lens through which we can have an impact on healing. We might anticipate the characteristics of families in transitional blending so that we might offer perspective, guidance, and direction as the new unit is formed. We can begin our interventions from the standpoint of individual and family story making. We might empower families to allow diverse grief experience and expression among the members.

Nadeau (1997) stated that "working with grieving families consists, first of all, of hearing their stories in the most intricate detail" (p. 109). We might examine the therapeutic impact of the use of a variety of expressive art modalities as ways to expand the communication options for families (Thompson, 2003). If we are sensitive and aware of the shadow grief that exists, we are essentially allowing the bright colors of

each family member's experiences to weave a transforming narrative within a social context of healing.

Nadeau (1997) emphasized that "it is important to help the family accept divergent meanings, develop tolerance for others who do not agree with them, and to help the family create rituals to make sense of what has occurred" (pp.109-110). As helping professionals, understanding families from a meaning transformation perspective creates compassionate communication and open clinical possibilities with those in grief transitions.

References

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