

Using the Loss Characterization with Bereaved Parents

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CLIENTS FOR WHOM THE TECHNIQUE IS APPROPRIATE

Parents who have lost children, especially several months after the death. Earlier application can be difficult when parents are wrestling with overwhelming emotional demands in the present, when supportive and directive assistance are most beneficial.

DESCRIPTION

For many parents, the death of a child represents a loss of profound and traumatic proportions with a grief trajectory that may be lifelong. Complications in grieving that can occur following this type of loss are well documented. However, at the same time, emerging from their struggle with grief, some parents report adaptive changes in their sense of identity, or what has been termed 'post-traumatic growth' (PTG). Within the therapeutic setting, while it is encouraging to witness and (where possible) to facilitate PTG, how adaptive responses to loss are assessed and then discussed with bereaved parents should proceed with caution. In particular, direct questioning about such responses using terms such as "positive changes," "benefits" or any other language that might be perceived to imply something "positive" has emerged from a child's death can be experienced as offensive to some parents and may even lead to a denial of such experiences (i.e., based on the sense of guilt this evokes). In light of these concerns, one technique that holds promise for sensitively exploring PTG in the wake of a child's death is the Loss Characterization (Neimeyer, 2002). Consistent with other constructivist and narrative-based techniques used to explore parental grief (Gerrish, Steed, & Neimeyer, 2010), one advantage of using the Loss Characterization is that it invites the bereaved parent to use his or her own formulations, definitions, and language to explore PTG (as well as possible complications) within their grieving experience. In particular, through using indirect and open-ended instructional prompts, the bereaved parent is simply asked to reflect on how the death of their child has impacted on who they are as a person. In more specific terms, the bereaved parent is provided with an instructional set at the top of a blank page that reads as follows (adapted version):

In the space that follows, please write in your own words a description of the kind of person you are following your child's death. Alternatively, if you would prefer, you could dictate an audio recording of the same description of yourself. Please be aware

that spelling and grammar do not matter, or even the way you write it. For example, you may just want to just jot down some notes, or even use some points to describe how you feel. How much you write is also up to you – please write as much or as little as you wish.

This exercise is one that I would like you to complete at home to allow you whatever time you need to “speak for yourself” about the loss of your child and how this has affected you. You may wish to begin as follows: “Since [child’s name] died, I . . .”

The above instructions are designed to be simple and to minimize the parent’s defensiveness and to allow him or her to focus on the *experience of bereavement* without implying any particular outcomes from the loss. The Loss Characterization can also be completed by asking parents to write their self-description as it might be written by a friend (or other significant person) who knew them very intimately and very sympathetically (i.e., they are asked to write it in the third person). In adopting the perspective of a friend or other significant person, the potential for self-criticism and other condemnation that may occur with this exercise can be reduced (Neimeyer, 2002).

However, based on my own research with bereaved mothers, the modified format as outlined above was one that mothers found more understandable and therefore manageable. Bereaved mothers wrote varying amounts in accordance with their own capabilities, with some mothers writing as little as two paragraphs. Despite this, the content of many of their accounts highlighted clearly how their loss had impacted their identity. Furthermore, adaptive (and complicating) aspects to mother’s grief experiences were revealed in their writings—thereby bypassing the need for direct (and potentially distressing) questioning about such responses. This did not mean that exploration of the quality and meaning of mother’s responses to their loss was not required. However, importantly, these discussions were able to proceed in a more sensitive manner by adopting the language, wording and examples of identity change of the bereaved mother (not the therapist) as a reference point.

CASE EXAMPLE

A mother who had lost her child to cancer five years earlier provided the following Loss Characterization; pseudonyms have been used to respect her confidentiality.

It’s difficult to write about “me” but I will attempt to do so. Firstly, losing Jess is the worst event that has ever occurred in my life. Losing a daughter is losing someone much, much more than a best friend, it is like losing a part of myself. In response to describing what kind of person I am now following Jess’s death . . . sad, but also grateful to have known and loved Jess.

There is a lot of regret for everything that led Jess to endure any suffering. To watch an innocent child be subjected to chemotherapy treatment that her parents had consented to was mental torture for us, physical torture for her. It is a choice we made and the consequences we will have to live with forever. There is nothing that can take away that horrific event. So yes, I live with sorrow for the suffering; regret that I wasn’t stronger to give of myself more and live with many thoughts of how it may have been if other decisions had been made. I remember often whispering in her ear that we loved her and were there beside her, but I will always wish that I’d had the words to be more insistent, stronger and more determined to somehow keep her alive. However, this was not the outcome and acceptance is all that is left.

When Jess first passed, the pain of losing someone so dear to me was so extreme that any previous experiences or conclusions that I had come to about life being beautiful or about

a creator being kind, were impossible to believe any more. They were a concept only, a memory that I knew I had believed all my life, but it was one I thought I'd never be able to believe again. The experience of grief is so powerful, so overwhelming, so all encompassing, it was hard to comprehend that a "kind" creator could also create the ability for a human being to experience such depths of sorrow. Through that grief, needs to understand where my daughter now was and whether she was still suffering, were crucial to me. Over time, in many unexpected ways, incidences occurred that helped me to see certain resolutions to my needs. Be it through words in a song, people who came into my life and spoke about their experiences, dates and places that were significantly related to my own life, kindnesses shown to me from other people's actions . . . all of these things over time helped to heal the grief.

Fortunately, I am alive. To appreciate this unique opportunity is important and feels good. Perhaps now I'm more focussed on valuing the moment, more aware of how fragile this life is, more appreciative of this limited time I have to be alive and recognise the need to live more from my heart. Learning to live with an "invisible" Jess is what I do now. I will always love and admire her for everything that she was during her lifetime and that bond we have will never die.

In examining this mother's Loss Characterization, the devastating impact of her child's death on her identity and assumptions about the world were clearly evident. Her inability to erase the memories of her daughter's suffering left her with pain and regret that she had come to accept would be with her for life. At the same time, through grieving her loss, she felt she had been transformed in profound ways. She described a greater appreciation for her own life, an increased valuing of the moment, a desire to live closer to her feelings and the creation of an ongoing and meaningful symbolic bond with her daughter.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Exploring bereaved parents' experiences of PTG and other adaptive responses that can potentially follow the death of a child can have important therapeutic benefits for parents' overall adaptation to their loss. With appropriate precautions against directly asking the bereaved if they have "changed in any positive ways," the Loss Characterization exercise allows survivors (of many types of losses) to write about "who they are in light of their loss" and to report of their own accord, using their own words and examples, changes to their identity that may reflect PTG.

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