

2-MINUTE TIP:

PROLONGED GRIEF DISORDER - 3 STORIES

Discovering Themes in Prolonged Grief

- I want to share how in the late 1970s I discovered the 7 themes of Prolonged Grief described in my other PGD handouts. Grief can be normal, delayed, distorted, or prolonged. Usually, our work is to make sure grieving continues on a normal course, normalizing the client's experiences, observing grief phenomena and emotions, giving names to experiences, watching for cognitions or actions that could take the grief-work in an unhelpful direction. In these 3 cases, identifying the loss, exploring emotions, and finding cognitions was not resolving the grief or depressed mood.
- 36 year-old Patrick reported the murder of his twin sister 4 years earlier. An image was burned into his mind – he arrived at her home as the coroner was carrying her out. He had not moved forward in his grieving. The image was vivid and painful. Due to sadness, he avoided talking about her. That is when I identified the phenomenon of traumatic grief. Resolving the trauma memory enabled him to set up a memorial for his sister and work through his loss.
- 59 year-old Addie divorced 3 years earlier after a 30-year marriage and raising 2 children to adulthood. She said she was an “executive wife,” entertaining clients and helping her husband advance in his career. With angry, depressed mood, she repeated anecdotes from the lead-in to the divorce and her ex-husband's actions. After months fixed on that with no progress, I saw this was prolonged grief. At the time, the idea of themes in prolonged grief did not exist. I finally realized she had lost her identity along with her marriage. She also had transferred dependency from her parents to her husband – being emotionally and economically dependent upon him. After we saw that, we could work it through, help her reinvest in new activities, use her skills and abilities, and develop a new lifestyle.
- Tillie was a 42 year-old woman who divorced her husband of 18 years after her 14 year-old daughter reported he had touched her inappropriately. After about 2 years, she expressed rage that he was remarrying, happy, and well off while her lifestyle and financial security was diminished. At the same time, she missed him. Instead of focusing on loss per se, we focused on ambivalence and on her challenge accepting the reality
- Though these and other cases, we see many losses are not only about the loss, but about complicating emotional factors, themes in prolonged grief.

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