

Good Grief: Finding Meaning in the Midst of Loss

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Change, however good, brings **loss**, and with every loss there is **grief**. The life of a cross-cultural worker is filled with transition, and therefore, with losses. As the cycle of change and loss are repeated, grief can intensify.

Hidden Losses

For the globally mobile, in addition to more obvious losses—such as important people, locations, and possessions—there are other losses that come as a part of cross-cultural life that are less apparent, but nonetheless important. These “**hidden**” losses can include:

- Cultural Context and Lifestyle
- Status and Role
- Identity, including in a system
- Relationships, including role models
- Missed Experiences
- Access to Place
- What Never Will Be

The losses are often **multiple and simultaneous**—one’s whole world can change in the space of a plane flight! Lack of time and access to context can make processing grief even more challenging.

What is Grief?

Grief is the natural response to loss, the body and brain’s way of trying to process and *make sense* of loss. The pain of grief is an indication of how important and meaningful the loss is—it wouldn’t hurt if it didn’t matter.

Grief affects the **whole person**:

- *Physically*—fatigue, body aches, numbness, tearfulness, changes in appetite and sleep, difficulty concentrating, changes in behavior (primarily in children)
- *Emotionally*— shock, anger, sadness, disappointment, fear, longing, helplessness, guilt
- *Cognitively*—denial, confusion, thoughts of “Why?” “If only...” “This is unfair!”
- *Spiritually*—questioning God, “spiritual desert,” doubt, lack of trust, lament
- *Relationally*—withdrawal, isolation, conflict (especially if grief responses differ)

Although there are commonalities, grief manifests differently in each person. *Each individual experience of grief is valid.* Grief can feel surprising at times, particularly when whatever prompted a grief response seems unconnected to the loss.

Grief is not linear; thoughts, feelings, and sensations are often experienced simultaneously. However, there are ebbs and flows to the intensity of the experience. It is not unusual for past aspects of one’s grief experience to reemerge at future times.

Responding to Grief

Grief is messy and uncomfortable, and often the reaction is to avoid or minimize it. Sometimes this stems from a fear that giving voice to the sorrow would be a betrayal of the good. Other times, the fear is that the anger and doubt that come with grief are “un-Christian” (or “not how a cross-cultural worker should act”).

While these initial responses are natural, they are ineffective. *Grief doesn’t disappear.* It will find a way to be expressed, even if covertly (e.g. through physical complaints). Denying or suppressing it only delays the process, and in some cases, can increase the grief response the longer it remains unresolved.

Acknowledging loss does not invalidate the good. Life this side of heaven is filled with both joys and sorrows. To live fully as image-bearers is to embrace the entire range of human emotion and experience. There is room for all of it.

God tells us to grieve! His word is filled with examples of lament—expressing the pain, sorrow, anger, and questions to God. Jesus, the “man of sorrows” (Isa. 53:3), is our best example of how to grieve well.

Sometimes grief cannot be processed in the present moment due to circumstances or responsibilities (e.g. setting up house in a new place, taking care of children, visiting supporters, etc.). In those moments, take the time to acknowledge that the grief is there, and then *put it “away” for safekeeping* until such time that there is space, permission, and energy to engage with the grief process.

Grieving Well

Grief is not about “getting over” the loss; it’s about learning to *integrate* it into life and *move forward with meaning*. Grieving is telling the story of what was lost, why it mattered, and how it influenced one’s life. Engaging in the grief process, while painful, is the only way through.

Individuals can grieve at their own pace and in their own way, but here are a few key elements to make the grief process more successful:

- **Acknowledge**—*name the losses*. Tell the story through talking to others, journaling, photos, art, music, videos, dance, etc. Give voice to the thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. Practice lament.
- **Witness**—*allow the losses to be seen and expressed*. Whether it’s only with you and God, or includes others in your family or community, give permission for grief to be displayed. Be kind to yourself while grieving, and take care of your needs.
- **Make Meaning**—*honor the losses*. Engage in customs and traditions, collect “sacred objects,” and create rituals to carry what is loved and important into the future. If needed, practice goodbye. Remember the truth of who God is and what He has promised. Practice gratitude.

It’s never too late to go back and grieve a loss. You can give yourself the gift of grieving well at any point.

A note to parents: Parents set the tone for grieving in the family. Model healthy grieving for children through creating space and permission to grieve, acknowledging losses, witnessing their grief, and guiding them in meaning-making. Be sensitive to developmental differences and the need for individual approaches to grieving based on your children’s temperaments and needs.

Resources

1. *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing after Loss* by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen – wonderful book for adults and kids alike about understanding the grief process and helping yourself and others through it.
2. *A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament* by Michael Card – guide to practicing lament through an examination of biblical laments.
3. *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss* by Jerry Sittser – personal memoir mixed with theological meditations on grieving as Christians.
4. *Swirly* by Sara Saunders – children’s story exploring TCK identity. While not specifically grief-oriented, it offers opportunities to talk about losses experienced as part of a highly mobile, cross-cultural upbringing.