

LEVELS Of LOSS

by Sr. Mary Agnes Sermersheim, OSB

Loss forever changes the world of the bereaved. It's a new environment, personal and social, an environment where the lost object is no longer present. An ending has occurred that demands new beginnings. Before that happens a period of transition takes place. During this time, the bereaved closely examines what has been lost and what has been gained as a consequence of the ending. What has actually changed? What continues the same? What is new? What experiences, roles, expectations, values opportunities, fantasies are to be given up? What new ones assumed?

All of the current and potential losses that follow as a result of the loss are to be identified. Each identified secondary loss requires its own grief response. Unfinished business that involves the loss is also to be identified. Appropriate ways to achieve closure are sought out.

It is often difficult for the family and friends of an individual who has recently experienced the loss of a loved one to understand why the grieving process lasts so long. Family and friends want to see their loved one be happy and "get on with life." It is therefore, important to be aware of the many levels of loss. This awareness may help the grieving person, as well as others who care about this individual, be more patient and move gently during the time (often at least two to five years) of grief.

The following is a list of different levels that one may experience after the loss of a loved one:

- **LOSS OF A LOVED ONE:** this level is very obvious; consequently, many think it is the only level of loss.
- **LOSS OF A LARGE CHUNK OF SELF:** the part of self that was given to the other person in love; at death, this part of self seems to be violently wrenched from one's being.
- **LOSS OF IDENTITY:** oftentimes, an individual identifies self by the "roles of service" used in a relationship; when the other person is no longer present and the role no longer played, the individual often loses the feeling of wholeness.
- **LOSS OF SELF CONFIDENCE:** because a grieving person doesn't recognize his or her personal wholeness, the feeling of inadequacy of not being able to do anything right is often very strong.

- **LOSS OF CHOSEN LIFESTYLE:** death FORCES a person to begin a new way of life; for instance, in marrying a person one chooses to be married. Even when, for very good reasons, a person must leave a spouse, (as in death) the person does NOT willingly choose to be single again.
- **LOSS OF SECURITY:** because of the new lifestyle, the grieving person doesn't know what will happen next or how he or she will emotionally react or respond to what will happen.
- **LOSS OF FEELING SAFE:** the grieving person feels exposed to the cold winds of life without their loved one, and feels very vulnerable.
- **LOSS OF A KNOWN FAMILY STRUCTURE:** death instantly changes the composition of a person's family, thus creating another level of adjustment that must be faced.
- **LOSS OF THE FAMILIAR MANNER OF RELATING TO/WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS:** the interest of the grieving person changes and, of course, sadness and anger are often evident. Because of this, family and friends frequently do not know how to respond and, therefore, avoid the individual.
- **LOSS OF THE PAST:** new acquaintances and new friends can be very supportive and accepting but they do not have a sense of the individual's past journey, of his or her history.
- **LOSS OF THE FUTURE:** it is frightening for a person in grief to think ahead - to think of next year or next month or next week without the loved one. There is fear that whatever future there is will be as painful as the present moment.
- **LOSS OF DIRECTION:** the individual doesn't seem to have a purpose in life any more; nothing seems to matter.
- **LOSS OF DREAMS:** all the plans for "spending the rest of my life with the person I love," of "seeing my child grow up," of "having my parents be grandparents," violently disappear.
- **LOSS OF TRUST:** because of the intense levels of loss and deep insecurities, it becomes very difficult for the individual to trust self: trusting anyone else is impossible for a long period of time.
- **LOSS OF SHARING WITH A LOVED ONE:** for many, the spouse was also the best friend - a confidante. Consequently, there is no one to listen to the little things (and the big events) of the day-to-day living. The loss of a child excludes the parent from sharing all the "growing-up years".

- **LOSS OF ABILITY TO FOCUS:** the grieving person's entire being is so affected by the loss that it becomes difficult to focus on what seems to be the "non-essentials" of the rest of life.
- **LOSS OF ABILITY TO SEE CHOICES:** since the new life style was not a choice, there is a sub-conscious feeling that the individual has no control over his or her life.
- **LOSS OF ABILITY TO MAKE DECISIONS:** because of the insecurity and lack of self-trust, the individual asks everyone "what should I do?" and then becomes more confused because everyone gives a different answer.
- **LOSS OF A SENSE OF HUMOR:** when one of the most important people in one's life is no longer around, nothing seems to be funny.
- **LOSS OF HEALTH:** the strain of the emotional and psychological work often causes physical problems such as nausea, migraine headaches, forming muscle knots, back problems, etc.
- **LOSS OF INNER HAPPINESS/JOY:** because so many individuals look outside themselves for a source of inner happiness, it takes a long time before an individual is able to recognize happiness in their life.
- **LOSS OF PATIENCE WITH SELF:** the grieving person wants to feel better NOW and therefore feels inadequate when the feelings of grief last for the normal grieving period of two to five years.

It is very important to note that some individuals may experience some levels of loss that are not mentioned in this list. Some of the levels mentioned may be levels not experienced by an individual. The list is presented as a means of helping you (as well as your friends and relatives) understand why nothing can replace the grieving process - the period of time it takes for the wound of loss to become a scar - for the darkness of grief to become the light of life.