

Reconstructing the Continuing Bond: Accessing the Back Story of the Relationship

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A. Adaptive Grieving: An Integrative Model

1. When grief moves forward, the survivor gradually integrates the "event story" of the death into his or her life narrative, while drawing attachment security from the "back story" of a loving relationship with the deceased (*Attachment & Meaning Reconstruction*)
2. "Bouts" or waves of anguish alternate with "moratoria" that offer a "time out" from the work of grieving. (*Bowlby & DPM*)
3. As loss is integrated, the person:
 - acknowledges the reality of the death
 - retains access to bittersweet emotions in modulated form
 - revises the mental representation of the deceased and the nature of the bond
 - formulates a coherent narrative of the loss
 - redefines life goals and roles
 - (*Attachment, DPM, Two-Track, Meaning Reconstruction*)

B. Attachment theory (Bowlby)

1. Human beings have evolved as social beings whose extended dependency on caregivers primes us for deeply rooted attachment bonds, not only in infancy, but also throughout our lives.
2. Basic attachment phenomena are observed in other species, especially mammals, and particularly other primates.
3. The attachment behavioral system serves two primary functions:
 - a. A *safe haven* at times of threat
 - b. A *secure base* for exploring the world
4. *Securely attached* children tend to develop *working models* of relationships in which others are viewed as available and dependable, and the self is viewed as resourceful and resilient.

5. *Insecurely attached* children (e.g., those with anxious, ambivalent attachments, often as a response to parental undependability, loss, neglect or abuse) tend to develop *working models* of relationships as precarious or dangerous, and corresponding patterns of dependency or compulsive self-reliance.
6. Disruption of attachment in later life through the loss of a security-enhancing relationship through death arouses *separation distress*, which triggers characteristic symptoms of grief.
7. Type of response to separation distress will depend on dominant attachment style. Two major dimensions (Fraley, Mikulincer):

Attachment anxiety: Negative model of self, positive model of others; often expressed as dependency and over-activation of attachment system. In grief, linked to trouble acknowledging loved one's unavailability.

Attachment avoidance: Positive model of self, negative model of others; expressed as deactivation of attachment system and emotions in general. In grief, linked to conscious avoidance of loss and failure to reconcile internal model with deceased's absence.

Illustration: Mother loss and attachment anxiety and avoidance

8. *Study of attachment and coping with bereavement*
(Meier, Carr, Currier & Neimeyer)

Study 1: 626 bereaved adults in first two years of loss assessed for attachment security and complicated grief (CG) symptoms. Results: beyond age, relationship to the deceased and cause of death, attachment anxiety predicted CG.

Study 2: 191 survivors of violent death loss (to suicide, homicide or fatal accident) matched to 191 non-bereaved people with non-traumatic life stressor. Results: beyond gender and cause of death, anxious attachment was related to poorer mental health for both groups. Moreover, avoidant attachment predicted poorer physical health, but only for the violently bereaved sample.

Conclusion: Anxious attachment may predict poor outcome across a range of losses, whereas avoidant attachment may become problematic only under conditions of severe threat.

C. Two-Track Model of Bereavement (Rubin)

8. Adaptation to bereavement proceeds along two tracks:
 - a. *Biosychosocial track*: psychological symptomatology (anxiety, depression), somatic concerns, family relationships, self-esteem, work
 - b. *Relationship to deceased*: imagery, memory, positive and negative affect re deceased, preoccupation with the loss, idealization, conflict, attachment issues, memorial practices
9. Disorders and difficulties unique to grief occur mainly on this neglected second track.

D. Continuing Bonds (Field, Klass and others)

1. Continuing attachment bonds with the deceased, rather than severing them, is a primary process in bereavement; as a great deal of qualitative research indicates.
2. Maintaining continuity in our life narratives implies sustaining connection to those who were a living part of our life story.
3. Reconstructing rather than relinquishing the bond can restore the attachment security challenged by death.

E. CB coping in the death of a spouse (Field & Friedrichs)

1. 15 early (4 mos.) and later (2 years) widows cued several times daily to record mood and whether their thoughts centered on their deceased husbands. Results:
2. Overall, more bonded widows showed greater grief, in keeping with attachment theory.
3. However, an interaction effect also emerged, so that for later widows only, more CB coping was also associated with more positive mood.

F. Binding vs. Bonding

1. Maladaptive CB is associated with highly dependent attachment and intense separation distress in several studies
2. Adaptive CB:
 - ✓ based more on a sense of psychological closeness than on physical proximity seeking (Field et al.)
 - ✓ associated with less self- and other-blame (Field & Bonanno)
 - ✓ reinforced by high levels of meaning-making (Neimeyer et al.)
 - ✓ culturally supported (e.g., more adaptive in Chinese than in an American context) (Bonanno & Ho)

Clinician's Toolbox: "Is it okay for you to be okay?" (Rando)

Reflect on Resistance: When a person seems mired in protracted grief or other forms of distress, Therese Rando suggests that the simple question "Is it okay for you to be okay?" can help reveal reasons the client may resist change, such as out of loyalty to the deceased. These obstacles often need to be dealt with before the client will permit improvement to occur.

Clinician's Toolbox:

Implicit questions entailed in accessing the "back story" of the relationship

- *How can I recover or reconstruct a sustaining connection to my loved one that survives his or her physical death?*
- *Where and how do I hold my grief for my loved one in my body or my emotions, and how might this evolve into an inner bond of a healing kind?*
- *What memories of our relationship bring pain, guilt or sadness, and require some form of redress or reprieve now? How might this forgiveness be sought or given?*
- *What memories of our relationship bring joy, security or pride, and invite celebration and commemoration now? How can I review and relish these memories more often?*
- *What were my loved one's moments of greatness in life, and what do they say about his or her signature strengths or cherished qualities?*
- *What lessons about living or loving have I learned in the course of our shared lives? In the course of my bereavement?*
- *What would my loved one see in me that would give her or him confidence in my ability to survive this difficult period?*
- *What advice would my loved one have for me now, and how can I draw on his or her voice and wisdom in the future?*
- *Who in my life is most and least threatened by my ongoing bond with my loved one, and how can we make a safe space for this in our shared world?*
- *Who can help me keep my loved one's stories alive?*

Clinician's Toolbox: Introducing our Loved Ones (Hedtke)

One counseling practice that is equally relevant in bereavement support for adaptive grief and in grief therapy for complications involves inviting stories of the relationship with the deceased. This not only is compatible with the goal of affirming or reorganizing a secure attachment with the loved one (by giving attention to the relational track through bereavement and oscillating between loss and restoration), but it also draws on narrative, meaning making processes to restore coherence and continuity in the midst of unwelcome change. As a clear alternative to "letting go," introduction suggests the possibility of bringing forward relational connections rather than relinquishing them.

Possible questions to initiate such a conversation could include:

- ✓ Could you introduce me to _____?
- ✓ What did knowing _____ mean to you?
- ✓ Are there particular times, places or ways in which you recall _____'s importance to you?
- ✓ Are there any special stories about _____ that (s)he would want others to know?
- ✓ What kind of things did _____ teach you about life, and about how you could manage the challenges you now face?
- ✓ What might _____ say (s)he appreciated about you? What strengths did _____ see in you?
- ✓ In what ways might you strive to grow closer to _____ across time, rather than more distant?
- ✓ What difference might it make to keep _____'s stories and memories alive?

Clinician's Toolbox: Correspondence with the Deceased (Neimeyer)

Write to someone you have loved and lost, or to someone you will soon lose.

Write with the intention to say "hello again" (Michael White), rather than a final goodbye.

Speak deeply, from the heart, about what is important in the relationship.

Consider what the other has given you, intentionally or unintentionally, of enduring value.

Address the words that remain unspoken, the questions that remain unasked.

If stuck, could prompt with:

What I have always wanted to tell you is....

What you never understood was....

What I want you to know about me is....

What I now realize is....

The one question I have wanted to ask is....

I want to keep you in my life by....

Optionally, consider drafting a response in the words of the other, perhaps initiating an ongoing correspondence of connection.

F. Imaginal Conversation and Chair Work (Shear, Greenberg & Elliott)

1. reaffirms the continuing bond, providing a sense of attachment security
2. facilitates resolution of concerns about the death or relationship, such as survivor guilt or self-blame
3. frees the bereaved to pursue personal goals of autonomy, effectiveness and relatedness
4. serves as a key part of empirically supported Complicated Grief Therapy

Clinician's Toolbox: Imaginal Conversations

- ✓ Commonly involves enactment of dialogue with the deceased, with the griever playing both roles.
- ✓ May use empty chair or two-chair work to facilitate shift in perspective, as in Emotion-Focused Therapy, choreographing to amplify intensity of contact.
- ✓ Spoken in present tense, with therapist prompting for depth and honesty, while staying on the sidelines of the conversation.
- ✓ Typically vividly emotional, clarifying and affirming, placing premium on the experience, followed by commentary to consolidate learning.
- ✓ Variations involve interviewing the deceased, a needy aspect of the self, etc.

Case Study: Dialogue with a Dead Mother

- What did Deborah discover in our in-session interview with her dead mother?
- How did this segment extend the narrative homework with which it began?

Clinician's Toolbox: Life Imprint (Vickio, Neimeyer)

In a sense, we are all "pastiche personalities," reflecting bits and pieces of the many people whose characteristics and values we have unconsciously assimilated into our own sense of identity. This "inheritance" transcends genetics, as we can be powerfully or subtly shaped not only by parents, but also by mentors, friends, siblings, or even children we have loved and lost. Nor are these life imprints always positive: at times, we can trace our self-criticism, distrust, fears, and emotional distance to once influential relationships that are now with us only internally. Take a few moments privately to trace the imprint of an important figure in your life, and then, at your discretion, discuss your observations with a partner.

The person whose imprint I want to trace is: _____

This person has had the following impact on:

My mannerisms or gestures:

My ways of speaking and communicating:

My work and pastime activities:

My feelings about myself and others:

My basic personality:

My values and beliefs:

The imprints I would most like to affirm and develop are:

The imprints I would most like to relinquish or change are:

Variations and extensions:

- *Documentation:* As homework, have person write a paragraph about each to reaffirm the connection
- *Letters of gratitude:* Write a "thank you" letter to deceased for the "gift" they have given us
- *Survey:* Interview several other people about the imprint of the deceased on them to deepen appreciation of his or her life
- *Directed telling:* With the dying or using empty chair for the deceased, directly express the impact of their life on your own

Recommended Readings

- Berger, J. (2006). *Music of the soul*. New York: Routledge. [Sophisticated and practical discussion of music therapy in end-of-life and bereavement care.]
- Bonnano, G. A., Wortman, C. B. & Nesse, R. M. (2004). Prospective patterns of resilience and maladjustment during widowhood. *Psychology and Aging*, 19, 260-271.
- Buckle, J. & Fleming, S. (2010). *Parenting after the death of a child*. New York: Routledge. [Clinically relevant discussion of in-depth qualitative study of parents who lose one child, but must actively care for another.]
- Carr, D., Nesse, R. & Wortman, C. (Eds.) (2006). *Spousal bereavement in late life*. New York: Springer. [Detailed report of the CLOC study, identifying risk factors, psychological adaptation and social effects in response to loss.]
- Center for the Advancement of Health (2004). *Report on bereavement and grief research*. Special Issue of *Death Studies*, 28, 6. [Official update and analysis of last 20 years of research on bereavement and health, covering such topics as health and mental health outcomes, impact of loss on health care professionals, efficacy of interventions, and a research agenda for the next decade]
- Currier, J. M., Holland, J. M. & Neimeyer, R. A. (2007). The effectiveness of bereavement interventions with children: A meta-analytic review of controlled outcome research. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 36, 253-259. [Evaluation of research on outcome of grief therapy for children and adolescents]
- Currier, J.M., Holland, J.M. & Neimeyer, R.A. (2006). Sense-making, grief, and the experience of violent loss: Toward a mediational model. *Death Studies*, 30, 403-428. [Demonstrates that a failure in sense making accounts for the impact of suicide, homicide and accident]
- Currier, J. M., Neimeyer, R. A. & Berman, J. S. (2008). The effectiveness of psychotherapeutic interventions for the bereaved: A comprehensive quantitative review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 134, 648-661. [Systematic review of outcome literature on grief therapy]
- Harris, D. (Ed.) (2011). *Counting our losses*. New York: Routledge. [Broad coverage of grief arising from "non-finite" loss, other than the death of a loved one, such as loss of marriage, ability, beliefs, work and much more.]
- Jeffreys, J. S. (2011). *Helping grieving people [2 ed.]*. New York: Routledge. [Practical handbook for care providers.]

- Jordan, J. & McIntosh, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Grief after suicide*. New York: Routledge. [Thorough coverage of research and practice issues in working with those bereaved by suicide. Comprehensive and readable.]
- Katz, R. & Johnson, T. (Eds.) (2006). *When professionals weep*. New York: Routledge. [Thorough and thoughtful coverage of "countertransference" issues in end-of-life and bereavement care.]
- Keesee, N. J, Currier, J. M. & Neimeyer, R. A. (2008). Predictors of grief following the death of one's child: The contribution of finding meaning. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 64, 1145-1163. [Documentation of sense-making as leading predictor of intensity of parental grief]
- Klass, D. (1999). *The spiritual lives of bereaved parents*. Philadelphia: Routledge. [Traces psychological and social transitions by which bereaved parent transforms but retains bond with deceased child]
- Nadeau, J. (1997). *Families making sense of death*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [Qualitative research on meaning-making as interactive process in families]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (Ed.) (2012). *Techniques in grief therapy: Creative practices for counseling the bereaved*. New York: Routledge. [Compendium of 96 methods of grief therapy, with instructions for each and a case study illustrating its application]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2009). *Constructivist psychotherapy*. New York and London: Routledge. [Practical and readable presentation of meaning-oriented approach to psychotherapy with numerous discussions of strategies and case studies focused on bereavement]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2009). *New theories of grief: Going beyond Kübler-Ross*. <http://www.adec.org/distance/webinars.cfm> [Online continuing education presentation addressing meaning reconstruction, dual process and two-track models of grief and their clinical implications]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2009). *The art of longing*. Charleston, SC: Booksurge. [Original contemporary poetry on grief with color illustrations from various artists]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2007). *Grief therapy: A meaning-reconstruction approach*. Lancaster, PA, USA: J & K Seminars [A complete 2-day workshop on 8 CDs with handouts, recorded live. CE credits available. Contact www.JKSeminars.com]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2006). *Rainbow in the Stone*. Memphis, TN: Mercury. [Original poetry on themes of loss and human resilience.]

- Neimeyer, R. A. (2006). Re-storying loss: Fostering growth in the posttraumatic narrative. In L. Calhoun and R. Tedeschi (Eds.), *Handbook of posttraumatic growth: Research and practice* (pp. 68-80). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. [Exploration of interface of PTG and narrative]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2004). *Constructivist psychotherapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. [Full length video featuring meaning making interventions in grief therapy with a bereaved mother, complete with conceptual introduction to the approach and post-session discussion]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2002). *Lessons of loss: A guide to coping*. Memphis, TN: Center for the Study of Loss and Transition. [Written for professionals and clients or lay readers, presents research-grounded new models of grieving and practical applications to grief counseling and psychotherapy]
- Neimeyer, R. A. (Ed.) (2001). *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss*. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association. [Multifaceted scholarly and applied contributions to bereavement theory, research, and practice, including considerations of post-traumatic growth]
- Neimeyer, R. A., Baldwin, S. & Gillies, J. (2006). Continuing bonds and reconstructing meaning: Mitigating complications in bereavement. *Death Studies, 30*, 715-738. [Demonstrates interaction of attachment and meaning making in predicting grief outcomes]
- Neimeyer, R. A., van Dyke, J. G. & Pennebaker, J. W. (2008). Narrative medicine: Writing through bereavement. In H. Chochinov & W. Breitbart (Eds.), *Handbook of psychiatry in palliative medicine*. New York: Oxford. [Review of research on expressive writing paradigm with special emphasis on bereavement]
- Neimeyer, R. A., Harris, D., Winokur, H. & Thornton, G. (Eds.) (2011). *Grief and bereavement in contemporary society: Bridging research and practice*. New York: Routledge. [Comprehensive handbook on new conceptualizations of grief, with focus on different types of loss, special populations and therapeutic issues and methods; each chapter is coauthored by prominent researchers and practitioners to thoroughly integrate scholarship and practice.]
- Neimeyer, R. A., Holland, J. M., Currier, J. M. & Mehta, T. (2008). Meaning reconstruction in later life: Toward a cognitive-constructivist approach to grief therapy. In D. Gallagher-Thompson, A. Steffan & L. Thompson (Eds.), *Handbook of behavioral and cognitive therapies with older adults* (pp. 264-277). New York: Springer Verlag. [Discussion of research on meaning making with special reference to older adults]

Neimeyer, R. A., Hogan, N. & Laurie, A. (2008). The measurement of grief: Psychometric considerations in the assessment of reactions to bereavement. In M. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, H. Schut & W. Stroebe (Eds.). *Handbook of bereavement research: 21st century perspectives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. [Review of general and specialized scales for assessment of grief with an emphasis on their attention to cultural factors]

Thompson, B. E. & Neimeyer, R. A. (Eds.) (2014). *Grief and the expressive arts: Practices for creating meaning*. New York: Routledge. [Comprehensive handbook detailing dozens of grief therapy techniques using visual arts, music therapy, dance and movement, creative writing and theatre and performance, giving explicit instructions and case examples to illustrate each.]