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“The pain of grief is just as much part of life as the joy of love: it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment.”

(Parkes & Prigerson, 2010, p.6)



Complicated Grief

By Anita Hoare, Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

“The pain of grief is just as much part of life as the joy of love: it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment. To ignore this fact, or to pretend that it is not so, is to put on emotional blinkers which leave us unprepared for the losses that will inevitably occur in our own lives and unprepared to help others cope with losses in theirs” (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010, p.6).

Bereavement is the process of grieving and the period of mourning that we enter after someone has died. It affects us physically, emotionally, mentally, socially and spiritually, and often brings us to question our assumptions about life and its meaning and purpose. As a grief and bereavement counsellor I see clients who are in the throes of existential pain and suffering: trying to make sense of life after the death of a loved one. Some of these clients are experiencing what is known in the field of bereavement, grief and loss as complicated grief.

A Case Study

Tom is a 65-year-old man who goes to see his doctor because he has been having difficulty adjusting to the death of his wife three years ago. He says he is sleeping on the couch in the lounge because he can't bear to sleep in the bed without her. He has stopped eating regular meals because she did all the cooking and he gets too sad and lonely. He often ruminates about how unfair it was for his wife to die and is alternately angry with the hospital and the GP who cared for her. He used to be an active member of the Lions Club but has stopped going because it makes him miss his wife too much when he is there. He thinks about her constantly and wants this suffering to stop and yearns to be with her.

Upon reviewing Tom's case, he appears to be exhibiting many symptoms of complicated grief. Shear (2015) lists the characteristic symptoms of complicated grief as:

- intense yearning, longing or emotional pain

- frequent preoccupying thoughts and memories of the deceased
- a feeling of disbelief or an inability to accept the loss
- difficulty imagining a meaningful future without the deceased person.
- intense feelings of sadness, bitterness, guilt, fear, or anger, which may be triggered by certain activities, situations, places, people, smells, or times of the day that serve as reminders of the person who died
- feeling overwhelmed
- numbing and withdrawal after the loss
- changes in the way people think about themselves and the world.
- problems in relationships with other people.

Shear' research (2012) indicates that approximately 7% of the grieving population is suffering from complicated grief.

The Difference Between Complicated Grief and Adaptive Grief

As bereavement practitioners, we have all met people like Tom, who had a close relationship with a strong attachment figure and who have not adjusted to the new reality of life without their loved one. The complications and challenges that a death can bring are usually resolved through the process of adaptive grief, only possible after acute grief subsides. This grieving period usually allows us the time to really think about the difficult aspects of someone's death. Once this has been done, more or less, we are able to move back into life adapting to the reality of the loss; sad at times; overwhelmed even, but functioning. After the death of his daughter, Bob Geldof said "how do we move forward? Not move on – time doesn't heal, it accommodates, it finds an available space in your brain and you kind of stick that part in there and it allows you to see things in context" (Wilson, 2014).

However sometimes acute grief gets stuck, and life has no prospect of joy or fulfilment. Instead of reflecting on ways to come to terms with the painful reality and imagining ways to move forward in their life, a person with complicated grief is sidetracked. Bereft people often, quite literally, feel beside themselves with grief and it interferes with the capacity to envision and live a rich and fulfilling life. The DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) has identified this type of grief as a condition for further study, and labelled it 'Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder'. There are other terms for this phenomenon, Prigerson (2009) calls it 'Prolonged Grief Disorder' and Shear (2011) calls it 'Complicated Grief'.

The Difference Between Complicated Grief and Depression

Acute grief is emotionally intense, destabilising and exhausting, but grief is not an illness, whereas major depression and anxiety disorders are. Grief and mourning have a purpose (Shear, 2012). When major depressive disorder, anxiety or PTSD occurs in the context of grief it can add to complications, stalling grief and can trigger the onset of both physical and mental disorders, adding a heightened risk of suicide and increased risk of complicated grief. As such, it is very important that the client be assessed and monitored by a qualified mental health professional, and that any comorbidities be identified and monitored (Hall, 2011).

Working with Clients who are Experiencing Complicated Grief

With regard to therapeutic interventions, a therapist who is trained in therapy for complicated grief would be recommended, since results from randomised trials show a greater benefit associated with this form of therapy than with other forms of psychotherapy (Shear, 2006). However if this therapy is not available, psychotherapy focused on accepting the loss and restoring effective functioning would be recommended.

Going back to our case study, some things for consideration and discussion with Tom might include:

- Psycho-education around grief, complicated grief, self-care and self-compassion (Neff, 2015).
- Rumination about the medical treatment his wife received needs to be addressed. This could entail him talking to his GP or the social worker at the hospital to tease out the distressing content and address any areas of concern. Find a way to help him resolve what can be resolved and process what is troubling him. Reconcile the complications and strong emotions and accommodate this in his new reality.



- Help him to understand the process and encouraging him to be aware of this in himself. Oscillate between contacting the pain and processing the reality of the death and engage in restoration – reconnecting to life (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).
- Some mindfulness practices may help him observe the ruminations and give him some respite from the busy-ness of his mind.
- Talk with him about finding one friend or family member with whom he could share his thoughts and feelings. Someone who will accept him and help support him in this process of adjustment. See if he can identify a member of the Lions Club who could come along to a therapy session so this could be openly discussed. Frequently people with complicated grief are often unaware of how concerned family and friends are, and their friends and family are unclear as to how best to help. Faced with the silence and discomfort of these people, the bereaved can feel they are a burden and withdraw even further. Companions support and comfort us and are invaluable sounding boards in troubling times and the bereaved often lose sight of this.
- Talk to him about a time when he felt some meaning and purpose in his life and help him identify some meaningful and achievable goals. Encourage him each session, and monitor and mentor him in achieving these goals.

Anita Hoare is a Regional Specialist Bereavement Counsellor at the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB). She is currently undergoing training in Complicated Grief Treatment through the Centre for Complicated Grief at the School of Social Work, Columbia University (www.complicatedgrief.org). Later in the year Dr M. Katherine Shear will be giving a webinar on Complicated Grief for ACGB (www.grief.org.au).

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Letter From the Editor



Welcome to the Winter 2015 edition of *Bereavement Practice for Clinicians and Service Providers*.

The feature article in this edition looks at complicated grief and addresses both its presentation and considerations for treatment. In addition, the article outlines some important differences between complicated grief and other presentations, including depression.

Alongside the feature article, we have also included information on an upcoming Complicated Grief Workshop; an interview with a bereavement practitioner; featured resources and a list of upcoming bereavement professional development opportunities that may be of interest.

As always, I welcome your feedback around the topics you'd like covered in this publication, and hope that the resources and articles provided are useful to your work in the grief and bereavement field.

Look after yourselves, and we look forward to future connections with you.

Warm regards,

Jenny Field

*Specialist Bereavement Counsellor
(Internship Program & Clinical Supervision)*
j.field@grief.org.au

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement is pleased to present:

Complicated Grief: Putting Theory Into Practice *Presented by Keren Ludski*

Defining and, therefore, diagnosing complicated grief often leaves practitioners feeling confused and overwhelmed. This results in differing levels of anxiety about working with clients who present with symptoms consistent with complicated grief. What most practitioners do agree on is that complicated grief often presents as grief that doesn't budge; leaving the bereaved feeling like it is impossible to move on from their grief and the practitioners feeling 'stuck' and unable to help their clients.

This workshop will introduce practitioners to theories of complicated grief as well as providing an introduction to Complicated Grief Treatment.

Learning Outcomes

At the conclusion of the workshop, participants will be able to:

- understand the symptoms and clinical presentation of complicated grief
- determine the differences between complicated grief, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder
- recognise and assess for complicated grief
- understand the procedures and processes involved in Complicated Grief Treatment
- identify and implement the key strategies and techniques used in Complicated Grief Treatment.

Designed For

Mental health practitioners working with clients experiencing grief and bereavement, such as counsellors, therapists, psychologists and social workers.

For further information and registration, go to www.grief.org.au/education



Workshop Information

Date:	Wednesday, 29th July 2015
Time:	9.30am – 4.30pm
Location:	Mulgrave, Victoria
Cost:	ACGB Member: \$200.00 Non-Member: \$250.00



Interview with a Bereavement Practitioner

Barry Whelan is a pastoral care and bereavement support worker with South East Palliative Care.

What has brought you into this field of work?

I had previously spent nearly 20 years in pastoral work and felt the need to move in a different direction with my life. In early 1996 I undertook a course in Clinical Pastoral Education at the Austin Hospital in Melbourne. The opportunity presented to utilise these skills with Dandenong Casey Palliative Care (now South East Palliative Care) where I have been for the past 18 years working in pastoral care and bereavement support.

How do you bear the sadness you witness or people share with you?

I am not sure that we actually 'bear the sadness' because it is their sadness and although I see and share some tragic and sad stories, I feel my role is to walk with them during that time and assure them of a listening ear and a sympathetic heart.

How do you support yourself when clients' stories or circumstances resonate with you?

I find that while I am with a client my focus is on their story and their situation and although I may have had similar experiences, my task and challenge is to stay with them and not be drawn into my own recollections or memory of past events. Sometimes this is difficult, but I feel it is vital that the client be heard in their world.

How do you help people understand the complexities of grief and bereavement?

I don't see my role specifically as helping them to understand the complexity of what they are going through. There is an old expression that goes something like 'people don't care what you believe until they believe you care'. If people know that you truly care about them and their suffering, and that they have your support and care during this time of pain and hurting, this will go a long way in assisting them to cope with their loss. My experience over the years is that people who are suffering loss remain at the 'emotional' level for quite some time and rational explanations of their grief are difficult for them to comprehend or accept.

What is the most challenging aspect to your work in grief and bereavement?

I find the most challenging aspect is in dealing with fractured families or broken relationships. Sometimes these fragile situations are long-standing and deep-seated and can bring great angst and stress to the client pre-death, as well as to the family after death. The challenge is often to find a way through that is of benefit and satisfaction to both parties without taking one side or the other, yet still maintaining the trusting relationship with both. Sadly it doesn't always work out the way we would hope.

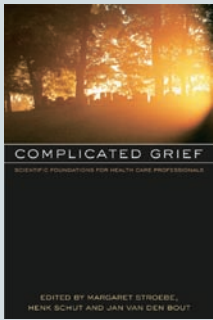
What do you find most rewarding in your work?

This is difficult to answer singularly for there are many rewards to this work. One aspect would be the satisfaction that comes from knowing that you have been privileged to have walked with a client or family during one of the most vulnerable times in their lives, and have given them respectful and honest support when it was needed most. To witness a client die at peace with themselves and their world and beliefs, and then support the family to the point where they are able to return to some form of normality, always brings a deep sense of fulfillment.

What would be your three pieces of advice/insight for those working in the field of grief and bereavement?

1. Be sincere and trustworthy - you might possibly be the only person that they trust enough to share their deepest concerns, hurts, disappointments, hopes, emotions etc. Be honest and respect and honour that trust.
2. Be objective in seeking positive outcomes for the client and their future recovery from loss and grief, but always encourage them to rely on their own strengths and don't allow yourself to become relied upon. There is a wise saying 'stepping stones can easily become stumbling blocks.'
3. Be patient and allow the client to move at their own pace of recovery and assure them of support regardless of where they are in their journey.

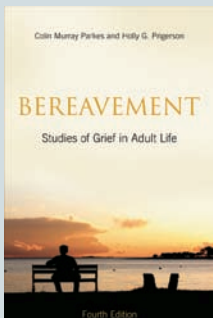
Featured Resources



Complicated Grief

Margaret Stroebe, Henk Schut & Jan van den Bout
\$64.95

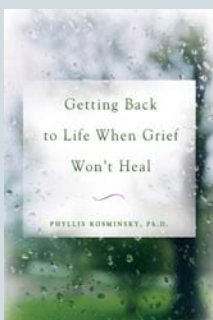
How can complicated grief be defined? How does it differ from normal patterns of grief and grieving? Who among the bereaved is particularly at risk? Can clinical intervention reduce complications? *Complicated Grief* provides a balanced, up-to-date, state-of-the-art account of the scientific foundations surrounding the topic of complicated grief. In this book, Stroebe, Schut and van den Bout address the basic questions about the concept, manifestations and phenomena associated with complicated grief.



Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life (4th Edition)

Colin Murray Parkes & Holly G. Prigerson
\$89.00

This book recognises that there is no single solution to the problems of bereavement, but that an understanding of grief can help the bereaved to realise that they are not alone in their experience. Long recognised as the authoritative work of its kind, this new edition has been revised and extended to take into account recent research findings on both sides of the Atlantic, including traumatic loss, disasters and complicated grief, as well as providing details on how social, religious and cultural influences determine how we grieve.



Getting Back to Life When Grief Won't Heal

Phyllis Kosminsky
\$22.95

Are you finding it hard to get over the loss of a loved one? Does it seem like you'll never move on with your life? Do you feel that you're stuck in the grieving process? You may be experiencing complicated mourning, the feeling of being 'stuck' in your sorrow, frustration, and unresolved issues. This book provides a path through your grief with real inspiration, invaluable insight and deeply felt advice. You'll learn that, yes, there is hope and, with time, you can let go of the overwhelming sense of loss and embrace life.

These books, along with a range of other useful resources, can be purchased from the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement.

To order, visit www.grief.org.au/resources or email info@grief.org.au

Upcoming Conferences

Listed below are a range of upcoming professional development opportunities that may be of interest to bereavement practitioners.

13th Australian Palliative Care Conference

When: 1–4 September 2015

Where: Melbourne, Australia

Website: www.palliativecare.org.au

2nd International Conference on Loss, Bereavement & Human Resilience in Israel and the World: Facts, Insights and Implications

When: 12–14 January 2016

Where: Eilat, Israel

Website: www.ovdan-eilat2016.com

Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) 38th Annual Conference

When: 13–16 April 2016

Where: Minneapolis, USA

Website: www.adec.org

Australian Grief and Bereavement Conference 2016

When: 4–6 May 2016

Where: Melbourne, Australia

Website: www.grief.org.au/conference



Our Services

Newsletter enquiries

For all enquiries about this publication, please contact Jenny Field on (03) 9285 2100 or email j.field@grief.org.au

Bereavement Counselling and Support Service

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) operates a statewide Specialist Bereavement Counselling and Support Service for Victoria. This program is supported by the Victorian Government Department of Health and has counsellors located across metropolitan Melbourne, and in regional areas (Grampians, Gippsland, Hume, Barwon South-West, and Loddon Mallee). For further information, call (03) 9265 2100, or email counselling@grief.org.au

Support groups

ACGB operates a range of support groups, including groups for adults, children, bereaved partners, loss of a parent and more. For further information call (03) 9265 2100 or email support@grief.org.au

Practitioner Consultancy Service

This service provides free information, consultation and support for practitioners who are working with bereaved clients experiencing complex and prolonged bereavements. To access this service, call 1300 664 786 during business hours.

Internships

ACGB has a limited number of placement opportunities for experienced counsellors seeking to advance their knowledge and skills in bereavement counselling. For further information contact the Centre on (03) 9265 2100 or email counselling@grief.org.au

Education and training

ACGB offers quality education and training opportunities for health professionals, students, volunteers and any other individual or agency desiring to enhance grief and bereavement knowledge and practice. Education and training programs are offered as seminars, workshops, short and long courses, conferences and customised training. For full details of all programs and services offered, go to www.grief.org.au/education

Bereavement Courses

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement offers research-informed, high-quality courses, including post-graduate

training program, the Graduate Certificate in Bereavement Counselling and Intervention (nationally accredited). For more information contact the Centre on (03) 9265 2100 or email courses@grief.org.au

Customised training and consultancy

ACGB offer a range of customised training and consultancy services that provide research-informed, high quality professional development programs that meet the specialist training needs of organisations, groups and individuals. For further information contact the Centre on (03) 9265 2100 or email education@grief.org.au

Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement

Published by ACGB three times per year, this journal encompasses both academic and applied aspects of grief and bereavement and is a ranked journal with the Australian Research Council as part of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative. To find out how you can subscribe to this journal, call (03) 9265 2100 or email griefmatters@grief.org.au

Membership

Access a range of benefits through the ACGB membership program, including discounted education workshops and three editions of *Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement*. For more information about membership options and benefits go to www.grief.org.au or call (03) 9265 2100.

Donations

Donations over \$2 are tax deductible and allow ACGB to continue to provide services including bereavement counselling, support groups, newsletters, events, education and training. To make a donation, visit www.grief.org.au or call (03) 9265 2100.

We value your feedback

If you have feedback about this publication, or any of the services delivered by the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, we'd love to hear from you. Contact us on (03) 9265 2100 or email newsletters@grief.org.au



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Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

253 Wellington Road, Mulgrave, VIC 3170
Ph: (03) 9265 2100 | Freecall: 1800 642 066
Website: www.grief.org.au

Bereavement Counselling and Support Service
Ph: 1300 664 786 (toll free – Victoria)
Email: counselling@grief.org.au