MISMANAGED GRIEF

by Linda Ostlund LCPC, CAGCS

Grief

Grief is a profound emotional response to loss. Losing a loved one is one of the most distressing and, unfortunate, common experience you will ever face. Most people experiencing normal grief and bereavement have a period of sorrow, numbness, and even guilt and anger. Gradually these feelings ease, and it's possible to accept loss and move forward. For some people, however, feelings of loss are debilitating and do not improve even after time passes, resulting in some cases as mismanaged grief.

Mismanaged Grief

Mismanaged grief often occurs when a loss is not acknowledged, validated, or supported—leading to "disenfranchised grief" (i.e., having been deprived of a power, right, or privilege). Examples of this can happen after losses such as:

- the death of a pet
- miscarriage
- estrangement
- loss of a non-recognized relationship
- or other stigmatized or private experiences.

When grief is minimized or dismissed, it can intensify emotional pain, prolong the grieving process, and increase the risk of unresolved grief, resulting in severe effects.

Effects of Mismanaged Grief

The effects of mismanaged grief can accumulate in the person to experience harm mentally, emotionally, and physically. It may disrupt sleep, appetite, concentration, and relationships; and, in severe cases—contribute to chronic pain, depression, and other health issues; such as, Autoimmune Diseases. The sad reality is, the more mismanaged grief you carry, the heavier the emotional and physical load become over time. Is there any hope for mismanaged grief?

Biblical Example of Mismanaged Grief

Yes. In the book of Ruth, you find the story of a woman who told people to call her "Mara"—meaning bitter. She believed that God had dealt very harshly against her (Ruth 1:20). "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me home empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy upon me (vs. 21)?"

Naomi's Tragedy

Naomi's tragedy was in the deaths of her husband and two adult sons in a foreign land. Her grief was entirely valid, but she allowed the sorrow to be mismanaged in that she chose to harden her perspective permanently—she isolated her identity in her tragedy. Naomi was definitely "stuck" in grief! She perceived herself being alone and hopeless. As time passed in her despair, she learned that Judah, her home-land, was once again producing crops and coming out of the famine. It was the famine that she, her husband and sons had fled to Moab. With no other hope, Naomi decided to leave and go back to Judah.

Naomi's Departure

On her way, she said to her two daughters-in-law: "Go back to your mother's home, and may the Lord reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. May the Lord bless you with the security of another marriage. Then she kissed them good-bye, and they all broke down and wept (vs. 8, 9). This should have been the end of the story; but, God had other plans for Naomi's mismanaged grief.

Ruth

God gave Naomi, Ruth. Ruth was the Moabite widow of Mahlon, one of Naomi's sons who had died in Moab. When Naomi told Ruth to go back to "her people and to her gods like her sister-in-law had gone"—Ruth replied:

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"Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried (vs. 16, 17)." With that declaration from Ruth, how did Naomi's story unfold?

Naomi's Sorrow to Laughter

From her deep sorrow, bitterness, and mismanaged grief—you see Naomi laughing with joy and coddling a baby boy to her breast (Ruth 4:16). As you read the Biblical account in the book of Ruth, God intervened in bringing Ruth in contact with a "family redeemer"—Boaz (vs. 7-10). A family redeemer in Bible times, was a near kinsman who could add to the relative's property his own estate while doing his social duty for the family because there was no male heir and no apparent likelihood that there would be one. This was true for Naomi.

Kinsman Redeemer

Boaz became responsible as a kinsman redeemer. He married Ruth, and from that union gave to Naomi a baby boy. "Then the woman of the town said to Naomi—Praise the Lord, who has now provided a redeemer for your family! May this child be famous in Israel. May he restore your youth and care for you in your old age. For he is the son of your daughter-in-law who loves you and has been better to you than seven sons (vs. 14, 15)!" This would make for a happy ending—Naomi is laughing versus sorrow, bitterness, and mismanaged grief. Yet, God had more to offer to Naomi.

Messianic Lineage

In the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1; it reads: "Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth; Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David (vs. 5, 6)." What's the significance? As a kinsman redeemer, Boaz and Ruth had a son named Obed.This child restored Naomi's family line and gave joy after she lost her husband and sons through death. In addition, what's more significant—Obed became the grandfather of King David, placing this family, including Ruth—a Moabite woman—in the Messianic lineage of Jesus, the Son of God.

God Acknowledges & Validates Mismanaged Grief

In the story of Naomi, God acknowledged the reality of Naomi's mismanaged grief, and he provided a framework for understanding and coping with it. In Romans 12:15, the Apostle Paul exhorts believers to: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep." This call to empathy calls for the importance of community and support during times of sorrow and mismanaged grief. Sharing in the grief of others is a tangible expression of love and solidarity. Ruth is a supreme example. Her love and loyalty to Naomi was instrumental in turning Naomi's mismanaged grief to hope, laughter, and trust in God in a profound way.

Are you experiencing grief? Sorrow? Mismanaged grief? You do not need to be alone. Finding community—people who can share, pray with you and for you, can be reassuring—bringing peace and hope in the midst of overwhelming loss and mismanaged grief. ■

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