

# Relational Healing

## Grief, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation: Grieving in layers

### Grief signals loss

Grief is the natural response to a loss. It's the way we're made. Losses reflect changes that connect to unmet legitimate and healthy needs. Prolonged grief isn't necessarily only about loss. It can be about the unmet needs, the loss of having needs met. Grief, then, can be viewed as a part of the signal system telling us there are unmet needs that are still in need of attention.

### Grief—Forgiveness—Reconciliation

**Grieving** is a process that unfolds in layers. The first layer is the immediate loss. The other layers grieving connect to the unmet needs that rise from the depths and come to light. The *active grieving* process (verses *dysfunctional grief*, or "stuck" grief) uncovers the layers. Each layer may need different forms of resolution.

**Forgiveness** emerges organically from a functional grief process and helps to move us along, and is a core part of deep healing. Reconciliation, forgiveness, and grieving form an interconnected triad where forgiveness bridges between wounding and healing.

**Reconciliation** can mean different things. It can be about two parties repairing a relationship. But just as importantly it can be about one person finding internal reconciliation to a past wound. Much of what is said here applies to the latter—a personal reconciliation to losses that is internally healing.

### Grief and Reconciliation-as-Healing

The core affective states of active grieving can be conceived of as *anger, fear, guilt, shame, and depression* (see "*Within the Walls of Denial*" Kearney). From a reconciliation perspective a functional grieving process is one that helps us find our way to forgiveness as we learn to embrace the affective states of grieving (each affective state being a "messenger" pointing to legitimate needs). Forgiveness helps us to release the pain of our losses. Functional grief isn't something we get stuck in, it's a path. It's transitional. It is part of a healing process. Grieving that leads to forgiveness, and forgiveness that leads to reconciliation describes the ideal healing progression.

### Emotional Pain in the Absence of Reconciliation

People suffering from physical chronic pain often think of "pain and suffering" in two different ways. The medical source of the pain is treated one way, the mental and emotional misery, or suffering, is treated in another way. The physical pain may never be healed no matter what is tried. The mental and emotional suffering that goes along with chronic pain, and makes living with the pain worse, can hopefully be managed, and the misery thereby lessened. Correspondingly, the ongoing absence of forgiveness (a source of relief from emotional pain) associated with relational injuries can be thought of as a form of chronic pain, the pain and suffering we experience when grieving seems to have no end in sight. If one is caught in a unending cycle of anger, fear, guilt, shame, or depression (the affective states of grief) by unremitting resentments or despair over a loss, it could be said that the grieving person is stuck in a dysfunctional grief. The grieving person is blocked off from the healing benefits of forgiveness for self and others, and from reconciliation with self as well as potentially with the other party. Peace needs to be made with the messengers of grief— *anger, fear, guilt, shame, and depression*. (LINK to operationalizing this "peace process" is presented in the [Healing the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation](#) power point, under the "Grief Work" section of the presentation)

## **Grieving the Layered Pain of Unmet Attachment Needs**

Does the pain of grief ever truly go away? Or to ask the question another way, can peace really be made with grief's painful messengers? And if so, how? I think the key to answering part of the question is by differentiating two kinds of pain—the pain of the immediate grief and the pain of the underlying unmet relational needs. If a person you love does something that damages an *attachment relationship* (a spouse cheats on you, a father harms or abandons you, your child develops an addiction problem and begins to manipulate you or steal from you—each being representative of the “death of a relationship”), there are now multiple problems. An attachment relationship has been lost or damaged, and there are layers of unmet attachment needs surfacing. You have been thrust into grief, the very definition of being traumatized.

The two kinds of pain likely have different solutions. Grieving 1) the loss of an attachment relationship and forgiving the offending person doesn't necessarily mean 2) the underlying attachment needs will be met. When things don't get better, the question becomes how to recognize the differences between being stuck in a stalled grief process versus the pain of living with unmet attachment needs. Both need to be attended to. No amount of grieving and forgiveness will guarantee that legitimate and ongoing attachment needs will be met.

## **Grief, Forgiveness, and Healing**

Forgiveness holds healing power for the one doing the forgiving. The offer of forgiveness to the offender may or may not help the offender, depending upon how it is received, but it will help the one who is able to forgive. Letting go of the offense severs the bond that keeps the offender tied to the victim, diminishing the power of the offense over its victim. The victim takes back power and can live with greater internal freedom and separation from the wrong done. Ownership of the offense is released and given back to the offender, empowering and freeing the victim.

It is important to say that forgiveness does not make the victim safe from the offender. Forgiveness and safety are two different things. Safety comes first, and must be maintained. Forgiveness should not be a means of access to the victim for the offender to do further harm. That would rob the victim of the healing power of forgiveness and makes forgiveness all about the toxic power of the offender.

## **The Dynamic Relationship between Grief, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation**

Grief and forgiveness are part of a dance. The dance is about all the associated layers of pain being tapped into by the grief process. New layers can be encountered ongoingly over the course of a lifetime, depending on the loss. Grief reasserts itself each time a new layer of need is encountered. Perhaps the loss is viewed from a new angle and anger or shame or one of the other affective states of grief is evoked. Functional grieving teaches us to recognize this as two things: 1) we are being cued by grief to see and address a legitimate need, and 2) forgiveness is still the way through the pain and back to a place of internal organization and empowerment. It's an important dance to master.

Mastery means growth. Growth as the human beings we were meant to be makes it worthwhile. Unfortunately I know of no shortcuts to this kind of growth, but with growth comes peace (an inner stability) even in the presence of pain. And lastly, this kind of mastery is at the heart of reconciliation.

## **Reconciliation**

If, perchance, a former offender is able to appropriately join the dance (through repentance, apology, amends where possible, and the ongoing respect of boundaries), so much the better. Freedom for the former victim is not dependent upon reconciliation with the offender but healing can be deepened by it. Reconciliation, internally with self and externally with the other, is a gift made possible by forgiveness.