

RECOVERING FROM TRAGEDY

Tragedy can take many forms, and a counsellor's role is often to help clients journey through the intense process of grief and mourning. The more understanding counsellors have about that process, the better equipped they are to make that journey with their clients. By sharing her own experience with grief and loss, Jasmine McMurray, RCC, along with her friend and colleague Devan Christian, RCC, demonstrates how Worden's TEAR model can be used to help clients move more intentionally through the grieving process.



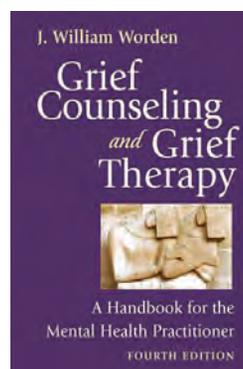
THE TEAR MODEL OF GRIEF

BY DEVAN CHRISTIAN, RCC

J. WILLIAM WORDEN,

the author of *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy* (2009), developed the TEAR Model to help outline an approach to working with grief. Worden takes the perspective that, in grief, we do not have stages or phases to pass through but, instead, have four tasks (see right) we need to accomplish in order to integrate into a new life after the loss of a significant person. This idea of grief tasks allows individuals to have agency in their mourning and aids in reducing feelings of helplessness.

When working with clients, I find



to be able to say their person's name and share the stories of their life and death; validating the pain and suffering they are experiencing from the death of their person; discovering who they are now in this world without their

- T** To accept the reality of the loss
- E** Experience the pain of the loss
- A** Adjust to the new environment without the lost person
- R** Reinvent in the new reality

myself supporting them through these tasks consistently — helping each client

person in each day, holiday, event, and anniversary; and helping them discover who they are and how they are going to continue to honour or carry forward the person who has died.

It was through long-term support that I could see clients return to some of these tasks as the year went on, particularly when the client was going through the “firsts” without

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their person — first Christmas, anniversary, birthday, or even doing household chores that had been managed by the other person. By understanding Worden’s TEAR Model, and supporting clients with each of the tasks as they come, clients may feel more empowered and supported in their journey towards their new self.

HOW PEOPLE RECOVER DAY TO DAY

The overwhelming nature of grief both paralyzes us and drives us to move. No matter the circumstance or where we are in our journey of grief, mourning gives us power to endure an unpleasant or difficult process or situation without giving way. Meeting each client brings its own learning and teaching, but one common thread I have seen is the change in clients when they give themselves permission to grieve. A common belief exists in our society that after a month, the mourner should have stopped crying, and after three months, they should have stopped talking about the loss. Acknowledging that everyone has the right to grieve in the way they want and for as long as they need to — even the rest of their lives — seems to relieve the pressure to “feel better” and “get over it.” I believe it is from this moment in the therapeutic relationship that the clients can begin their movement through the tasks of grief.

The four tasks are clearly reflected in Jasmine McMurray’s experience of recovering from tragedy.



MY STORY OF RECOVERY

BY JASMINE MCMURRAY, RCC

On November 5, 2007, my world changed forever. I vividly remember returning from a Vancouver Recital Society concert and seeing several voicemail messages from my partner John’s sister, asking me to call. It was in the next two minutes that she shared news with me that altered my life in a profoundly painful way. She was angry and scared, because John had not returned from his weekend at Stave Lake, where he had been attending a 4x4 rally.

I still clearly remember the feel of that fall day — the decaying leaves and crisp air, tinged with the icy winds of winter, as I searched along rough forest paths calling out for John. I remember watching the Search and Rescue Unit use sonar to scour the bottom of the lake for evidence of his body. Hundreds of people had come to help with the search. John’s family persevered and continued actively searching for several weeks,

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while I was overcome with pain and began to isolate myself, turning inward and beginning the grieving process.

In October 2008, John's body was discovered in Stave Lake. It was determined that he had fallen into the lake, dragged down by his heavy boots and clothes. It was both a blessing and a curse to have a sense of closure to this tragedy; the pain of the unknown had ended and the pain of knowing he wouldn't come back began.

The ability to compartmentalize and distract was essential as well, because, even though it felt like my own life had ended along with John's, the outside world kept moving forward. I continued to complete my clinical practicum, and I remember how this activity provided reprieve from facing my empty apartment. In those early days, my fellow practicum students, who I am blessed to call my friends, were life saving. They met me where I was at. They honoured my experience and validated my emotions when I needed that. They also provided the space to help me divert my attention by discussing our own clinical cases.

EXPERIENCING THE PAIN OF MY LOSS

Another essential aspect in those early months was attending weekly counselling sessions. This provided the space to explore the different and difficult emotions that arose. It felt difficult to express the anger and resentment I'd held toward John for dying and for unresolved conflict in our relationship. There were days I felt angry with him for making the choice to go to Stave Lake. These emotions felt unreasonable and wicked. I felt guilty for feeling not only love for him but also anger. Some people I shared these thoughts with reinforced my experience of guilt. I know now that some people found it challenging to see me in pain and wanted to "help" me feel better. It was especially minimizing to be told to focus on the positive — proclamations such as, "You are so lucky you had the time you did with him" or "Don't worry, you'll see each other again one day."

There were days when the thought of discontinuing my own life felt appealing and the idea that, perhaps,



JASMINE AND JOHN 2007

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TO ACCEPT THE REALITY OF MY LOSS

Initially, the grief and pain of losing John felt both physical and emotional. There were days when simply eating and sleeping felt impossible. I found it helpful when friends and family supported me in very simple, practical ways, such as bringing over food, offering to help tidy my house, or just allowing me the space to mourn with them physically present.

I would see him again only validated this desperate thinking pattern. It is important to highlight that these thoughts of suicide could be better described as a desire to escape the soul-crushing, heart-shattering, suffocating pain of losing someone I loved. I was indeed lucky to be surrounded by counsellors as friends and colleagues. I encourage anyone who has these feelings of ending their life to reach out for support. You are not alone in this struggle to manage and process deep emotional pain, and sharing this struggle can help ease the burden.

ADJUSTING TO THE NEW ENVIRONMENT WITHOUT MY LOST PERSON

On the very first Valentine's Day, when John was still presumed missing, my friend hosted a Valentine's Day party that just included my closest friends. This space allowed me to show up in one of John's shirts, with no make-up and puffy red eyes. The love and acceptance I received that evening was, to this day, transformative. It allowed me to feel a sense of belonging while I dealt with the most painful experience I had encountered thus far in my life. It also helped me to begin re-engaging in the world around me.

REINVENTING MY NEW REALITY

In those initial months, I did feel a sense of hopelessness about being able to meet someone whom I would love as much as John. Life is unpredictable. When Tom, my current partner, walked into my life, I began to believe loving again was possible. His unconditional love and acceptance allowed me to open my heart to loving someone new. It takes courage to risk being hurt again — to risk losing someone else that we love — but it has been my experience that it is vital to take this risk, open our

hearts, and reach out to find connection with others.

Tom and I have a beautiful daughter, Kaeli, who is absolutely the personification of love and light. I sometimes reflect on what I would have missed if I had kept myself

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closed off and unaccepting of a new chance for love. It will be 10 years this November since John passed, and now, with the easing of my grief, I feel love and connection when I think of him. The pain has faded, and I have been able to seamlessly integrate my memories of him into my life.

While this is the first time I have publically shared my deeply personal experience with tragedy, it feels honouring to share how it has affected me personally and professionally. Our capacity for compassion increases as we honour our own pain and expand our ability to create a safe container for other people's suffering. Being able to empathize on a deep, visceral level about what facing tragedy feels like can aid in our clients' journeys. Holding the space and allowing grief to flow in the therapy office can allow clients to feel safe enough to let their own pain out.

To conclude, here are my top three tips for working with grieving clients:

1 Understand that grief and sadness have no end date. It can be difficult for counsellors new to grief work to sit with their clients' pain, and this can lead to feeling the need to "fix" the client and take away their pain. It is

important to remember that although the pain from grief may fade over time, it may never go away completely, and that's okay. Our role is to sit with a client exactly where they are at in their journey with no expectations of where they "should" be.

2 Acknowledge that life is precious and fragile and that we cannot control when tragedy strikes. Existential angst can arise for clients who have faced tragedy, as they come to the realization that life is unpredictable and ever changing. Initially, this can feel overwhelming for clients, but ideally, over time, therapists can help clients become more present in their lives and able to expand their capacity to cherish each moment they have.

3 The human spirit is more resilient than we think it is. As counsellors, we have the honour of journeying with people as they process their pain. Humans have a far deeper capacity for pain, happiness, suffering, and joy than we know, and being a counsellor who honours this is vital in helping our clients feel a sense of safety and understanding. ■

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