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Why grieve?

Grieving is normal. Grieving brings healing. Jesus grieved.

As I reclined on my chair to write, my memory brought to me a story of an elephant, my mother had told me as a child. An elephant calf was run over by a train and was killed. By dusk the entire herd was found crying, literally shedding tears over the dead. Animals grieve too.

Grief is a normal psychological reaction to loss of a loved one, a possession or a desire. It's an experience of deprivation and anxiety and shows in our behaviour, emotions, thoughts, physiology, interpersonal relationships and in our spiritual lives. All of us are prone to experience grief at some point in our lives. Grief is universal and can be a result of divorce, amputation, death of a pet, a failure in contest or a forced shift to an unfavoured place. Grieving is never easy though we employ avoidance with jargons like 'passing away' or 'left' instead of 'died.' Though we take comfort in the certainty

of resurrection, the emptiness and the pain of 'letting go' remains. A feeling of helplessness sets in as we face an irreversible and unalterable situation.

Joseph mourned over his 147-year old dad (Gen 49 and 50). 'Letting go' of his father even at 147 was a struggle! The Bible says, "he refused to be comforted." Grief shatters. David went through anticipatory grief over his son. He and his men wept, mourned and fasted over the death of Saul and Jonathan. They were not ashamed to grieve. Nehemiah wept over the walls of Jericho. He fasted and prayed along with his mourning. A period of tears and prayer gave Nehemiah clarity and plan of action. Christ wept over Lazarus' death though He knew that he would be brought back to life in a little while. He empathized with Mary and Martha and accepted their state of anger. Christ demonstrated on the Sermon on the Mount the importance of grieving when He taught, "blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." He withdrew to a solitary place, perhaps to grieve when the news of the execution of John the Baptist reached Him.

An insight into the **causes of grief** can help us to resolve this strong emotion. **Loss** of something deeply valued pushes us to face emptiness and the difficult task of readjusting. Sometimes grief is abnormal, pathological and complicated when it keeps the mourner bound to the deceased, denied, delayed, prolonged and hinders us from coping and moving on with life.

Grief is more difficult when the loss is sudden, untimely or traumatic, and may be easier when the loss is expected. The **type of loss** plays a role of intensity. The loss of an

older parent, a spouse or a child vary in their severities. These significant losses can cause further instability in marriages which are shaky or in contrast can bring couples together as they help each other cope. The beliefs the bereaved hold on to matters to large extent. As a reaction to grief some either drift away from church or seek comfort, support, hope for the future and turn to God. There is greater potential for pathological grief when people refuse the supernatural comfort and peace of the Holy Spirit in times of mourning. Psychologists say that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. The personality of the griever plays a vital role. If previous separations were difficult and problem-producing, then grieving is likely to be difficult. Handling grief may also be more difficult for people who are insecure, dependant, anxious, unable to control and express feelings, prone to depression or living under stress. Some try to prolong their grieving because they enjoy the attention that comes from others.

Grieving may be prolonged and difficult also when the survivor feels a sense of **guilt** because he or she participated in the event that caused the death, extreme dependency on the dead person, the dead person forced a promise out of the survivor that he should never grieve, feel sad, remarry or move, premature 'jumping back' to normal activities and when the one who grieves believes that grieving is a sign of spiritual immaturity.

I stress on the knowledge about grief and the need to have it resolved because its **effects** on us can have lasting and sometimes lifelong impacts. Loss can be a significant life event. Most common effects are shock, numbness, denial, excessive crying, sometimes collapse, restlessness, apathy, memories, loneliness and sleep disturbances.

Physically, grief affects the immune system causing heart failures, increase blood pressure, strokes and cancer. The percentage of suicide and road traffic accidents rise. Stress, headaches, indigestion, loss of appetite and inability to sleep are other physical effects.

Emotionally and **cognitively**, grief affects a person's feelings and thoughts. Apart from depression, there are also feelings of insecurity, withdrawal, forgetfulness, disinterest in sex, nightmares, and dreams about the dead and poor judgment. We also see loss of motivation, confused routines and priorities. When these emotions and thoughts are not given the freedom to be vented, then grief can become pathological and can trigger by an anniversary, birthday or any reminder.

Socially, the loss pushes us to face the painful reality of relating to others. Instead of withdrawing from social events and fellowships, it would gently wear off when the anxieties and loneliness are faced.

Grief affects us **pathologically** when it's unresolved, denied, and never ending. This is shown in behaviours of withdrawal, low self-esteem, refusing to talk about the deceased, psychosomatic illnesses, antisocial behaviour, threats of self-destruction, excessive drinking or drug abuse, impulsivity and pretending to be happy, laziness and a resistance when counselling is offered. Intensive psychotherapy and medical intervention of a psychiatrist is vital at this juncture.

The fact remains that all of us are prone to go through this painful process — if only we knew the right and healthy coping techniques we would guard ourselves from damage. Most people would not need special help, and

with time the mourner heals, recovers and comes to terms. Families, friends, counsellors and pastors can be immediate sources of help. They can help in the following ways —

- As anticipatory grief makes grieving more normal after the loss, encourage to talk about death before it occurs.
- Just be there. You don't have to say much. Grieving people dread empty rooms. Be available after the funeral.
- Encourage tears and assure that expression of feelings is good and acceptable. Give freedom to cry. Don't pressurize.
- Be a careful and active listener. Beware of being judgmental and trying to 'explain things away.'
- Give the griever some time to be alone, being sensitive to his fluctuating needs and feelings.
- Discourage major decision-making till a few months have passed. Be alongside.
- Gently challenge irrational conclusions and help deal with false guilt.
- Pray with the bereaved and comfort with words of the Bible without preaching or using spiritual cliches.

Remember that throughout the helping process you are trying to support the mourner and not unconsciously build an unhealthy dependency. Giving the grieving some real life examples of people who went through a similar loss, may be helpful. For example, a seasoned widow sharing her experience of grief and how she coped, with someone who has just lost her husband. It's a natural tendency of relatives to protect children from sadness and

the reality of death. Children need to understand and grieve as much as they can. They should be given the freedom to question, cry, and understand that the lost parent or friend will never come back. They need reassurance of love and care. Rejection is felt deep inside following the loss of a parent.

Loss of a child to accidents, illness, still birth or even miscarriages is very upsetting and beyond endurance. There may be guilt, self-condemnation, anger and unanswered questions, associated with the grief. This grief often leads to marital conflict as there may be blameshifts, and feelings that the other parent doesn't care as much. Both the parents may not express their feelings to each other as they would not want to hurt each other.

Grief is not an event. It's a process of denial that the death cannot be true, bargaining that if the loss could be avoided, a vow would be made, depression when the pain, sadness, hopelessness, helplessness, loneliness and worthlessness, and finally acceptance of the loss and coming to terms with the reality and learning to readjust and cope with the loss.

Can the pain of grief be prevented? I think it cannot and should not be. The prevention of unhealthy grief reactions should come in before the loss occurs.

An open and honest attitude in homes which encourage discussion about death can be helpful. Mending relationships releasing forgiveness and receiving, expressing love, appreciation and respect and developing interdependence make the grief smoother. Building and maintaining friendships would be a strong pillar to lean on during

crises. Keeping active with involvement in Church activities, entertainments and sports eases the pain.

Most people consider expressing emotions to be a sign of weakness. Those who wish to appear strong try to hide their feelings. But expressing our grief can help us deal with our intense sorrow when a loved one dies.

Above all, our God empathizes with our pain the best and would never let us walk through this road alone. His Spirit intercedes when we don't have the energy for the words. Sink it deep that God never makes mistakes and He is sovereign. He will give us His grace, comfort and strength to go through this phase. Only believe and take one step at a time!

Grief can make us bitter or better. The choice is yours.