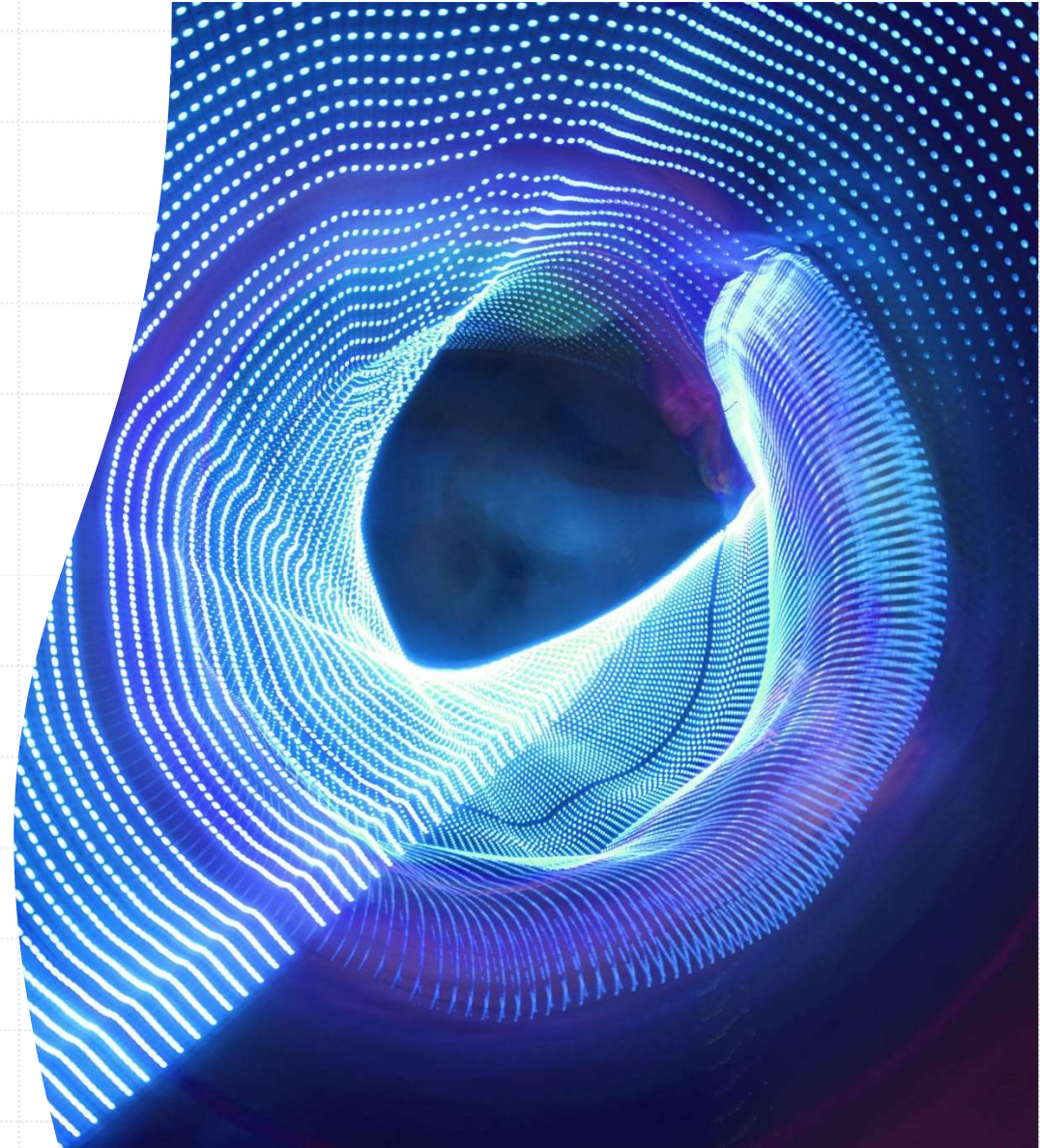


Grief Through the Eyes of Attachment

Dr. Ellen Crossman





Agenda

- Identify how attachment influences bereavement.
- Comprehend the interplay between attachment styles and mourning.
- Conceptualize clinical considerations related to grief for your clients.



Loss and Grief



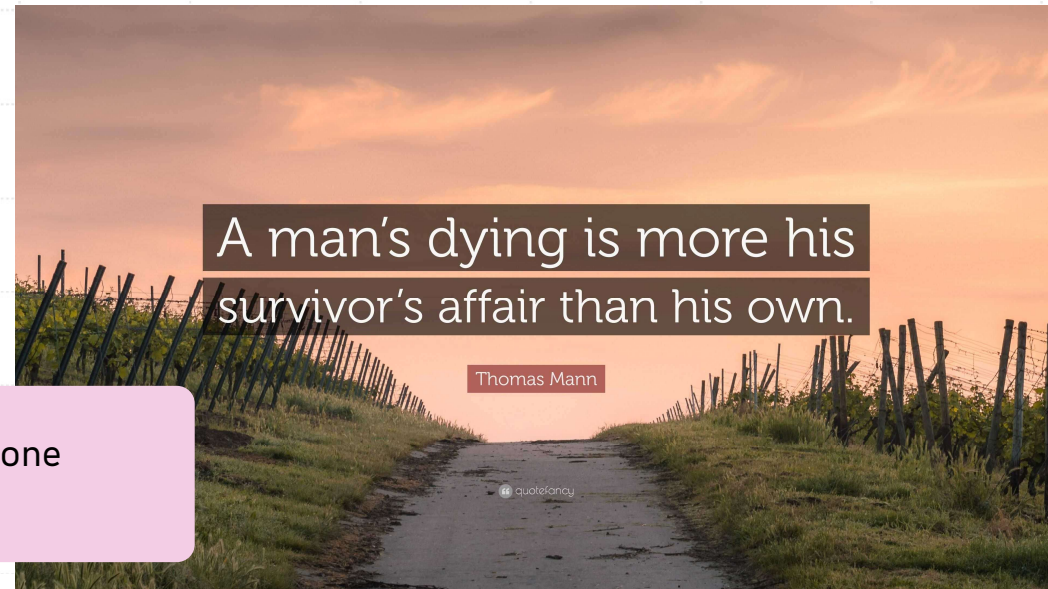
Loss is the objective state of losing someone important



Grief is the emotional response to the loss experienced by the person



Mourning is the way of expressing grief and actions that generally reflect the mourning practices of one's culture



(Stroebe et al. 1988)

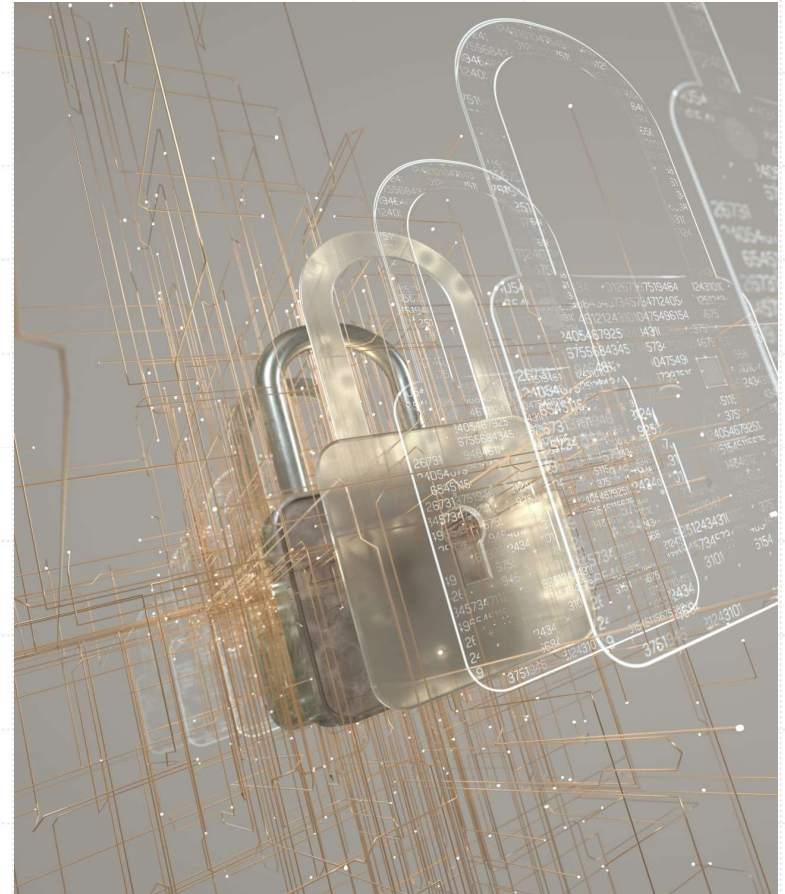


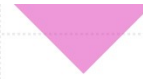
Attachment Theory

- Focuses on the affective bond that emerges between child and caregiver. This bond is at the core of identity formation, self-regulation, and interpersonal attitudes and behaviors.
- Proposes that the physical attachment between parent and child leads to a sense of physical and psychological security. Nonresponsive or rejecting interactions with a caregiver lead a child to feel anxiety, insecurity, and low self-esteem.
- The four concepts include a safe haven, a secure base, proximity maintenance, and separation distress.
- Four S's (Safe, Seen, Soothed, & Secure) refer to basic needs to be met for children to develop healthy and secure relationships.

Attachment Styles

- Secure attachment is the secure consistent bond providing safety
- Insecure attachment is measured along two continuums of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).
 - Attachment anxiety refers to the extent to which individuals worry that their partners will not be available at times of need and tend to fear rejection and abandonment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).
 - Attachment avoidance refers to the extent to which individuals seek to maintain autonomy and emotional distance from relationship partners and tend to lack trust in others (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).





Conceptualizing Separation Distress & Bereavement

- Both processes consist of the stages of protest, despair, and detachment.
- The basic structural elements of the mourning process are an attachment relationship, the experience of loss, and a bereaved person suffering from the loss or termination of this attachment (Corr, 2004).
- According to attachment theory, disruptions in the attachment bond result in loss and grief (Noppe, 2000).



Attachment Theory of Grief

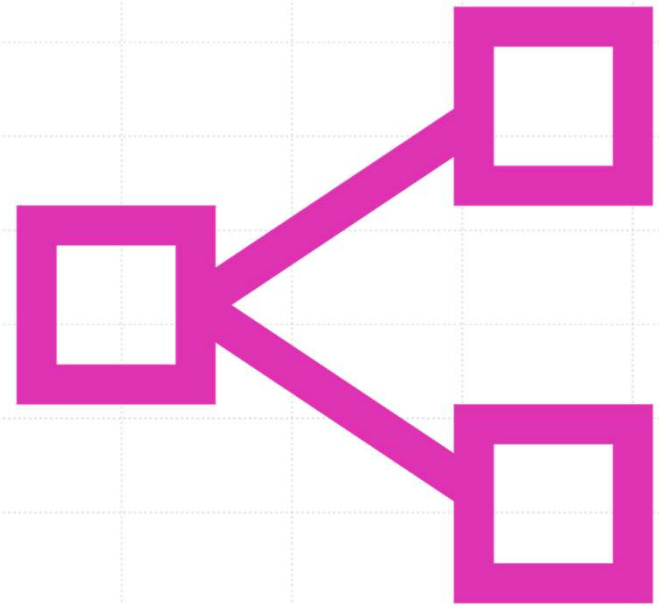
An attachment theory view on adaptive or 'normative' bereavement is based on the consideration that the death of a loved one (attachment figure) will prompt predictable responses for most people: strong protest, anger, yearning, despair, intense sorrow, loneliness and withdrawal.

Individuals tend to gradually adjust to the loss by maintaining a symbolic relationship with their deceased loved one, restoring their sense of security, and making-meaning with a new reality which allows them to re-engage

(Bowlby, 1980)

Attachment Theory of Grief

- Bowlby (1980) stated that the way people manage their grief can be understood as a function of their attachment histories.
- Securely attached individuals can easily access their emotional attachment memories and thus show normal grief reactions.
- He proposed that individuals with insecure attachment orientations, compared with secure, are likely to experience complications in the grieving process as the lack of security in relationships interferes with the ability to adaptively seek safety and comfort in others.
- Individuals with insecure attachment styles are less likely to think coherently about their attachment memories and more likely to display traumatic grief reactions.

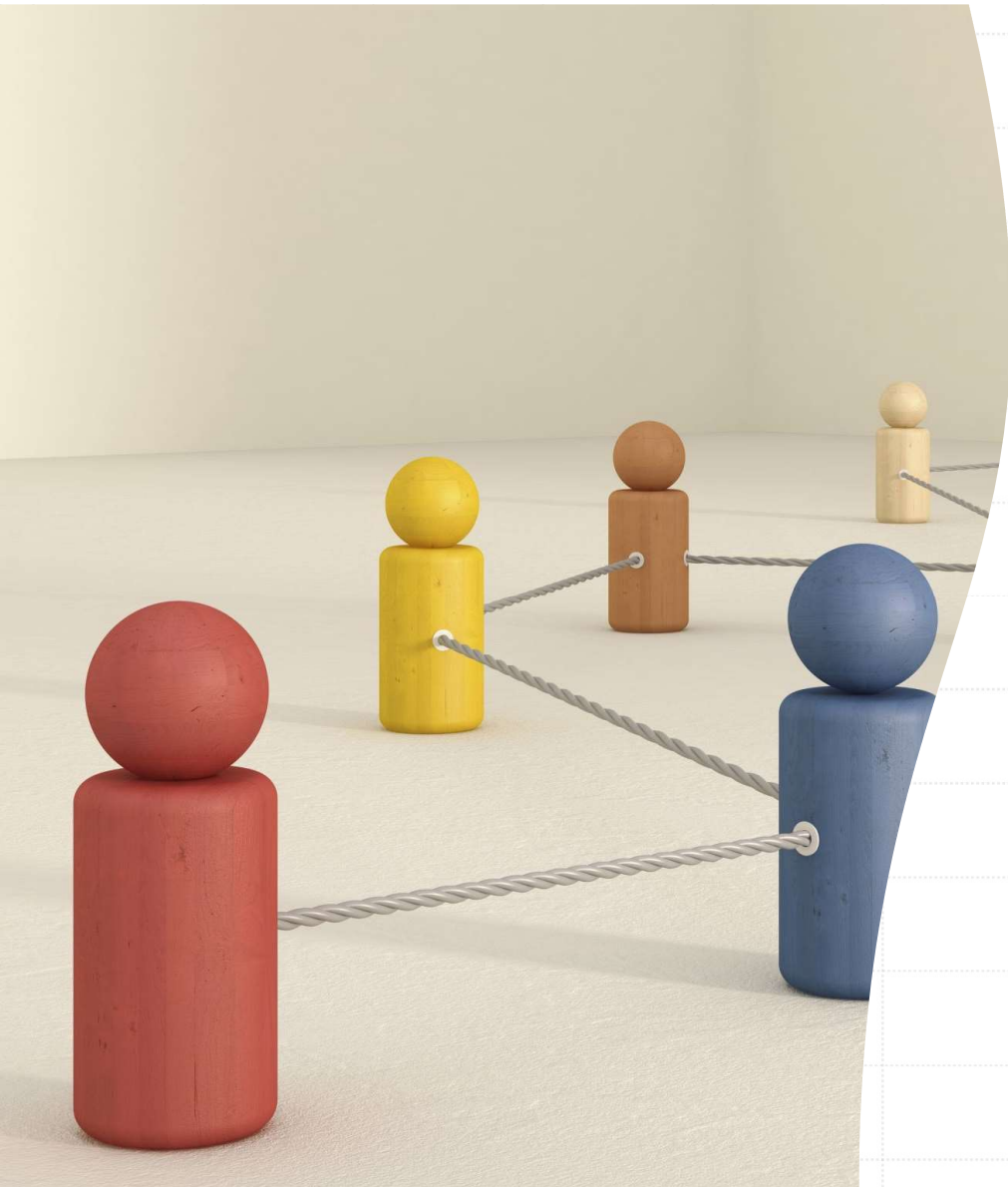


Grief & Insecure Attachment: Anxious

- Individuals are highly emotional after the loss, and this overwhelming emotional state is accompanied by panic, impulsivity, and anger.
- The correlation between attachment anxiety and higher levels of grief is explained by hyper-activation of the attachment system.
- The bereaved individual is likely to attempt regulate their emotions by signaling or expressing their needs and fears, overemphasizing their distress and presenting themselves as extremely vulnerable to pain.



(Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002)

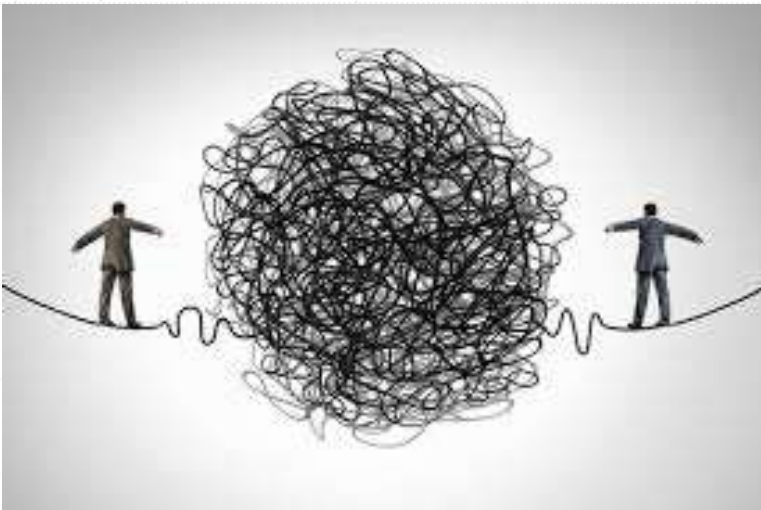


Grief & Insecure Attachment: Avoidant

- Individuals with an insecure-avoidant attachment style suppress their feelings about the attachment relationship, act as if nothing happened, exhibit inhibited grief reactions, and avoid activities related to their recovery.
- Individuals with an avoidant orientation are likely to deal with distress and threat by deactivating their attachment system, forgoing support seeking, and relying on themselves to deal with threats (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).
- Some theorists have proposed that avoidance may sometimes be adaptive (offering a buffer to overwhelming emotions).
- Over time attachment-related avoidance may be linked with complicated grief.

Attachment & Complicated Grief

- Bowlby (1980) proposed that attachment insecurities can complicate the grief process.
- While an avoidant coping style arguably may serve an adaptive function in some contexts, it also can become maladaptive when utilized as a defensive maneuver following the death of an attachment figure (Bonanno et al., 1995).
- Attachment avoidance is proposed to underlie 'delayed grief'.
- Attachment-related thoughts and emotions are suppressed and urges to seek support are lower (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).
- Individuals high in attachment avoidance are thought to respond to grief with a de-activation of their attachment system, leading to a loss of access to thoughts and images of lost loved ones (Mikulincer et al., 2002).
- Attempts to suppress painful thoughts following a bereavement are likely to fail to reduce distress in the long term however, and suppressed pain may resurface when cognitive or emotional demands increase.



Attachment & Complicated Grief



- High levels of attachment anxiety may predict 'chronic mourning' which is characterized by overwhelming anxiety and sadness, prolonged difficulty in re-engaging with adaptive functioning and forming new relationships, preoccupation with the deceased, and difficulty accepting the loss.
- Anxiously attached individuals tend to experience chronic activation of the attachment system, leading to hyper-accessibility of thoughts of the deceased loved one which may perpetuate excessive yearning (Mancini & Bonanno, 2012).
- The effect of attachment anxiety on complicated grief was no longer significant when it was examined together with social support and emotional loneliness.

Attachment & Complicated Grief



- In addition to emotional bonds, cognitive and behavioral processes such as avoidance behaviors and negative cognitions may play meaningful roles in the potential development of CG, possibly lending support for the development of novel treatment interventions that specifically address these processes.
- Based on the potential for insecurely attached individuals with CG to utilize ineffective coping mechanisms, such persons may benefit from treatment interventions designed to assist them in developing more adaptive coping skills.
- Considering the pathways between factors is important to understand their interactions.
- Consider including bereavement-specific and general outcome measures to better understand the experience of the emotional impact of bereavement.
 - Experiences in Close Relationships-Short Form (ECR-S; Wei et al., 2007)

Meaning-making

- Global meaning develops early in life and can be changed by subsequent experiences, such as loss.
- Situational meaning refers to the appraisals we make concerning specific situations or life experiences.
- An incongruence between situational and global meaning creates distress, which initiates the meaning-making process.
- Bereaved individuals higher in attachment avoidance may have experienced less discrepancy between situational and global meaning following the loss of an attachment figure
 - Higher degrees of “meaning-made” might be present.
- Less avoidantly-attached bereaved individuals might struggle with the discrepancy between global and situational meaning
 - Might benefit from support in making sense of the loss in the context of existing global meaning.

Continuing Bonds



- Representations of ongoing attachment to the deceased that can be expressed through a wide range of thoughts and behaviors.
 - can predict both positive and negative outcomes
- Internalized CB includes expressions such as telling stories about the deceased, thinking about how the deceased might view ongoing life events, and looking to the deceased as a model to guide goals and values.
- Externalized CB includes expressions such as difficulty parting with possessions or changing surroundings that involved the deceased, imagining that the deceased may suddenly reappear, and experiencing the deceased as physically present.
- Research on a relationship between Complicated Grief and Continuing Bonds is inconsistent.

(Field & Filanosky, 2010)



Continuing Bonds

- This experience may be affected by the attachment style of the griever.
- Some research suggests that CB may be a normal and healthy response to grief for securely attached persons, permitting them to slowly relocate and loosen the bond with the deceased attachment figure while allowing for “a sense of continued remembrance” (Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2010, p. 263).
- Individuals high in attachment avoidance may simply be less likely to express CB. It is also possible that CB could be expressed differently among individuals high in attachment avoidance
- Individuals with anxious attachment styles may rigidly cling to the CB, leading to the hyperaccessibility and rumination of the deceased as seen in those with CG.
- The differing results on how CB interact with and impact grief and coping responses may be better explained by differences in attachment style.

- While therapeutic interventions for bereaved clients are often aimed at facilitating meaning-making and maintenance of CB with the deceased, our findings suggest that perhaps these practices may be less applicable to highly avoidant individuals.
- We propose that perhaps an initial assessment of grieving clients' global beliefs, particularly those pertaining to their attachment relationships, may be important before assuming that the loss has been a disruption to their meaning system or that facilitation of CB would be a fitting intervention.
- Additionally, understanding grieving clients' attachment styles and global beliefs could help guide the selection of the most fitting interventions for individuals.
- The Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale (ISLES; Holland et al., 2010)
- Continuing Bonds Scale (CBS; Field & Filanosky, 2009)



Meaning-making & Continuing Bonds

Attachment & Dual-Process Model

Attachment Styles

Secure Attachment

- positive view of self and others.
- comfortable with emotional intimacy, communication.
- healthy boundaries and trust.

Avoidant Attachment

- prioritization of self-sufficiency.
- avoiding emotional intimacy.
- tendency to push others away.
- struggling with trust and communication.

Anxious Attachment

- negative view of self, positive view of others.
- needing constant reassurance.
- fear of being abandoned.
- craving closeness.

Disorganized Attachment

- incorporates characteristics of anxious and avoidant styles.
- fear of rejection but difficulty with intimacy.
- unpredictable responses.

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Figure 1. The dual-process model of coping with bereavement.

Clinical Considerations

- Normalize the process. Do not pathologize.
- Avoidant attachment:
 - Confront loss, focus on significance
 - Keep in mind: lack of attachment to the deceased
- Anxious attachment:
 - Confront loss, lower rumination
 - Prompt oscillation to attend to restoration tasks



Cultural Aspects to Consider



- Grief is a cross-cultural phenomenon in the sense that people in every culture must experience and deal with death throughout their lifespans.
- Grief is also socially and culturally bound, the expression of which occurs within an individual's context.
- Given that attachment, while considered intrapersonal is created through (and affects) social relationships, special attention should be paid to social context and grief.
- For example, how grief is expressed varies vastly across different countries from cultures where "muted grief" is the norm compared with cultures that express what is deemed as "excessive grief" by United States' standards
- Research has shown that the exact definition of concepts such as security and sensitivity may vary depending on cultural values and practices (Rothbaum & Morelli, 2005).



Parent Grieving a Child

- Bereaved parents who score high on the dimension anxious attachment are very likely to suffer extremely following the loss of their child.
- Bereaved parents on the avoidant dimension were more vulnerable to the negative effects of bereavement.
 - Increased grief symptoms
 - Increased depression
 - Deactivating strategies were no longer functional. (They cannot shut off thinking about the painful loss of their child.)
- Anxiously attached parents tend to have lower marital satisfaction, which was associated with more depressive symptoms.

The Grieving Child

- Piaget (1954) stated that only from the last months of the first year can a child begin to understand that an object exists even when it disappears
- A child's attachment to the primary caregiver typically begins to develop in the first year of life, with children aged six months and older experiencing distress and reacting to the loss of the caregiver.



When the cause of the loss is death, different interpretations emerge based on children's developmental stages.

Infants (0-2 years), the concept of death has not yet been formed; however, they still perceive and react to the caregiver's absence

Childhood (2-6 years), death is considered to be temporary and reversible

School age (6-12 years), the permanence and irreversibility of death will become evident

Adolescence (12-18 years), the concept of death will be comprehended as it is in adults

Keep in mind, the separation of a child from the primary caregiver may also occur for causes other than death.

Abandonment

Hospitalization

Institutionalization

The Grieving Child





The Grieving Child

Factors that have positive effects on the grieving process are:

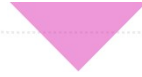
Providing the child with accurate information about the situation immediately

Allowing the child to ask all kinds of questions and responding to these questions as honestly as possible

Allowing the child to participate in the grief experienced by the family

Comforting the child by the surviving parent or someone known and trusted





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