Personal Experiences and
Clinical Reflections

Edited by
Salman Akhtar
and Gurmeet S. Kanwal

ROUTLEDGE

BEREAVEMENT

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To

the memory of a good friend and great poet

Nida Fazli (1938–2016)

SA

the memory of my father

Piara Singh Kanwal (1928–2015)

GSK

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Salman Akhtar & Gurmeet S. Kanwal

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INTRODUCTION

This book came out of an exchange that we (S.A. and G.K.) had soon after one of us had lost an important person in his life to death. While sharing sorrow, we stumbled upon questions that intrigued us and whose answers we did not know. For instance, does the grief over losing one's mother differ from losing one's father? Do women grieve differently than men? Can children mourn? And, if so, how is their mourning different from that of adults? What other pathways, besides the "celebrated" mourning and melancholia, are available to modify the anguish of the bereaved? Is the grief over one's child's death ever resolvable? And, what does "resolution" of grief mean anyway? It was the encounter with such questions that led us to undertake putting this book together.

We enlisted six distinguished colleagues to help sort out the ambiguities in the realm of bereavement and mourning. We requested them to write about one particular loss (death of mother, father, sibling, spouse, child, and pet) and to include both their personal experience with it and their clinical understanding of it. This was no easy request. We were asking our colleagues not only to share their expertise but also their personal stories of bereavement and grief. While some of them had experiences going back many years, others were still freshly immersed in

their loss. However, we knew that only with such a unique collection of essays that brings together subjective experience and the existing psychoanalytic literature could we hope to shed a fresh light on the varied nature of grief and its normative and complicated unfolding.

Now, before raising the curtain of the stage where the six poignant scenarios of grief are played out, we wish to say a few words about the confusing relationship between the three designations, namely bereavement, mourning, and grief. As we surveyed their dictionary meanings and psychoanalytic usage, we found that sometimes they are used interchangeably and at other times they are distinguished from each other. "Bereavement" seemed to be more specifically linked with death than either "mourning" or "grief," which are used in connection with losses and separations of other kinds as well. "Mourning" is used in a more generalized manner in the Kleinian and developmentally oriented analytic literature to denote the renunciation of infantile omnipotence and the shift from pleasure principle to reality principle. But "mourning" is also used in connection with death. Grief, on the other hand, is synonymous with mourning for some authors and constitutes the initial stage of mourning for others. Some authors reserve "mourning" for a process that has been successful, while others do not. And, finally, there are authors who regard bereavement, grief, and mourning as a three-step process.

Attempting to extricate ourselves from such a lexical conundrum while conceding that we might lapse into imprecision from time to time, we selected "bereavement" instead of "mourning" or "grief" for the title of our book and as the core motif for our conceptualizations. Our choice was based upon the polysyllabic somberness of the word and its phonic kinship (with prominent "b"s and "r"s) with burial and also upon its tight linkage with death. And, that's what our book is all about: death. Although, for obvious existential and clinical reasons, it explores the subjectivity of those left behind, those still living, and those suffering from pain. The hope of course is that doing so will help transform their suffering into richer and more meaningful perspectives on life.

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

Bereavement: the spectrum of emotional reactions

Salman Akhtar

Most adults encounter the death of a loved one in the course of their lives. They might lose a parent, a sibling, a spouse, a friend, or, in an event that is as searing as it is unfathomable, they might lose an offspring to death. All such losses are painful and even when their occurrence had been expected for a while, the consequent alterations in the intrapsychic economy and external life can be challenging. A chain of emotional reactions is set in motion, which is often accompanied by shifts in one's sense of personal identity and in one's relationship to others. One does recover from the laceration but is no longer the same person. This is the essence of bereavement.

The nuances of this process constitute the topic of my contribution. I will begin by delineating the affective and cognitive aspects of normal grief. Following this, I will delineate the psychosocial variables that can complicate this process. Then, I will discuss the frozen and maladaptive forms of grief, as well as other pathological responses to losing someone to death. I will also elucidate the implications of the foregoing material to the conduct of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. And, in conclusion, I will highlight the areas that merit further scrutiny and unresolved questions that still exist in this realm.

Normal reaction to bereavement

Freud's views

Early on in his career, Freud made important observations regarding emotional reactions to the loss of a loved one. He noted, for instance (1893), that mourning can precipitate neurotic symptomatology and that "melancholia consists in mourning over the loss of the libido" (1893, p. 201). The latter remark implied that normal mourning refers to the loss of a love object and abnormal mourning refers to the loss of the self's loving quality ("libido") that goes with the lost object. Yet another early remark by Freud (1896) pertained to the self-directed reproaches that often appear after parental death and are due to unacknowledged hostility towards them.

These passing observations were elaborated by him twenty-two years later in "Mourning and Melancholia". In that seminal contribution, Freud (1917e) made the following observations about grief:

- "The mood of mourning [is] a 'painful' one" (p. 244).
- "Disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning" (p. 245).
- "Reality testing has shown that the love object no longer exists and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition" (p. 244).
- "Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nonetheless, its orders can not be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at a great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged" (pp. 244–245).
- "When the work of mourning is completed, the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (p. 245).

Freud emphasized that loss of interest in daily activities on the part of a grieving individual is due to the "work of mourning," whereby "each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it" (p. 245). Thus, Freud laid down the foundations of how the phenomenology of grief is described in contemporary literature, regardless of whether it be "scientific" or "popular." The important features of such phenomenology are (i) affect of mental pain, (ii) idealization of the lost object, (iii) a piecemeal process, and (iv) the "freedom" of ego from the lost

object (and, presumably, the capacity to find a substitute) at the end of mourning.

Freud's portrayal of mourning was superb and yet left many areas untouched. For instance, his paper (i) makes no mention of the impact of the age of the bereaved upon the mourning process, (ii) pays little attention to the gender of the bereaved, (iii) makes no distinction between the loss of mother, father, sibling, spouse, and child, (iv) does not mention the average duration of normal grief, and (v) concludes with the questionable proposal that, at the end of the mourning period, the lost object is decathected, which implies that it is forgotten or at least retains little emotional value for the bereaved.

Now, in all fairness, it should be acknowledged that eight years *before* writing "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud had explicitly declared that "a normal period of mourning would last one or two years" (1909d, p. 180). And, twelve years *after* his seminal work, he had softened the idea of object-decathexis at the end of mourning. In a letter to the Swiss psychiatrist, Ludwig Binswanger (1881–1966), whose son had died, Freud spoke of grief in the following terms:

> We know that the acute sorrow we feel after such a loss will run its course, but also that we will remain inconsolable, and will never find a substitute. No matter what may come to take its place, even should it fill that place completely, it yet remains something else. And that is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating a love that we do not want to abandon. (Freud, 1929, cited in Fichtner, 2003, p. 196)

Whether Freud was so moved only because the death of a son was involved or whether this statement simply reflects one of the many instances of difference between the "official" and "private" views of Freud is hard to conclude. Suffice it to say that the letter opens up the possibility that, at the end of mourning, the lost object is not "replaced" but "re-placed," that is, psychically relocated and differently invested in terms of emotions.

Subsequent contributions

Prominent among post-Freudian contributions is Lindemann's (1944) pioneering descriptive work on "acute grief" among 101 individuals who had recently faced the death of a loved one. Almost all of them