



GROWING AROUND GRIEF

Another way of looking at grief and recovery....

By Lois Tonkin, Grief Counsellor, Wellington, New Zealand

Whether we realise it or not, we live in a world of models. Not model whose time is spent strutting the catwalk, but those that exist within our minds, and which we frame the way we see our lives and work. Our models of the world are created by what we are taught, and by our experience of life.

As a novice grief counselor some years ago, the model of grief within which I saw my first clients (poor things) was largely a theoretical one. Generalising wildly, one can say that most theories of grief postulate a series of stages, culminating in resolution. It was against this framework that I placed my client's stories.

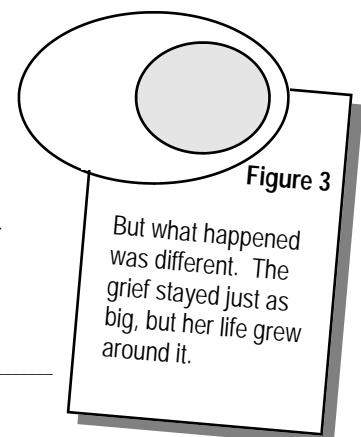
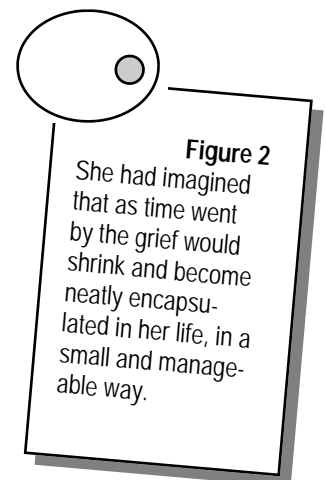
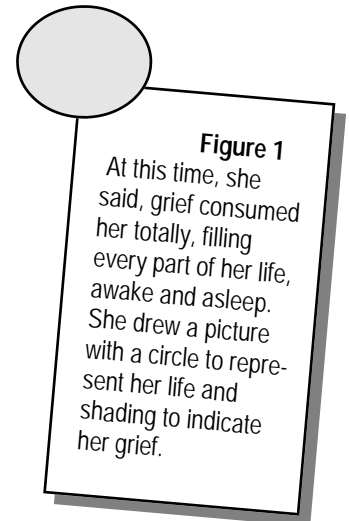
What concerned me was the people I talked to who told me that their grief certainly did not end in the way I thought it should. Most of the clients fitted the model well, but there was a sizeable minority whose 'resolution stage' did not match up. I was perplexed in grief group discussions when I would hear these people, whose lives were obviously going on and growing, quietly say that their pain was sometimes just as bad as ever, and had never really gone away.

Then, in an Elizabeth Kubler-Ross workshop some years ago, an unknown woman described a model of grief which fitted her experience. I am indebted to this woman because her model made sense of grief for me in a way that others had not, and has comforted many clients to whom I have shown it since. Colleagues have also found it useful so, with thanks to a woman I do not know, I pass it on.

The woman's child had died some years before. At this time, she said, grief consumed her totally, filling every part of her life, awake and asleep. She drew a picture (Figure 1) with a circle to represent her life and shading to indicate her grief. She had imagined that as time went by the grief would shrink and become neatly encapsulated in her life, in a small and manageable way; she was realistic enough to assume that it would not away entirely. (Figure 2)

But what happened was different. The grief stayed just as big, but her life grew around it (Figure 3). There were times, anniversaries or moments which reminded her of her child, when she operated entirely from out of the shaded circle in her life and her grief felt just as intense as it every had. But, increasingly, she was able to experience life in the larger circle.

What helps some clients about this model (and it does not fit everyone) is that it relieves them of the expectation that their grief should largely go away. It explains the dark days, and also describes the richness and depth the grief has given to their lives. As grief counselors we can encourage them, as time goes by, in tentative attempts to 'grow a new life'. My clients have felt comforted, using this model, that they can do so without the sense of disloyalty to the deceased that so often holds back bereaved people. In this way they continue the process of integrating the loss with their lives, and moving forwards.....



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