Success Over Stress
Coping with Loss, Grief, & Trauma

Slide 1: Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

• Compare grief, mourning and bereavement
• Interpret why traditional views of grief may be unhelpful
• Recognize what is involved in healthy grieving
• Identify unique issues involved in grief associated with violence or trauma
• Illustrate ways to provide “psychological first aid” to those who are grieving

Slide 2: Loss is Stressful

We will all experience loss in our lives - loss of relationships, loss of pets, loss of personal possessions, or loss related to moving. And, even though we don’t like to think about it, death is a type of loss as well. No one will live forever. The reality is that loss and grief are universal experiences. Given that we all will experience loss and grief at some point, we should be prepared to cope with these issues. They may be some of the most significant stressors any of us will ever face.

Slide 3: College Students and Loss

You may wonder why we would cover these topics in a stress course for college students. Sometimes, college students will say things like, “Grief and loss don’t apply to me; I’m too young!” According to the University of Minnesota Boynton Health Services' 2010 College Student Health Survey (Lust, Ehlinger, & Golden, 2010), respondents reported that in the previous year:

• 16% had experienced the death of someone close
• 17% had experienced the termination of a close personal relationship
• 7% had been diagnosed with a serious illness – either physical or mental
• 4% had been fired or laid off from a job

As you can see from these statistics, loss is something experienced by many college students. Losses related to deaths, relationships, jobs, and illness were all mentioned in this research. Other significant losses, such as the loss of a pet, moving, having a friend move, or loss associated with theft, weren’t examined in this survey, but we would have to assume that even more students experienced these issues as well. Thus, individuals both young and old endure loss; age doesn’t necessarily make you immune.
Before we begin to explore some of these topics in greater detail, it would be good to clarify some of the common terminology. These are terms that you’ve probably heard before. We’ll use them throughout the lesson, so we need to make sure we’re all interpreting them similarly.

**Bereavement** is the state of being deprived of something. There are three conditions involved in bereavement:

- First is that it must be a valued relationship with another person, animal, object, or personal characteristic
- Second, there is a termination of that relationship
- Third, there exists a feeling of deprivation as a result of the loss

When we refer to someone as **bereaved**, we are implying that an important loss has taken place in that person’s life. Keep in mind that bereavement can occur with any loss, it doesn’t just apply to death or the termination of a relationship. For instance, some students feel bereaved upon moving to college, as they find they miss their families, friends, pets, or hometown.

**Mourning** involves the culturally-patterned traditions and rituals performed around the time of a loss. In the case of a death, funeral customs are examples of mourning practices. In some cultures, a memorial service is common, followed by an in-ground burial. In other cultures, cremation is more common. Many cultures invoke some means of bringing people together at the time of a death like memorial services, wakes, visitations, and luncheons. Wearing black, playing taps at a graveside and retiring a sports jersey are also examples of mourning practices. Generally, mourning practices serve to help us cope with a loss by providing familiar rituals, memorialization of the loss, and social support from others.

**Grief** is a person’s emotional response to a loss. We’ll spend quite a bit of time exploring this term, as grief embodies the personal experience associated with a loss. Additionally, there are many misconceptions surrounding grief in today’s society that, quite frankly, can interfere with our attempts to cope with loss effectively.

**Slide 5: VIDEO: Coping with Grief**

What was it like dealing and coping with grief in your life?

My parents went through a divorce when I was in school last fall semester, I think. And it actually affected me a lot, where I wasn’t coming to classes and I wasn’t doing my homework and everything and I guess you just have to deal with consequences to learn from your mistakes.
Healthy grieving is just kind of letting go of the things that you can't control.

I deal with grief quietly. Um, I, I prefer to have personal reflection time versus being with a bunch of people and experiencing that same grief.

That loss really builds up on you, especially when it's people that you were talking with last week. Um, how I deal with that is just with uh, sticking with the people that are still here.

Finding that support, finding a base. You know, not putting everything on your own shoulders.

I cry. I do cry when I cope with grief. It's good for you, not, like, to do it constantly, depressively. You can always go talk to someone.

Ultimately, turn to God. Do a lot of praying, kind of meditating, going to church, relying others for support. Um, just taking it day by day.

Laughter is always a good, good thing. So be around friends who loves you.

Try to find some friends who you can really talk to about, because once you unwind and work all that through it seems a lot more manageable. Especially when you know that, um, other people have similar stories and are supportive.

Slide 6: Misconceptions

The United States—like many other countries and cultures—is a loss-denying and death-denying society. In general, we don’t like to think about death and loss, or even acknowledge that they are universal experiences. At the same time, we often see that death is a theme in popular entertainment through television, movies, video games, and novels. This, however, only serves to make death, loss, and grief even more unreal to us. And, because we rarely discuss these issues in a realistic manner, few of us are prepared to cope with them effectively when they occur in our lives.

As was previously mentioned, there are many misconceptions and even myths surrounding grief – especially in the US. Some of these misconceptions include (Corr, Nabe & Corr, 2009):

- A little grief is OK, but only for a while.
- Grief is something to get over or work through.
- Stage-based models of grief should be followed.
- We should adhere to timeline recommendations regarding grief.
- Any variance from stages or timelines is a concern.
- A strong will can help us move on; only weak people have trouble getting over their grief.
There are right or acceptable ways to grieve.

Grief should be rational, linear, and solvable.

These misconceptions impair our ability to cope with loss effectively.

**Slide 7: Grow From Grief**

If loss is a natural part of life, then we must acknowledge that grief is as well. At various times in your life, you have probably heard someone say, “Life isn’t always fair.” This is true and we have to admit that suffering and grief can’t always be avoided because we all have things in our lives that we care about deeply. We all are at risk for experiencing grief. This is a reality. The loss of anyone or anything important to us hurts. But, we don’t have to let grief and loss devastate us. Rather, we need to learn how to incorporate them into our lives in a healthy manner. It is better to live with grief, rather than try to escape it. We can’t always solve it or get over it. In fact, you don’t need to get over a loss. It is quite possible to both keep a loss present and to move forward with life and relationships in a healthy manner. Living with loss can help enhance the meaning of life. To that end, don’t deny or avoid grief; let it help you grow. This will involve a shift in the traditional paradigm - rather than gaining closure after a loss, seek remembrance and growth. Closure is not always possible, nor should it be. Healthy grieving involves remembering and honoring as much as it involves moving forward.

**Slide 8: Individualized Grief**

Every experience of grief is different. In fact, diversity in coping with loss should be allowed and expected. We need to realize that we don’t need to solve or remove grief from our lives; rather, we need to cope with it. We can do this by trying to make sense of the loss—whatever that means for each of us. We need to believe in our ability to learn to live with grief and loss and we have to realize that it is OK to give up on closure. Resiliency is the key; it can be learned and cultivated. Each of us is capable of adapting and enduring despite our loss and pain, even though this may seem virtually impossible at times.

We are better equipped for healthy grieving if we realize that grief is not a neat, predictable process. We have to learn to be OK with emotional oscillation and ambivalence. Some days will be bad, but others will be good. At times, we feel very, very angry. Yet, other times, we are able to experience joy despite our loss. Similarly, we’ll find that it’s common to feel despair one moment and hope the next. All of this is completely expected and certainly OK. Many grieving people find that they are able to cope effectively with loss – even significant, tragic loss. There will be ups and downs and even extreme sadness along the way, but the vast majority of bereaved people will be able to live full, productive, and, yes, even happy lives.
Slide 9: Dimming Grief

Contrary to common belief, there is no perfect timeline for grief. Grief fades with time, but it never really goes away, especially if the loss we experienced was significant. In fact, the following quote from Karen Everly, who’s daughter died on 9/11, illustrates this concept nicely. She said, “Grief is a bit like a fading light; it grows dim, but it never goes out... and that is enormously reassuring” (Bonanno, 2009, p. 297).

Karen’s quote clearly indicates that she is comforted by the memories of her daughter—and, even her continued grief. As time has passed, her grief has become less raw, less painful, and certainly more bearable. But it’s never completely gone, and that’s a testament to how much her daughter meant to her. Many grief researchers will encourage the bereaved to maintain emotional attachments to those they’ve lost by remembering and honoring them. This is a hallmark of healthy grieving.

Slide 10: Stage-Based Grief

For many years, an accepted view of grief was that it progressed in predictable stages and that any deviation from those stages was alarming. A variety of stage-based models of grief have been proposed, and most include the following stages: shock & disbelief, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, more current grief research indicates that very few, if any, people progress through grief in such a predictable manner. Some people do have all of these experiences, while others, have very few of them.

There are many criticisms of stage-based approaches to grief. The notion of stages not only implies that the course of grief will be predictable, but that a person should progress from one stage to the next in an orderly fashion. As anyone who’s experienced a loss can testify, grief is rarely predictable and it is far from orderly. The idea of stages can seem confining or restrictive. It does not incorporate feelings or experiences that fail to fit neatly into any of the stages. Stage-based models also imply a timeline. For some reason, many people hold the belief that we should be done grieving within 6 to 12 months. As we’ve already discussed, there really is no perfect timeline for grieving—each person’s experience is unique. Finally, deviation from the stages or the arbitrary timeline is often seen as abnormal. In reality, a variety of responses to grief are normal and very few cases are cause for concern (Bonanno, 2009).

Slide 11: Grief Research

The most current research on grief reveals a few interesting insights. First, most of us are extremely resilient and we are capable of coping with loss in a healthy way. We may not recognize this quality in ourselves until a significant
event or loss occurs, but it’s there. We are remarkably resilient creatures! This doesn’t mean that we feel less or are in some way affected less by a loss. Loss is inevitably painful, sad, and life-changing. Research shows that we are amazingly capable of coping with loss and sadness and adapting to it as we journey through life (Bonanno, 2009).

Secondly, there appears to be no magic formula for effective or healthy grieving. Resilient people utilize a myriad of methods and have diverse reactions. As we’ve discussed with stress management in general, what works well for one person may not work at all for another. The important point is that most of us can find healthy, effective coping techniques that work well for us and, no matter how we cope, most of us eventually find our way back to productive, fulfilling lives (Bonanno, 2009).

A third insight from current grief research involves memories. As we grieve, the vast majority of us realize that our memories provide comfort. After a loss, virtually all of us will naturally recall and focus on our positive and good memories, rather than unpleasant memories. This is a helpful and protective tendency of the human brain. Good memories give us respite from the pain of grief. As we’ve already discussed, it’s common for people to experience significant emotional oscillation as they grieve (Bonanno, 2009).

**Slide 12: Grief and Memories**

Grieving individuals oscillate between the pain of grief and the comfort of good memories. This oscillation, which becomes less intense over time, allows them to fully grieve, but not become mired in their sadness. Additionally, the memories allow them to keep a part of that which has been lost.

We should also comment on one potential side effect of this aspect of grieving. Often, when romantic relationships end, many people focus only on the positive memories associated with those relationships, rather than considering all aspects of the relationships—positive and not-so-positive. This fond remembering can often cause people to re-enter a relationship (or start a new one too soon), even when it might be better for all parties to let go. Awareness of this tendency can help us make more informed decisions.

Grief research has also indicated that a positive outlook and the ability to use humor and cultivate laughter appear to be important in healthy grieving. As time pushes on, most of us come to realize that the best way to pay tribute to the significance of our losses is by living a full, rewarding and productive life. This realization comes to us gradually and we can amaze even ourselves with our resilience.

**Slide 13: Trauma and Grief**

Something that we must acknowledge is that violence, trauma, terrorism, and disasters often present significant and unique issues for survivors. Victims of
these incidents must contend not only with grief and loss, but also with terribly painful memories. These situations compound the grief of the survivors as they grapple with multiple forms of loss including loss of control, loss of privacy, loss of trust, loss of autonomy, and loss of faith. Research reveals that grief and distress are magnified when the following are true (Carlson, 2011):
- A cause is unknown
- A person is injured, physically or psychologically
- A threat to life either existed or was perceived
- An incident continued over a long period of time
- An incident was human-generated, such as an assault or terrorist attack
- An incident was sudden and unexpected

**Slide 14: Coping With Personal Loss**

Of course, personal characteristics and other factors will also determine how significantly someone is affected by violence or trauma and how effectively they are able to cope with it. And, as with all other forms of grief and stress, healthy coping involves a wide variety of options—each personally determined. There is no perfect prescription for coping with violence and trauma. However, we do know that the following strategies can help immensely:
- Share your thoughts and ask for support from someone you trust
- Keep to your regular routine
- Eat a balanced diet and take care of yourself
- Avoid using tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs to mask or attempt to escape from stress and grief
- Look for humor and laughter whenever you can
- Maintain regular sleep patterns as much as possible
- Reach out to others who are or have been in similar situations
- Expect an emotional rollercoaster; be OK with intense emotional oscillation
- Take time for yourself—to relax, breathe, pray, talk. Do whatever helps, but doesn’t hinder your recovery

**Slide 15: VIDEO: Who helps you cope?**

Who helps you cope with stress?

My mom. And she’s my roommate, so really her, because I talk to her a lot. So.

That person would be my father. Um, he’s, he’s the guy that keeps me moving, uh, keeps me focused, keeps me in check.

My best friend helps me cope with stress. She makes me laugh a lot.
I turn to my parents and boyfriend and roommates and um, I live in the dorms, so the girls who live on the hall, just [because] everyone’s going through the same thing.

Definitely my father. Um, he’s, he’s wonderful at listening.

Who helps you cope with stress?

Honestly, if you have one person that you’re super close too, um, that person is gonna be your, your listening board, the one that’ll think rationally for you when you can’t.

I rely on my friends a lot. I mean, I have a girlfriend and so she helps me a lot. You know? Tries to keep me on track with stuff.

My friends and my family. They're both there for me, I know that.

Sometimes I talk to my kids because they are also in school.

**Slide 16: Grief During College**

Finding yourself in the midst of a loss while attending college can be very stressful. It is challenging enough to cope with grief on it’s own. When you add schoolwork and exams to this process, it can feel overwhelming. If you feel that you are falling behind due to stress resulting from a loss, speak with your professor, T.A. or academic advisor about steps you can take. Remember, your professor won’t know why your work is late or declining in quality unless you tell them. Most professors and advisors will understand what a tough spot you are in and can offer a solution or arrangement. This conversation may be uncomfortable but unless it takes place you could find yourself behind in classes. It is OK to ask for help or support when you need it!

**Slide 17: Anticipated Loss**

Sometimes, we have warning that a loss is coming. Recall the example of moving away from home to attend college. You probably knew this was coming months or even years in advance and had time to strategize for such a change. You may also experience other forms of anticipated loss, such as the death of a family member or pet from a terminal illness. While this is never easy, the silver lining is the opportunity to prepare and hopefully mitigate some of the associated stress. This will look very different for different types of loss, but healthy preparation might include:

- Establishing advanced directives or last wishes
Having discussions with healthcare professionals or family members to clear up unanswered questions
• Discussing fears, wishes, accomplishments or anything else of importance
• Planning for change by creating a list of tasks that need to be completed
• Settling disagreements or conflict if necessary
• Spending time with loved ones with a renewed appreciation

Thoughtful advanced planning can help make future difficult decisions a bit easier. Answering the tough questions and having the uncomfortable conversations can prevent you and loved ones from wondering. You may find comfort in knowing that your loved one’s desires were met.

Slide 18: Healing Activities

Upon experiencing a loss, you may be looking for ways to express emotions or channel feelings. There are many grief-focused or self-healing activities to participate in. Here are a few ways you could do this:

• Create a memory book using photos, letters, and mementos.
• Use rituals, symbolic acts, or materials when words are inadequate. This could be writing letters or poetry, journaling, performing a service or eulogy, or disposing of objects associated with the loss in a ceremonial way.
• Do things to pamper yourself. This could mean meditation and relaxation, exercising, practicing positive self-talk, or visualization.
• Read books and articles related to healthy grieving.
• Join a support group, or
• Volunteer for an organization that holds significance with your loss.

Resource Links:
• Groups at UC Irvine Counseling Center
• UC Irvine Health: Grief and Loss Information
• Pet loss support group
• UCI Counseling/Clinical Services
• Pet Loss Support Groups
• The Center for Victims of Violence and Crime (homicide, suicide, sexual assault, etc.)

Slide 19: Psychological First Aid

So, what should you do if someone close to you is affected by loss, violence or trauma? Nancy Carlson, the Behavioral Health Coordinator for the State of Minnesota, offers some excellent guidance, which she has titled “psychological first aid” (2011). This advice can be used for anyone suffering from any type of loss. Her advice can be divided into five broad categories.
1. Promote Safety: Safeguard your friend and do what you can to sustain him—help him to feel secure. Help your friend meet his basic needs (food, activity, rest, or support). Provide simple and accurate information when needed and identify resources that might be helpful, like support groups or counseling.

2. Calm and Comfort: Provide a compassionate presence. Listen to his concerns and practice active listening. Show that you care! Don’t push for information or for details; they will emerge in their own time. Help your friend utilize stress management techniques that he finds helpful. This might involve breathing exercises, journaling, meditation, or physical activity. Remember to be flexible and supportive. You can provide comfort, consolation, and reassurance through a phone call, card or even cookies.

3. Connectedness: Help connect friends and loved ones if that’s desired and would be helpful. If your friend is reluctant to seek support, encourage him and cultivate a trusted support network for him.

4. Self-Empowerment: Provide information to guide your friend toward what to expect. Support productive life changes he may want to make and help him make gradual progress toward meeting his own needs and returning to familiar activities.

5. Fostering Hope: Encourage your friend to look to the future. Remind him that, with support, things will get better. Throughout his healing process, never stop listening and caring.

If you still find yourself wondering what to do or say, you could also try the following:

- Instead of saying, “Let me know if you need help” decide on a task you can help with and make the offer.
- Be available and accepting.
- Allow grievers to tell their stories and express their feelings.
- Encourage and model good self-care.
- Be patient.

Slide 20: Recognize A Need For Help

Throughout this course and especially this lesson, we’ve acknowledged that loss, grief, and trauma are extremely difficult life events. But we’ve also emphasized the notion that most of us can cope with these events fairly well. We also must acknowledge that some people need help with these issues (Bonanno, 2009).

Thankfully, our understandings of grief and stress have progressed so that we have many options for helping people suffering from prolonged grief reactions. Counseling and psychotherapy have proven to be very effective. For some, meeting with other people who’ve experienced similar loss in a support
group is helpful. But how do you know if you or someone close to you needs this help? When is a grief reaction so concerning that it merits intervention?

An individual may need additional support or counseling when their grief or distress becomes so persistent that it affects quality of life and the ability to function productively. Some warning signs that might indicate that intervention is needed include:

- Pronounced withdrawal from others
- An aura of numbness
- Disclosure of feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- Lack of involvement in leisure, family, or work activities
- Intense preoccupation with the loss, or
- Unexplained, intense anxiety

While we’ve said there is no timeline on grief, if any of these symptoms are consistently present for more than 6 months, intervention may be warranted. This list is not all-encompassing, but it does provide a good framework from which to start. If you have a friend you are concerned about, consult your campus counseling services for guidance. Talk with your friend to make your concerns known and offer to assist him in seeking help. Support from a trusted friend can be incredibly helpful for a person utilizing these services for the first time. Seeking counseling is nothing to be ashamed of. Finally, encourage your friend to turn to his family for support and help as well.

Resource Links:
UCI Counseling/Clinical Services

Slide 21: Summary

In this lesson, we’ve tackled some tough topics: loss, grief, trauma and how to cope with them. A key take away is that when these things happen, know that you do not need to suffer alone—there are many people who care about you and want to help. There are also many people who can relate to your experiences because they’ve been through similar events. Reach out and seek this support. Many people are willing to help but they might not know how. It’s ok to tell them what you need.

Finally, keep in mind, that the ultimate message of this lesson is one of hope. When bad things happen or when we experience a significant loss, we are capable of adjusting and living a full, meaningful, productive life. It may not be an easy journey, but it is possible and quite probable. And that, in itself, is enormously reassuring.

References


The Rothenberger Institute provides a suite of wellness-based courses focusing on the knowledge and skills students need to lead healthy, productive, and balanced lives. For more information visit [www.ri.umn.edu](http://www.ri.umn.edu)