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Presentation Transcript
Recovering from Loss
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Not long after I started in private practice, in 2003, some friends, who had lost a child, introduced me to the Children's Grief Center of New Mexico. I learned a lot about grief there, working with children who had lost loved ones. About four years later, I started training to learn EMDR, which is a loss therapy.

Somewhere along the way, I learned that loss can cause two fundamental reactions. One is depression. You know, we get depressed if the dog dies, or we lose our job, or our girlfriend drops us, or things like that. And then anxiety is the second one, where we anticipate losses in the future – quite often because of losses we've incurred in the past. You know, we get held up at a Seven-Eleven store, and so every time we approach a Seven-Eleven after that, we get anxious when we walk in the door.

So I learned from my EMDR training that PTSD is about loss as well – a loss of the sense of self, a loss of safety, a loss of control.

About the time I began learning all this, I'd managed to make myself a pariah in the church that I had, in a lesser way, helped to found, and so experienced some losses of my own that I was dealing with, concurrent to all this learning about loss. And that helped, but what really helped me to understand the depth of loss were three women I met, who all lost their very young daughters to suicide. All three of their daughters hung themselves.

So, today I'm going to pass on what I've learned – or at least, part of it – from those three and, also, my own experience, and the experience of other people that I've worked with who suffered serious losses. And all that in hopes that you can recognize grief, trauma and PTSD when you experience it or when you see it in others. And then you'll know more about what to do, should that happen to you or someone else.

Last time, we called the presentation, *Understanding Loss*. That was the ninth part of a series, called *Taking a Look at our Emotions*, and this time, we're going to be working on *How to Recover from Loss*. That's the title – and the last in the series on emotions – the tenth part.

Let's start, first, talking about non-traumatic loss recovery.

There's a professor at Columbia University, named Bonanno, and he's probably done some of the best research about loss that is out there. What he discovered was, most people can move past the loss of a loved one between six months to three years – and that without therapy. He discovered that sometimes therapy even prolongs it.

There are three areas to consider when you're thinking about recovering from a serious loss. One has to do with mourning. After suffering the intense loss of a loved one, we're going to be weakened, so we shouldn't expect ourselves or others to continue on at full throttle. It takes time to recover. We're going to obsess about the one we've lost. We may be depressed. We may repress the feelings about the loss. And that is a defense mechanism, because it's too hurtful to feel it all at once, so our conscience meters it out to us a little at a time. It's also good to know that there's no set schedule for recovery and no set order for the phases of loss that people go through. Everybody seems to do it a bit differently.

One of the women that I spoke of told me that her favorite aunt asked her what it was like to lose her daughter, and, as she was explaining it, her aunt, who loves her deeply, said, "But can't you just get over it?" And I suspect that she said this because it was so hurtful to see her niece suffering so much, that she just wanted her to be okay right now. In other words, her comment was to comfort herself, rather than her niece. But the answer to that question is, "No, she's going to get over it when it's right for her to do so – not when the family wants a person to get over it."

Mourning also includes customs that vary from culture to culture. We have funerals in our country that proceed along loose guidelines – you know, there's usually a funeral home or a graveside service. And people, quite often, wear black to those and afterwards, sometimes, there's an informal meeting where there's food and people gather and talk.

There's a Japanese movie called, *Departures*, that shows a custom they have in that country, where the body of the deceased is washed in the presence of the family. This is all done in a very formal, appropriate way. Nobody sees the body. It's usually done by a professional. And it's a time to say, "Goodbye." We know that in Jesus' day, the same kind of occurred with Him, because we know that His body was prepared for burial by those women who were closest to Him. In the Japanese movie, the professional who had washed so many bodies, in the end, had to wash the body of his estranged father, because there was no one else to do it. And that movie shows us that that simple act evoked such strong feelings in him that in his father's death, he reconciled himself to his father and forgave his father's abandonment that took place when he

was young. So that might seem strange to us, but it probably seems strange to the Japanese that we *don't* do that.

We can also think about what happens where there are no customs that allow people to mourn. I've told this story before about the man whose sister was killed suddenly by an automobile accident when he was twelve. His parents' response was to take everything related to his sister out of the house and they never spoke of her again. They didn't let him go to the funeral. She was wearing formal clothing when she died, and when he got older, he developed a cross-dressing fetish, where he unconsciously memorialized his beloved sister in a pathological way.

So far, we've talked about the loss of loved ones, but the bigger picture is any kind of loss. A woman I know was telling me that, as she got older, she realized that she could not continue to eat peanut butter and crackers in the same quantity that she had when she was younger and still remain thin. And she said that she had to grieve the loss of that enjoyment and just go past it.

I didn't know this when I was younger, but people suffer a lot of losses as they grow older in diminished capacity and acuity and various things like that. That's why older people can get depressed over the state of their life.

I once did a funeral in the Ozarks quite a few miles north of Little Rock for a man who'd been a listener to our church's radio program. And when it was time to start the service, there was only *one* person there – his widow – no friends, no relatives attended. She'd outlived all of them. She was completely alone in the world and I just sat and talked with her. It was a very sad thing. And it heightened in my mind what it's like to get old, and how, if we live long enough, we lose everything it seems like.

The second things, after mourning, is to think about memorializing. My friend, whose son died, told me that memorializing his son's death was the most comforting thing that he learned to do. He learned that in a support group for people who had lost children. So he visits his son's grave and he remembers his son's birthday and also the day of his death. And he remembers his son's accomplishments and celebrates them. There's a scene in one of my favorite movies – Mr. Miyagi's birthday in *The Karate Kid*. He put on his old army uniform. He read the newspaper article. He looked at her picture. He got drunk. And the next day he was back to his everyday life again. And you surmise from the movie that that was what happened *every* year.

We also have Memorial Day in this country. It's very helpful to most of the survivors of veterans to know that there is a national day of remembrance for the sacrifice their loved ones made.

Mourning, and then memorializing, and then supporting. While supporting people who have lost loved ones, there are three things *not* to do. Don't try to fix things. It can't be fixed. When we lose someone we love, we will always be sad about it because we will still love them. And, if we still love them, we *will* be sad.

There's a story about Sigmund Freud. When he encountered people who had lost loved ones, he encouraged them to attach to another person – you know, fix it – get in, get out and fix it – just simple. He did that with other people until he lost his own grandson, and after that, he described himself as inconsolable forever. And that's okay. That's okay.

Let's look at a scripture. It's in 1 Corinthians 15:26. It says:

1 Corinthians 15:26 – *The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

God made us relational beings. He made us with eternity in our hearts. We don't *want* to die. So, death separates us from life. It ends life. And because of that, we hate it. It also breaks relationships. And we hate that because He made us relational beings.

But let's look in 1 Corinthians 15:54 and 55 and continue on there. Paul says:

1 Corinthians 15:54-55 – *When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"*

So the resurrection speaks to renewed relationship and new life. And that's encouraging for us. Paul said he didn't want us to suffer like others who have no hope in the resurrection. Because, if we have that hope in it, we're going to be comforted.

Don't try to fix things. We all have our problems. And nobody else can solve them for us. And, if we try to solve other people's problems that we don't have the power to solve, then it's all going to turn out badly.

The second thing is not to pity. One of the three women that I mentioned earlier, who had lost a child, told me that she hated to go to family functions for years after because she was the *one* who lost her daughter – poor thing! She couldn't stand to be thought of that way. So, don't be a pitier.

The third thing is: no judgment. "Can't you just get over it? It's been a year already. You've got to start rallying here."

So what do we put in place of all this pity and "encouragement?" Well, let's look at three things we *can* do. We've seen the three things we shouldn't do – fix, pity and judge. What *can* we do that then? You know, some people think you've just taken away the three things that they do when you take away those three things.

Well, a person can help with the day-to-day. When people suffer loss, they get depressed. And when people are depressed, everything is harder. So helping with daily efforts of living, makes

grief easier. That's why people bring food to the wake – so that it can be taken home and put in the refrigerator and the grieving at least won't have to cook. There are many others way to deal with this and to make oneself helpful.

Sensitivity is the second one. This comes from understanding what goes on when someone suffers a loss. That's why we're talking about this today – so that we can be sensitive – to know that there's no one way to grieve or set any schedule for return to activity, to realize that people are going to be disoriented and feel disconnected.

My friend, who lost his son, told me that, at the funeral, many of their friends came to them and very lovingly asked what they could do to help. And he said that he and his wife were so distraught and so disconnected they didn't know. They didn't know what they needed. But one couple said, "We can do this, or we can do this, or we can do this, or we can do this." And he said, "We knew what would help if we heard it, but we couldn't come up with those things on our own." So, have a menu to offer is one helpful thing for people.

The next thing is, if you're going to be sensitive – this is probably, actually, a fourth thing we shouldn't do – we should not give ourselves care at the expense of the grieving – "There, there, it'll be all right" – when it, quite probably, won't for a while. So, we're saying that to comfort ourselves. We know it's not going to be okay, so why do we say that?

The third thing – the third thing of three – is empathic listening. It helps to be understood. How do we let people know that we understand them? Well, I went to a funeral once where a man died, and the widow was surrounded after the service by friends and family. But her twelve-year-old son sat at the outside of the last pew in the funeral home by himself. Why would you think that would happen when just a few yards away is the widow and everybody is around her? Well, because facing a grieving child is one of the difficult things adults can do. So I eased over and sat beside him and I said nothing at first. And when he didn't comment after a while, I said, "It's such a terrible shock." And he said, "Things are never going to be the same." You know, it's *not* going to be okay. Right? And I said, "So many things...we can't even see how it's going to be yet." And he said, "I won't get to go fishing with him anymore." And I said, "You miss your father *so* much." And tears rolled down his cheeks and he put his head on my shoulder. He didn't even know me.

So, I couldn't fix it, but I could understand it. And understanding helps us connect to our feelings. And connecting to our feelings helps us move through the loss. It helps us realize we're not alone in it, too. How do you do that? What was I doing? Well, I was guessing what he was feeling and putting it into words. And when he said something that had emotional content to it, I fed it back to him in my words. And that helped him access his own feeling.

There are a lot of other things. You can get really thick books about all this, but I can never remember all that stuff. So, if you stick with these three things that we talked about that you

shouldn't do and three things that you *can* do, you're going to be way ahead of the pack on being helpful.

Now we're going to talk about the second thing – the traumatic loss recovery. We explained last time that when a loss is violent, unexpected and sudden, it's likely that survivors will be overwhelmed. So, we think about that and we think about people that have been raped, people that have relatives that have been shot in robberies...sometimes we *don't* think about people who have been in, or have had loved ones who have in automobile accidents. That's its own kind of violence. When people are exposed to that kind of loss, their resources to adapt are sometimes less than stressors they're having to adapt to. When this happens, the brain begins to improperly store memory.

Now, some people have a higher tolerance for things like this. And that's usually because they grew up in a family where they were very well supported early. They've proven that that reduces the risk of PTSD, drug addiction, all of those things.

So, when a person *is* overwhelmed, however, the traumatic part of the memory – the emotional part of it – gets stuck in the place where it was created, instead of stored in the cortex. And when this happens, predictable results ensue. It seems that no amount of talking about it helps us adapt, and the brain, somehow, needs to be healed at this point. Fortunately, God has built into our brain a self-healing mechanism.

You know, your body has mechanisms built into it to heal itself of wounds. I was reminded of that recently when I tweaked my knee and it swelled up like a balloon. It seemed like a very minor thing that happened. It didn't really hurt that much, but man, did it swell up! Well, that's my body protecting me from that. Of course the reaction can sometimes cause a problem, but it was racing blood into the area to take away the damaged stuff and to protect it, and to let me know that I shouldn't be moving around on it.

And you know about shock and all that – how our body heals itself – and it has lots of things in place to take care of that. Most diseases are self-limiting, if we just give it the right help and support. Your brain has something like that, too. And, if we access it, the frozen or stuck memory can be adaptively rewritten so that we can move past it. In fact, every night, when we sleep, our eyes move back and forth rapidly in REM sleep. And this back and forth movement is actually stimulating first the right and then the left side of your brain, and a channel is opened up, so that the stuck material on the right side can move to the left.

The professor I mentioned at the start, Dr. Bonanno, verifies that, when loss is traumatic, then people have a harder time getting over it on their own. So, we've now discovered a way to access this healing process while people are awake, focused on a specific trauma, and the results are quite dramatic.

I had a lady in my office who did therapy for two years. She told her husband one morning she was leaving him because he was a ne're-do-well – (I would have left him...) – and that afternoon, he shot himself in their bedroom, and she came home and found him dead. I mean, wow! That would overwhelm most anybody, I think. We did seven sessions of EMDR – or actually, six – and she came in for her seventh, and I said, “How’d your week go?” And she said, “Not too bad.” She said, “You know, I’ve been thinking about it, and I think I’m going to move back into the house.” Well, that’s quite a statement right there, right? She said, “I also called my husband’s family and forgave them for the way they treated me at the funeral.” She said, “I also called my sister.” She and her sister had never gotten along all their lives, but she took a step toward reconciliation with her sister. And she looked up at me, and she said, “Am I over this?” And I said, “Well, you’d be the judge of that more than I, wouldn’t you?” And she said, “I think I am.” And I asked her a few questions, and I believe I was in line with her on that one, then. So, I’m sure all the therapy that she did set her up for that and helped her a lot to be ready for it, but she just couldn’t move the traumatic part by herself, so we activated that process through EMDR, and she was over it. So, that’s a very powerful way to help people that have been traumatized.

The third thing to think about is – now that we’ve talked about non-traumatic and traumatic loss – is to talk about resources. I took a class years ago on how to help people that were in crisis – *Crisis Counseling* was the name of the class – and the instructor came in and he put a picture of the Lone Ranger – a poster of the Long Ranger – up on the board. He talked for quite a while. Finally, we asked him why that was up there, and he said, “Because, in crisis situations, you should *never* be the Lone Ranger. You should *always* engage other people to help you. Everybody that’s a first responder, everybody that’s in crisis counseling needs backup. Never forget that.”

So what resources are available to help? Well, you know, I have this book on my shelf. It’s called *Tear Soup*. It’s a picture book. It’s illustrated. It’s written like it’s for children, but it’s really for adults and children. It’s the most helpful thing I’ve ever read – of all the books I’ve read about it – about how to help somebody and how to help yourself when you’ve sustained the loss of a loved one – traumatic or non-traumatic. Very important.

The second thing to think about is local hotlines and support groups. I once facilitated a support group for mothers, whose husbands had committed suicide. At the end of the class, they all got out pens and papers and started jotting down – not the class, but the course – like a ten-week thing. Their kids were doing courses of their own with other therapist in other rooms, but all the mothers were in one place. And they all started jotting each other’s names and email addresses and phone numbers, so they could text and stay in touch, because they got support from each other in a way that I couldn’t give to them. In fact, that wasn’t my job. It was to connect them, so they could support each other. It was a support *group*, right? And there is just something about being around other people that have suffered similar losses. They can understand it in a way that other people can’t. So they help make each other feel understood. So, if you can connect people

to those things...and that's the way a facilitation is supposed to occur. That's what a facilitator's job is – not to be the focus, but to focus them on each other.

Most communities have a number of very specific groups. Albuquerque is not the biggest town in the world, but we have a lot of support groups very specifically oriented. So it's important to find one that fits the situation, if you possibly can.

This might sound strange, but pets help people a lot with things like this. I had a man in one of my congregations back east – an elderly gentleman, whose wife finally succumbed to kidney failure after ongoing courses of treatment – and his son bought him a little dog, and that helped him so much. It wasn't a replacement. It was just something new in his life. So you can think about that.

Another one is anxiety management. I pound the tom-tom about this all the time – breathing, exercise, and there's a new thing that we call posturing. You can look up the name, Lisa Cuddy, on YouTube – breathtaking research on how you hold your body determines a lot about how you feel. That's something I'm going to get into pretty soon. Exercise – one of the best things for the two worst parts of trauma – anxiety and depression – is exercise. And breathing for anxiety. If you're paying attention to your breathing, you can't be out in the future, worrying about what's coming. So, it's a good way for temporary relief to de-stress the body. So that's – let's see – the book, local hotlines, pets, and anxiety management. And then, the fifth thing – not to be discounted – is your own ability to empathize.

You know, there's a good reason why God has a church, because He knows that we can help each other instinctively with being Christians. So, you are a resource to help other people through loss. Don't underestimate it. It might be your gift.

Okay, so let's remember – no fixing, no judging, no pitying, helping with the day-to-day burden of living, be sensitive – and you do that by learning about it – and then, empathy – to understand – make an effort to understand the experience of others, instead of telling them how they feel.

Jesus said that He was coming to heal the brokenhearted. God restored Job from his trauma after Job learned what he needed to learn from it. And in neither of these cases is there any mention of EMDR. God can heal people without it. He can do it any way that He wants and He always knows what to do, but, at the same time, He's given us an amazing ability to heal ourselves of losses if we're willing to do the heart work. And by His example of dealing with others, He shows us how to be helpful to those who have suffered loss.

Until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.