

## Loss, Ghosts, and the Stages of Grief-Part II: Grieve, Let Go, and Grow with the Flow!

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Current writings about grief and ghosts have enabled the Stress Doc to appreciate parallels between *burnout* and his newly conceived and coined *burn-in*. This essay will connect emotional losses that linger and loiter and the negative energy that sows shadowy ghostly seeds. Both conditions are impacted by feelings of loss and unrecognized grief which provide a crucible for the gestation of a spectral presence the Doc calls "Grief Ghosts". Comparing and contrasting the two concepts will help individuals and companies better understand how both burnout and burn-in can set in motion an "erosive spiral" that undermines: a) personal health and learning/motivational focus, b) interpersonal communication, connection, and cooperation, as well as c) team and system productivity. Are you and your company or organization ready for some *Workplace Grief busting*?

### Loss, Ghosts, and the Stages of Grief-Part II: *Grieve, Let Go, and Grow with the Flow!*

Thinking about loss factors and being a member of that AA group Alliterations Anonymous, I couldn't help but coin the "Eight Dramatic-Depressive 'D's" – *Death, Disability, Defeat, Damage, Dysfunction, Disillusionment, Disruption, and Disorientation*. The "D"s are significant events or experiences infused with bio-psycho-social and/or economic loss. When they are cursorily connected to or disconnected from the process of grief then psychic ground is being laid for restless and roaming if not haunting post-traumatic reverberations. Over time, this hovering, lingering, loitering sense of loss, still not acknowledged or embraced, more often shunned, morphs into alienated grief, or what I call *griefghosts*. Burn-in grief ghosts sit heavy on many people's minds and bodies, hearts and souls. (Actually, in light of the number of Boomers who are showing signs of dysfunctional cognitive deficit, I'm on the verge of expanding my "D" list to include premature *Dementia*. Causing so many levels of loss, this disease is especially haunting for the individual still aware of its debilitating and dependency-inducing effects and, of course, for family members in caretaker roles).

Let me illustrate some recently encountered "grief ghosts" in my Grief Counselor role for the colleagues of a young government employee, husband and father of two, instantly killed in a "head on" vehicular collision on the way to work. (A big truck crossed over a highway dividing line). While the employee's tragic death was the immediate catalyst for the request for a consultation, many of the work folks encountered were on what I call the *emo-existential* edge because of their own long-lasting, lumbering ghosts. Ironically, my conception of grief ghosts does not necessarily entail the spectral embodiment of a deceased person. Ghosts may also arise from the loss or termination of a role or relationship, especially one insufficiently grieved.

For example, a common yet psychologically complex and multifaceted shadow now brought to light was the ghost of stormy marital or intimate relationship past, even one of seemingly ancient history – especially when tensions and tearing down had eventually become a staple of the relationship. Not only were many searing memories connected to the loss-divorce of a spouse or mate who invariably defied simply being loved or detested, but loss involved both the loss of one's role and identity as a partner, that state of *disruption, disorientation, and ego damage*. Actually, research indicates it's harder to emotionally grieve the death of a spouse from a troubled marriage than a mate from a healthier one, perhaps because the interaction of the former was a breeding ground for an array of disturbing ghosts.

In addition, even family of origin voices, often of an all too familiar and manipulative nature – that game-playing, blaming, or shaming variety – may once again overtly reverberate in this volatile land- and mindscape’s “echo-system”. Not surprisingly, this relationship rupture was frequently a shock to a person’s core self-image. And when lingering and especially long-standing, festering subterranean grief collides with crisis tremors, there’s a spectral outpouring of mythic-like effect. Akin to a band of vultures spewed from the bowels of the earth, myriad ghosts arise and circle ominously on a now haunted horizon.

### **A Swarm of Ghosts: Case Vignette**

During the above workplace crisis/grief debriefing, one County Supervisor quickly conjured up multiple ghosts from differing time periods. Interestingly, as I was wandering the office halls, making myself visible, this Supervisor was trying to convince a colleague to have a grief debriefing session with me. Not surprisingly, I had to track her down in her office before she would agree to talk. The first riveting revelation was of an older sister killed in the 9/11 World Center attack. The violent death of her colleague likely heightened the connection to her sister’s horrific demise. Her eyes quickly watered; not surprisingly she expressed surprise. But for me most noteworthy, alas, as many are wont to do, she was also apologetic for her overflow. Which begs the question: Why do so many apologize when they unexpectedly cry? My hypothesis is that: a) the bereaved individual feels it is a sign of weakness, that is, she should have basically “gotten over it” by now; or perhaps there’s that admonishing “parental-family” echo: “stop feeling sorry for yourself,” b) believes he or she is imposing their vulnerability upon or discomforting the other party, or c) the bereaved individual believes the other person views the crying as a sign of weakness; of course, this assumption may be correct, however, it may also be a projection of the crier’s critical self-judgment. (In fact, crying is your emotional wellspring. When crying out of hurt, fear, or sadness (or even joy) the mind-body becomes a safety valve and cleansing process; emotional tears not only let off pressure and tension but also literally flush out accumulated stress toxins).

This woman also recalled the stormy interaction and termination of a troubled marriage, its impact on the kids, as well as her decision to retrain professionally, eventually uprooting from family in New Jersey to take her current job in Maryland. Another reason for her volatility was that just a few days before, a somewhat close friend in his late 50s died of a heart attack. And when I asked if she had anyone to talk to at work or on the outside regarding her litany of losses, she shook her head. Over the years, the advice received from most people was, “It’s time you got over it”. Clearly, her support system was on the verge of extinction; all work and little play seemed to be sowing low grade depression. After explaining the propensity for past pain to be dredged up by crisis, I made three suggestions: a) keep grappling with the ghosts, there’s no time line for “getting over it,” b) “fight for what you need” (a mantra that she insisted would shine forth from her screensaver), and c) consider some brief EAP counseling to help with a) and b).

### **Connecting Loss, Transition, and “The Stages of Grief”**

As sad and tragic as they are, the unexpected deaths of her friend and of her colleague have also provided a poignant opportunity to open the Pandora’s Box of grief. And while numerous furies rush out, invariably sowing some chaos in their turbulent draft, many forget that the final spirit out of the box was “hope”. So consider this Stress Doc mantra: *Grieve, let go, and grow with the flow!*

From a common sense perspective, *grief* is “the cause (and expression) of intense, deep, and profound sorrow, and other strong emotional outpourings involving a specific event or situation” (*Encarta Dictionary*) triggered by a significant loss or disruptive change. We often connect loss and grief via the premature death, incapacitation, or separation of a parent, child, grandparent, sibling, or any close relative, friend, or colleague. However, as sketched in Part I, grief may be a byproduct of broad array of experiential and psychological losses and transitions. Particularly when the death, damage, defeat, disability, dysfunction, disillusionment, disruption, or disorientation (or even acknowledged dementia), is sudden or unexpected, this triggers or sets the psychological platform for a grief reaction or response. At minimum, the individual is often thrown into an early grief state-stage, such as “shock” or “denial”.

The critical question regarding a grief process is the degree to which an individual gradually and meaningfully navigates or superficially and dismissively circumvents the various stages. Do you periodically visit and revisit (or shun and block out) the complex of

emotions and memories surrounding a major or significant loss? Do you admit the daily impact of diminished mind-body functioning and grieve “what was” in order to adapt to and explore new potential and possibilities? Does the individual over time pursue in depth journeying (from group sharing to personal reflection-journaling) or avoidance and distraction (or maladaptive numbing)? The answer will likely either *generate grief growth or germinate grief ghosts*.

I will use the timely theme of job/career disruption for illustrating the “Stages of Grief” and the process of grappling with the psychological component of change, i.e., the threat, loss, and challenge of “transition”. Here are:

### **The Stress Doc’s Stages of Grief: *Discovering Purpose and Possibility in Trying Times***

With all the uncertainty and stress in our economic-job climate (not to mention natural and man-made disasters), most of us can use a refresher on how to grapple with loss and change, how to have the courage to both persist and to let go, how to transform the present danger into opportunity...how to grow stronger, wiser, and better supported-connected through genuine grief.

As I once penned:

*For the Phoenix to rise from the ashes  
One must know the pain  
To transform the fire to burning desire!*

A soon-to-be author on motivation and dealing with stress from a break-up emailed asking if he could cite the essay below, which especially looks at job loss, career transition-confusion, and uncertainty. So here are “The Stress Doc’s Seven Stages of Grief”:

### **Shock and Denial or “This Is Not Possible” or “It Can’t Happen Here!”**

It’s no big surprise when given one day’s termination notice that an employee may experience a state of shock. There’s such total confusion and disbelief that a person often goes numb; the mind-body system has to shut down. Sometimes shock follows the downplaying or denial of bad news. For example, in the early ‘90s, there was talk of significant restructuring in the US Postal Service. A number of employees took the early attitude: “We’re always dealing with change here...No big deal”. Alas, these folks didn’t count on “Carvin Marvin” Runyon becoming the Postmaster General. Talk about a shocker...Within a year 50,000 employees were restructured out of the service!

### **Fear, Panic, and Shame or “Oh God, What Do I Do Now?” or “What Will They Think Now?”**

Once the shock wears off, you are no longer numb; there are some predictable next steps, such as profound anxiety and vulnerability: how will I survive this loss of income, identity, my daily routine, my social standing, etc.? There’s a mounting sense of being out of control, which for many also evokes feelings of shame and inadequacy. And lack of control, not surprisingly, can stir up childhood memories of the same, being or feeling tormented, bullied, rejected or humiliated by family, peers, teachers, etc.

I vividly recall the lamentation of a postal supervisor on a management fast-track, quickly derailed by reorganization: “I once had a career path. Then this boulder fell from the sky and crushed it!” Is it only a career path that’s been crushed? How about the human psyche and spirit? Has it too been burnt up or burned out?

### **Rage and/or Helplessness or “How Dare They!” or “Oh No, How Could They!”**

Do you think our once fast-tracked supervisor is feeling abandoned and betrayed? Most likely. Often people in this phase swing between rage and profound sadness. Both states can be induced by deep underlying vulnerability or helplessness. You’ve been wounded, feel exposed, and just want to lash out. Or you turn the rage inward in depression and self-condemnation. Now it’s crawling under the covers escapism, or going through the motions of living or, even, straining as hard as you can to reign victorious over your basic unworthiness; to battle a fear of failure and lurking dread of being sucked into that compelling black hole of helplessness.

Consider this: in *The Random House Dictionary: The Unabridged Edition*, the first six definitions of the word “failure” describe it as an act or an instance. It’s not until the seventh and last definition that “failure” takes a personal direction. So losing a job or being confronted

with other losses and separations are often more events or individual episodes, albeit powerful ones, than a judgment upon you.

### **Guilt and Ambivalence or “Damned If You Do or If You Don’t!” or “Making a Pact with the...Spiritual”**

The feelings and old voices of guilt (not living up to an important other’s expectations or standards) and shame (violating or compromising an internalized core value or essential part of your self-identity, integrity, and esteem) can become louder and more incessant; self-directed rage keeps taunting you for shortcomings, unworthiness, fumbled dreams, etc., and can ultimately drain and demoralize you. If some energy returns or remains the battle may continue in other arenas. First, the classic approach-avoidance conflict: “Damned if I do, damned if I don’t; damned if I stay, damned if I leave”. Take the paltry severance or not; leave the faulty marriage or not. And while the uncertainty is terribly frustrating, at least there’s a struggle. It’s no longer “black or white”: you (or “they”) are not simply “evil”.

Some may turn to a spiritual source for relief or rescue: “Higher Power, just tell me what to do” or “Higher Power, I turn it over to you”. And, of course, some in desperation will proclaim newfound or “born again” allegiance if they are only saved. Yet, in the end, with or without your HP, one must get focused and cut the entangling emotional cord.

### **Focused Anger and Letting Go or “Turning a Lemon into Lemonade” and “Freedom’s Just Another Word...”**

This phase truly reveals the complexity and potential creative energy built into the grief process. To reach that powerful, purposeful, and passionate state of focused anger one must often blend (and temper) rage and sadness. Some rage can propel us out of a shocked, paralyzed, or ambivalent state. Yet, you must also face your sadness and loss and struggle with uncertainty to temper uncontrollable aggression, to make sadder yet wiser assessments and decisions. Remember, rage unchecked much more often leads to self-defeating behavior, e.g. “shooting yourself in the foot” or “putting that proverbial foot in mouth” than it does to “Going Postal!”

If you’ve worked hard to integrate the previous stages then the reward is “focused anger”: “I really don’t like what’s happened...but how do I make the best of it?” You’re ready to loosen – if not untie – the knot of hurt and humiliation. And best of all, you’re getting ready to knock on (maybe even knock down) some doors again.

### **Exploration and New Identity or “Now You’re Ready to ‘Just Do It!’” (even if scared)**

Letting go is often unnerving. It’s not just the financial security that’s at stake. But losing a job or a vital relationship also profoundly shakes our personal/professional identity. We’ve invested so much time, ego, energy, and/or money in this position, partner, or one possible outcome...Who am I without the job, without my mate or significant other? Even with the most dear and painful loss or separation, the words of Albert Camus, Nobel Prize-winning author and philosopher have the crystalline ring of essential truth:

*Once we have accepted the fact of loss we understand that the loved one [or loved position] obstructed a whole corner of the possible, pure now as a sky washed by rain.*

### **Acceptance or Relief or “The Glass is Half Empty and Half Full” or “Bittersweet”**

While submerging yourself in the stages of grief for a time will feel hellish, there truly is an opportunity for rebirth. Getting out of the black box is a distinct possibility if you can ride on and ride out this acutely emotional learning roller coaster. The grief encounter is definitely more than a one-trial learning curve. And there’s no absolute or fixed period of time for your movement through the stages. My blood starts percolating when I hear “well-intentioned” family members, colleagues, or friends say to the grieved, “Hey, it’s been three months (or even six months) already”. (On the other hand, if after two or three months, your energy level continues to drain away, don’t suffer in silence. Grief and depression can be easily confused as loss and sadness are common to both. One possible differentiating factor to consider: depression often involves internalized anger, and the energy needed to hold down an angry eruption further contributes to an exhausted-depressed state. During a grief process one’s anger, whether rational or not, is eventually acknowledged, the “cause” of the anger is more objectively if not forgivingly perceived. Aggressive energy is eventually transformed into more purposeful if not passionate focus and direction. Speak to a health professional wise in the ways of grief, burnout, anger, and/or depression).

Finally, remember, there's a real difference between "feeling sorry for yourself" and "feeling your sorrow". *When feeling sorry for yourself you are mostly blaming others. When feeling your sorrow you are demonstrating the courage to face your fears and pain.* There are poignant moments in life when we all must take time to embrace our sorrow, both alone and with caring or kindred spirits. As I once penned, reflecting on more than one soul shaking grief process: *Whether the loss is a key person, a desired position or a powerful illusion each deserves the respect of a mourning. The pit in the stomach, the clenched fists and quivering jaw, the anguished sobs prove catalytic in time. In mystical fashion, like spring upon winter, the seeds of dissolution bear fruitful renewal.*

Part III will examine key existential questions that have bearing on the development of and recovery from both burnout and burn-in. Until then...*Practice Safe Stress!*

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