

The grieving process



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Confusion about the nature of grief, the impact of different ways of coping with it, and its resolution, has continued to this day. Attig sought to chart a way out of the confusion by setting out 'the laws of sorrow', a series of empirically verifiable statements about the process of grief, derived from the literary sources available at the time. These were largely ignored by later researchers and theorists writing about grief in favour of Freud's speculations, published at about the same time, which were based on psychoanalytically framed interpretations of case studies. (Attig, 2001)

Rather than being put to the test by later empirical research, they became entrenched as the orthodox way of understanding grief, an approach which was later expanded to encompass other concepts, such as the stages of grief. By referring to three different ways of understanding grief for men and women in terms of its mental suffering, harmful physical effects, and as a natural reaction to the loss of a relationship. The way that research on grief developed over-emphasized the first two approaches, so that psychiatric, counseling and medical perspectives predominated, fuelled by the Freudian interpretative framework. I have emphasized the third way of looking at grief-as a natural human reaction. This places it in the province of biology and psychology, rather than psychiatry and counseling. Grief for both men and women can be understood as follows: in terms of its universal occurrence in the human species, whatever the culture; in terms of its derivation from simpler forms in the animal world; and as a product of the process of natural selection. From this perspective, it was possible to identify a basic form of the grief reaction shown by animals and young children. I explored the apparent paradox involved in explaining grief as a result of natural selection: grief involves a set of reactions which are harmful to an

individual's survival and reproductive chances, yet natural selection involves selection of attributes with the opposite features. However, modern evolutionary thinking emphasizes a trade-off between adaptive costs and benefits. Grief for men and women can be regarded as a cost incurred in pursuit of something which has an important adaptive consequence. Previous accounts have varied in identifying what this might be, but the most likely candidate involves the persistence of important social bonds when the other individual is absent. This is required either because most absences involve separations rather than permanent losses, or so that social relations are not built on a transient, 'out of sight, out of mind' foundation. To achieve the continuation of social relations in spite of the long- or short-term absences of the other individual, there must be mechanisms that cause a social bond to persist in the other's absence. This is achieved by having an enduring mental model of the other, which is continually checked with the input from the outside world. When there are signs of a discrepancy between this input and the mental model, an emotional reaction-distress-is generated. This account of the evolutionary significance of grief encompasses three earlier speculations (Fillion, Clements, Averill, & Vigil, 2002) which all differed in emphasis but contained two central ingredients: first, they viewed grief in terms of individual survival (rather than group-level selection); second, they viewed grief as the cost of an important feature necessary for maintaining significant social relationships (i. e. those that aid fitness). ...