

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Grief

You may say, “I don’t need to know anything about grief. No one in my family has died, and when someone does, I’ll fly home to the funeral.” If and when that happens, it may be one of your easier encounters with grief because everyone there will understand your grief, and your culture has developed rituals to enable you to resolve your grief. Although we commonly think of grief as related to the death of a loved one, there are many other causes of grief.

The dictionary defines grief as the “intense emotional suffering caused by loss of any kind.” Missionaries experience many losses that other people do not, so those people do not understand. There is no funeral or other ritual to assist in grieving over these losses. Missionaries may offer true, but over-spiritualized, platitudes in denial of the losses they experience. When people are dying and losing everything, we do not question their denial, anger, or depression before they come to accept their loss. Regarding losses other than death, missionaries may carry a load of unexpressed, unresolved grief.

More important than the “objective” severity of the loss is each person’s own interpretation of the loss. Leaving a pet may seem like a minor event to most people, but those who have had that pet for years may experience much grief. Here are several losses that may increase grief for missionaries.

Things?

Everyone understands the loss of friends and family, but what about the house, the car, the supermarket, the school, the pets,

the newspaper, and the toys? All of these, and more, are lost as you leave your passport country to become missionaries. Any, or all, may cause grief.

You may develop two homes, one in your passport country and one on the field. When you come “home,” people there cannot understand that you feel the loss of the smells, the foods, the animals, the friendliness of the people, and the music of the country where you have been serving. Losing these may cause grief when you return to your passport country.

Transfers?

Headquarters calls, and you move to another field. You lose everything you have come to love over the last months or years. Grief comes again. Perhaps this culture has become home to your teens, and when you move to the new field, your older adolescents remain with other missionaries to finish school. They may be old enough to marry a national and stay behind forever—another loss and more grief.

The field committee asks you to take over a project that has not been handled well by another missionary. However, that means leaving what you have been doing so effectively—another loss. Your new project does not take off and the one you left also declines—more grief.

Transitions?

You knew that being a missionary would mean moving even more often than other people do in our mobile culture. Built into long-term missionary life are usually at least two moves every five years, four years on the field and one at home. In addition are

the countless moves to different fields, to different places on the same field, to different states on home assignment, etc. The list of transitions seems endless.

People sometimes say IBM means “I’ve Been Moved.” In the same way, MAF may seem to mean “Move Again, Friend,” or WGM may seem to mean “We’ve Gotta Move.” Missionaries are always saying good-bye, multiple good-byes to people, places, possessions and pets—grieving for all.

The hardest transitions seem to be premature departures. How do you say goodbye when you don’t want to leave? What if there has been a moral lapse? What if you have not been able to stand up under the emotional strain? What if headquarters just said to leave your assignment or to leave the mission? What if you are leaving in an evacuation? More grief.

Travel?

Travel is exciting to many people, but to missionaries on deputation, it can be dreary. You have been away from home for several years on the field, and now you are away even more. When overseas you could not get home for the funeral of a friend (no money, no flight available, no time free), but now that you are at home, you cannot get back to the field for a funeral there—unresolved grief in both cases.

Before airplanes, travel time was a time to work through the loss, through grief. It took at least days, if not weeks, to get from country to country whether traveling by ship, train, or horse-drawn vehicle. Today missionaries finish packing, step onto the plane, and in a few hours are at their destination. They have had no time to work through the loss.

Time?

That brings us to the time it takes to grieve. Grieving rituals are different in different cultures, so grief is expected to take different times in each. Grieving always takes time, sometimes much time. It may take a few days for leaving things, weeks for leaving friends, and months for the death of a loved one. Some people say that such bereavement should be over in a couple months, but it often takes much longer. Those who try to short-circuit the grieving process may experience problems years later.

Triggers?

Long after your time of grieving seems to be over, you may suddenly feel the loss intensely again. “Triggers” (stimuli that bring back memories of the lost person, place, or thing) surprise you by suddenly reactivating the grief. You may not even realize that you saw, heard, or smelled something that brought back memories of the loss. Smell is especially likely to do this, and you will not even know why you thought of that person, place, possession or pet.

Anniversaries are particularly difficult, especially wedding anniversaries. Birthday anniversaries are another difficult time. “First’s” are also difficult, such as the first Christmas or first family reunion. Related events in others’ lives may be difficult, such as the birth of a friend’s child bringing back the loss of your own—years later, when you thought the grief was gone.

Trauma?

Missionaries may be more likely to experience traumatic situations. Other cultures may be more likely to have assault, political unrest, evacuations, bombings, killings, kidnappings, and so forth. When this happens to a missionary, others also become involved, and rightly so. Even though they did not experience the trauma firsthand, those helping also often grieve over the loss caused by the trauma.

Theology?

When a people in business get moved, they blame the company. When people in the military get moved, they blame the government. When missionaries get moved, they may blame not only administrators at headquarters, but also God himself. After all people have prayed about the move and have determined that it is God's will. God called us, he made us move, and it is his fault. Naomi's statements about God in Ruth 1:20-21 are excellent examples. Returning missionaries may feel just as she did.

What can we do about it?

- Be honest. The loss and grief you experience is real. Do not deny it; it really hurts. Do not over spiritualize it and say what a privilege it is to suffer for Jesus, if it is not. Be honest and open about your feelings of loss.
- Be informed. Reading this brochure and other material about grief helps you become informed. Realize that all of these "Ts" are especially relevant to missionaries.

- Be Christian. Too often Christians deny their feelings of grief. They may quote 1 Thessalonians 4:13 as saying that we are not "to grieve like the rest of men." Do not stop there because the rest of the verse is "who have no hope." We grieve, but like people who have hope. Look at what the Bible says:
 - Abraham grieved. Genesis 23:2
 - Jacob grieved. Genesis 37:35
 - David grieved. 2 Samuel 18:33
 - Jesus grieved. John 11:35. "Jesus wept" is one of the shortest but most important verses in the Bible. If he wept at the funeral of a friend, we certainly can grieve about our losses.
- Be missionaries. We have an excellent example of people saying good-bye to missionaries in Acts 20:17-21:1. Paul talked extensively about his leaving them, and then beginning in verse 36, note what they did:
 - They said their good-byes.
 - They knelt.
 - They prayed.
 - They wept.
 - They embraced.
 - They kissed.
 - They went to the ship.
 - They tore themselves away.

This is a good example of the grief expressed at the parting of a missionary. Paul had ministered to them two years, and such grief is normal and expected. If you do not express the grief over your losses, it may remain unresolved and return to hinder your work. Be honest informed Christian missionaries relative to your loss and grief.

Ronald Koteskey is
Member Care Consultant
New Hope International Ministries

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Ronald Koteskey
122 Lowry Lane
Wilmore, KY 40390

Phone: (859) 858-3436

e-mail: ron@missionarycare.com

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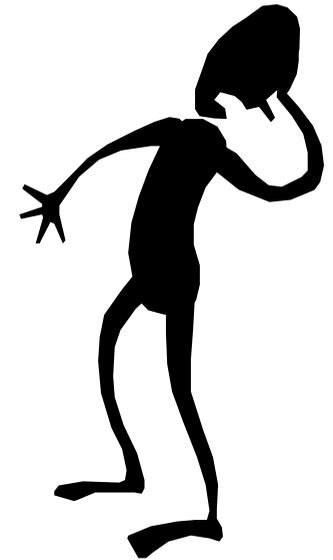
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