

# **Finding Direction in Grief**

## *An Explanation of the “Compass Model of Bereavement”*

**William G. Hoy**

Clinical Professor of Medical Humanities  
Baylor University  
Waco, Texas

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Those who have attended one of my workshops on grief support and counseling might remember being asked to close their eyes and point to the north. For me, the exercise is always great fun—as participants point in all different directions. When those in attendance are invited to open their eyes and look around, they usually laugh at the diversity of responses—and the “directional challenge” with which most seem to be afflicted!

In an unfamiliar room, we lack the landmarks that help us get our bearings. We become disoriented and do not know which way is which. This activity provides an excellent picture of what it means to walk the journey called grief. We are lost in unfamiliar terrain, desperately needing a compass.

Now more than two decades in development (Hoy, 1993, 1996, 2007), the Compass Model grows out of a Grounded Theory research perspective (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), directly resulting from clinical experience with hundreds of bereaved people.

### ***Finding Direction in Grief***

Whether settling frontiers or exploring new reaches of outer space, the greatest discoveries are preceded by a period in which the voyager is unsure where he is going, perhaps even a period of being completely lost. A compass is needed to find our direction in grief.

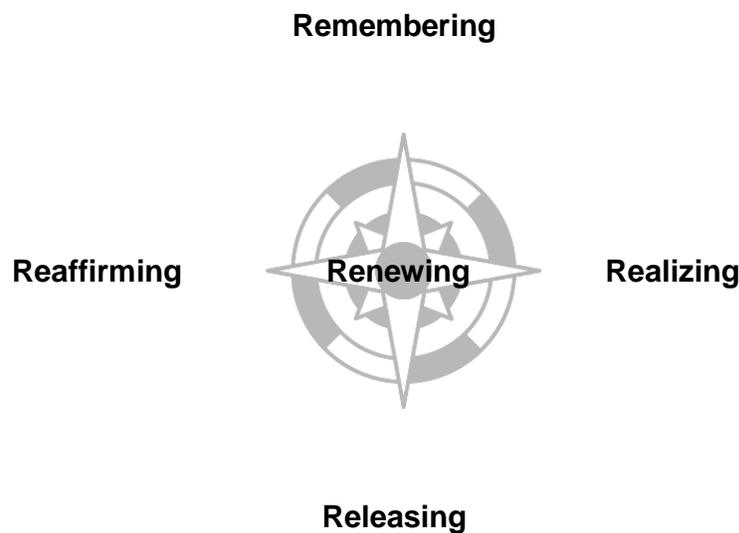
The four points on a compass provide a useful picture of the grief process—remembering, reaffirming, realizing, and releasing. As the diagram shows, the grief process gradually leads to a sense of renewal. Here, the bereaved person lives with the memories, experiences the loss, and learns to live a life that no longer includes the physical presence of the loved person who has died.

I call these “adaptive actions” rather than stages or phases, and that word choice is deliberate. As grieving people, I do not believe we “progress through” a group of stages, implying some rigid sequential ordering of experiences. Rather, we take action to the extent of our emotional ability on each of these adaptations, revisiting them multiple times in the process of mourning. Often, I find bereaved people are working on two or three of them simultaneously and there is certainly no prescribed order to them.

## ***Remembering***

When we *remember* a loved one's life, we recast his or her life and the relationship shared. Recalling the significant events, the funny stories, and the occasions when survival seemed to be a long shot—all aid us in finding a place in life today for the relationship that has been disrupted by a death.

One of the most helpful resources for people in grief is their memories. Bereavement groups, counselors who work with bereaved people, and friends of the bereaved help most when they provide plenty of time for people in grief to “tell their story,” including the minute, mundane stories that make up a life and a relationship.



Recounting these memories usually evoke some mixture of joy and sadness. We cry in telling even the funny stories and remembering the most quirky of character qualities. In early grief, both pleasant and unpleasant memories are accompanied by sadness, but it will not always be so. One goal of the grief process is being able to recall these memories without the heart-rending pain now being experienced.

Grief groups, for example, provide the opportunity for participants to share memories, stories, and photographs. Because other group members usually did not know each others' loved ones, they can hear the stories without correcting or supplementing.

Provocative questions encourage the sharing of these stories. For example, ask, “What are the times of day that hold the most vivid memories for you? and “When and where are you when you find yourself missing your loved one the most?”

In support groups, I invite participants to bring photographs to one group meeting so we can all “meet” the people who have been important in the lives of the group members. Remembering the life of a loved one begins the process of finding direction in grief.

As important as the stories are, however, remembering is not just about storytelling; it is also about clarifying values. The stories shared by bereaved people point to the unique virtues that characterized the now-dead loved one. Generous, hard-working, patient, compassionate, joyful, peace-loving and teachable are just a few of the qualities that might have characterized this individual.

The meaning that is often found in a loved-person’s death turns on the “gifts” that individual imparted in the lives he or she touched. When a bereaved person says, “This person changed my life,” they usually mean, at least in part, “These are the characteristics of his or her life I will not only remember, but perhaps even, apply in my own life.” Implicit in the sharing of stories is the honoring of the values that made this relationship truly valuable.

### ***Reaffirming***

Bereavement also calls for reaffirming of values. This compass point challenges a bereaved person to consider life’s values and the spiritual “moorings” that provide an anchor in the loss. For many people, religious faith provides the cornerstone for this reaffirmation, and so they reaffirm their faith heritage through worship, prayer, or scripture reading.

Bereaved people find reaffirmation in the inspirational writings of Helen Steiner Rice, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Greenleaf Whittier. The melodies and lyrics of hymns and other uplifting music also provide opportunity for reflection and reaffirmation in grief. The stirring biographies of people who overcame great odds to live out their dream and purpose for life can also be very engaging for people in grief.

The death of a loved one raises spiritual questions unlike any other of life’s transitions. Even people who have given little thought to faith questions before find themselves grappling with those issues in bereavement. This exploration of faith is what provides the backdrop to reaffirmation, even when bereavement involves anger at God and cries about the seeming injustice of suffering.

Interestingly, during my 16 years of practice as a clinical counselor with a southern California hospice and community bereavement organization, I found that even non-religious people engage in this process. The fact that a bereaved parent, for example, does not have a conventional set of religious beliefs does not preclude him or her from finding spiritual meaning in the death of a child. Though I worked with a few hundred bereaved parents in my clinical years, I do not recall a single instance in which I met a parent who, at the death of her or his child, believed that child ceased to exist. While they might not have emotionally located that child to Heaven, Paradise, or a specific eternal place of bliss, I did not encounter parents who did not have that child located somewhere. Whether the child is a “star shining down at night” or a “spirit all around me,” the point is that a very important spiritual exercise was being undertaken by these bereaved parents as they endeavored to make sense of their loss.

Remember that often the road to reaffirmation includes spiritual searching or even a full-blown crisis of faith. No bereavement support person should be afraid to engage bereaved people in a discussion of how they find reaffirmation in their bereavement.

### ***Realizing***

Because of our natural tendency to deny the facts of a loved one's death, the grief process also calls us to *realize* that the death has occurred. Professional grief caregivers nearly unanimously agree that seeing the body after death plays a vital role in this process of realization.

While it is helpful to see the body in a hospital bed shortly after death, my experience suggests it is also important to see the body in a casket—the most familiar symbol of death in our culture. You should be prepared for people in your work, however, for whom this experience was not possible or not chosen.

Western society is generally antagonistic to the idea of death. One poignant activity to engage in with support group participants, for example, is to invite them to share their favorite death euphemisms, the terms we use to avoid having to say that someone has died. Pointing out to those you support that our culture is not generally very comfortable with death helps explain why so many of their friends seem at a loss for words (or at least the helpful kind!) or may even seem to avoid the grieving person altogether. Bereaved people will jokingly recount their favorites: *crossing over*, *pushing up daisies*, *lost him*, *gone to his reward*, and of course the ubiquitous, *passed away*.

Traditional symbols of mourning and the ceremonies of funerals help. The funeral procession, the service in a church or other familiar place, and the viewing of the body in a casket all aid in realizing that death has occurred and that the family and community relationships have been interrupted. You can also invite groups or individuals into a discussion of diverse kinds of funeral and memorial gatherings (Hoy, 2013; Long, 2009).

Saying in a support group or a training class, "Funeral and memorial ceremonies help us with our grief in many different ways. Will you tell us a little today about how your family said goodbye to your loved one." Especially in a diverse group, the descriptions alone may elicit a lively discussion as group members hear about the customs practiced by other members of the group.

To follow up this discussion, I have often asked, "What parts of the ceremonies we have been talking about have worked for you? What parts of your own ceremonies did not seem to help? What parts of the other group members descriptions have you particularly liked?"

For all of their diversity, death ceremonies include some remarkably common elements in nearly all cultures. Far from being "barbaric" as some suggest, these customs provide an invaluable foundation for healing to begin.

### ***Releasing***

The fourth need humans share in adjusting to loss is the necessity of saying goodbye to a loved one's physical presence and the interaction possible in human relationships. In other words, we must begin to *release* our loved one as we begin to move into a world from which he or she is absent. Of course, no magical formula or "do it once, get it over with" incantation exists to say goodbye.

In some ways, we spend the rest of our lives saying goodbye. Going into a restaurant frequented together requires a new widower to say goodbye. Finding "new homes" for the personal possessions treasured by her son requires a bereaved mom to say goodbye. Redecorating a room filled with reminders of the relationship shared with her husband requires a young widow to say goodbye.

The process of bereavement is really about finding new, rich ways to live life fully, even in the absence of our loved ones. This is fundamentally what "release" is all about.

### **Renewing**

I have been resistant to refer to the adaptive action of "renewing" as a fifth dimension on my four-point compass, and its presence is a more recent addition (since about 2009). Renewing is more than a goal of the grief process but it is probably a good way to describe "the end game." When a loved one dies, we are faced with a series of choices that lead either to adaptation to a new way of living in a radically changed world, or, to grief that remains debilitating.

While grief is never really ended, the dysfunction of grief typically does. Early in the process, bereaved individuals report difficulty sleeping and eating, trouble with concentration, unremitting sadness, anger, fear, or guilt, and a diversity of spiritual challenges. However, research evidence into this phenomenon of "complicated grief" indicates that the vast majority of individuals do find renewal and a renewed sense of functionality in the wake of loss. Some individuals seem to adapt in a matter of months while others require a year or two and there are likely many factors that lead to these time differences.

What does not happen for bereaved people, however, is a finding of "closure" or "getting over it." Those terms do not offer adequate respect to the long-term nature of loss, implying instead that we magically find "recovery" in short order and get on with the rest of our lives. The grief that is occasioned by a death-related loss is much more like an amputation to which the patient *adapts* than it is like a bad bruise or broken bone from which the patient *recovers*.

Nevertheless, some of the world's most powerful movements of change have occurred out of the context of a loss. Millions of dollars have been raised for cancer research and treatment because bereaved individuals started organizations to raise money and awareness. Mothers against Drunk Driving (MADD) was not started by a disinterested college student who decided to start a nonprofit organization as a school project; this world-changing movement was begun by a bereaved California mother whose own teenaged daughter was killed at the hands of an impaired driver. Parents whose teens and young adult children were killed in road crashes or who died by suicide have been instrumental in raising awareness, often as a memorial bearing the name of their own children. The vast majority of peer-led bereavement support groups are shepherded by individuals who have first lived through their own painful experiences of loss.

So the process of renewing –and really all of the process of grief--is how bereaved people live out their grief for the rest of their lives, always discovering new vistas to be enjoyed and new pathways to explore. In a word, bereaved people are not generally ruined by their losses. Instead, they are transformed by them.

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