

Chapter 4

Grief on Pause: Understanding the Concept of Grief Avoidance Behaviors

Tobi Yvette Russell

Central Michigan University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the experience of grief that focuses on avoidance. Avoidance can be adaptive in certain situations, including in some cultural practices. However, at other times, avoidance can be maladaptive for the griever. When avoidance is maladaptive for the griever, both physical and emotional concerns can cause long-term difficulties for the grieving process. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with an understanding of grief avoidance behavior. The chapter will describe the common patterns that are seen in grief avoidance behavior, types of experiences leading to grief avoidance behavior, the physical and emotional outcomes of grief avoidance behavior, various assessment tools for grief avoidance behavior and evidence-based treatment for prolonged grief disorders. Dr. Wolfelt created a framework of common patterns of grief avoidance that included: the postponer, the displacer, the replacer, the minimizer, and the somaticizer.

INTRODUCTION

Grief is one of the most universal experiences that human beings have in their lives. For many, the grief experience is accompanied by sadness, loneliness, and despair. Others express anger, numbness, confusion and/or guilt (Ang, 2023). People can also report positive feelings such as happiness, contentment, and acceptance of the loss as well. However, one significant component of grief can also be grief-related avoidance or what this author calls grief on pause. When one avoids, it is typically to

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escape distressing emotions, to escape emotionally intense situations, or to manage the impact of the loss (Meichenbaum & Myers, 2016).

Avoidance can be an adaptive way for some to deal with grief. Some grievors struggle to detach from thinking about the loss and the thoughts are in the form of rumination. Rumination in bereavement is defined as a “conscious, recurrent, repetitive, and self-focused thinking process that revolves around the death, the deceased person, and the feelings associated to the bereavement experience” (Tang, 2022). Rumination in bereavement is seen through three different lenses: as a way to cognitively process the loss, as a way to avoid coping with the loss, or as a way to confront coping with the loss. Cognitively processing the loss is seen as an adaptive form of grieving that promotes growth. Avoiding coping with the loss is when the griever is not able to deal with the emotional pain in reality and removes themselves from the grieving process. Confronting the coping process occurs when the grieving individual solely focuses on the negative emotions of grief (Tang, 2022). When an individual ruminates to confront the coping, the behavior was seen as making the emotions worse instead of making them better. In fact, severe ruminators became so avoidant of reality that they were not aware of stimuli (Eisma et al., 2021).

While ruminating about grief work is counterproductive, suppression of grief also does not help individuals cope over time (Eisma, Lang & Boelen, 2020). In fact, there are studies that indicate deliberate grief avoidance was a precursor to poor adjustment to loss (Eisma, Lang & Boelen, 2020). Avoidance is seen as a symptom that maintains maladaptive grief reactions.

Grief is not the only concern that people try to avoid. For example, phobias are behaviors that individuals also try to avoid in an effort to feel better. However, what has been learned over time is that to gain relief from a phobia, individuals need to approach, not avoid the feared object. Avoiding the object may help in the short-term, but long-term deliberate avoidance maintains the fear.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a global concern that had wide-reaching implications due to the contagiousness and severity of respiratory disease. Due to these and other factors, physical distancing measures and lockdowns were put in place to protect individuals prior to access to a vaccine. Several research studies found increases in psychological concerns including higher levels of anxiety and stress. In one international study, that looked at 1408 individuals living in Italy and ranging in age from 18 to 88 years old, researchers set out to explore the role of anxiety, coping strategies and defense mechanisms as they related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gori et al., 2021).

Participants completed four different measures including the Ten-Item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory-Form X3 (STAI-X3), the Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced-New Italian Version (COPE-NVI) and the Forty Item Defence Style Questionnaire (DSQ-40). The study found that avoid-

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