

Unveiling the "Myths" in The Truth about Grief

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Editor's Note: Referenced page numbers are to the electronic (Amazon Kindle) edition of the book. In its electronic form, the book retails for \$ 12.90 but can be read on a personal computer with free software downloaded from Amazon. We invite your comments on the blog at <http://griefconnect.wordpress.com>.

Rarely do I bother to comment on one or another of the media reports critical of those who provide counsel and care to the bereaved. Occasionally, however, the untruths and half-truths are so egregious as to require response. In my opinion, this is the truth about "investigative journalist" Ruth Davis Konigsberg's new book, *The Truth about Grief: The Myth of its Five Stages and the New Science of Loss* (Simon & Schuster, 2011). Though unlikely to become a *New York Times* bestseller, the volume is getting quite a bit of play in the media, with citations and/or reviews in such places as *Macleans*, *Time*, *CBS News*, *Library Journal*, *Boston Globe* and *The New Yorker*.

What is most interesting about Konigsberg's book is its goal to discredit an idea that has already long-sense been discredited. She verbally assaults the "grief culture"—a term she uses 16 times in the book—by suggesting we should quit using the Kübler-Ross 5-stage understanding of grief, a model of grief that most of us quit using decades ago or never started using in the first place! As I wrote on the amazon.com review of the book a few weeks ago, her book would have been appreciated if she would only have written 40 years earlier.

Early on, John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parkes (1970) were pointing out the idiosyncratic, highly personal nature of bereavement, an idea that had already been popular in their work long before Kübler-Ross, anyway.

Kübler-Ross' five stages are ubiquitous in the non-grief-specialist culture, to be sure, but that is largely due to *her* industry—the news media. The media quotes the "stages" as unadulterated truth after every cataclysmic event. Their universal appeal is not, as she supposes, because counselors working with the bereaved use them. In its review of the book, the *New Yorker* writes simply, "In her new book, *The Truth About Grief*, Ruth Davis Konigsberg sends a liberating message: there's no 'right' way to respond to a loss" (Le, 2011). Really? And that is supposed to be "revolutionary?"

In the fourth edition of his landmark grief counseling textbook, J. William Worden (2009) wrote, "Even though the mourning tasks apply to all death losses, how a person approaches and adapts to these tasks can be quite varied. A one-size-fits-all approach to grief counseling or grief therapy is very limiting" (p. 8). Worden continues, "I have affirmed in each edition of this book (the first was in 1982) that every person's experience of grief is unique to him or her, and people's experiences shouldn't be saddled with the term 'abnormal grief'" (p. 8).

The reason for Konigsberg's fixation on Kübler-Ross is unclear, except that she concedes she was exposed to the theory in a high school psychology class. For reasons she does not explain, the book contains 110 references to Kübler-Ross. By contrast, four voices of far greater

influence in bereavement counseling over the last three or four decades get much less play: Colin Murray Parkes, J. William Worden and Therese Rando each attract less than 25 references in the book, even though in every case, their level of scholarly publication and usefulness in the field greatly exceeds that of Kübler-Ross. University of Memphis Professor Robert A. Neimeyer, one of the most prolific scholars in bereavement over the last three decades, merits only three mentions in Königsberg's entire text. Such oversight looks more like "axe-grinding" than responsible journalism.

Königsberg is correct that many people, likely including some readers of *GriefConnections*, rely on Kübler-Ross' five stages to explain grief. But this doesn't mean that the so-called grief culture (ie specialist counselors) do so regularly. In fact, though she is highly critical of the Association for Death Education and Counseling, I don't recall hearing Kübler-Ross quoted as an authority in an ADEC meeting in years. Rather, among specialists in grief, Kübler-Ross is generally seen as an important pioneer whose work is viewed as an historical event with little present practical utility.

Königsberg is particularly critical of the lack of scientific validity behind much grief counseling, and she is correct that Kübler-Ross' work was never empirically justified. Unfortunately, her own book violates the very principles of good science she says she espouses. That the book is so filled with conceptual errors and historical inaccuracies is, in my judgment, its greatest flaw.

She asserts that the advent of arterial embalming during the American Civil War, for example, gave rise to the custom of wakes (p. 26) but seems unaware of the ample evidence that a wake was held for St. Patrick when he died in Ireland about 1,400 years ago (O'Leary, 1874, p. 332) and that the custom has been widely practiced around the world for centuries (Metcalf & Huntington, 1997).

From the very beginning, she writes as if she is the first person to critique Kübler-Ross' work, but scholars and bereavement specialists were challenging Kübler-Ross' work from the initial publication in 1969, a fact Königsberg almost forgets to mention. Scientific investigation of bereavement has been going on for many years and the results, like with most fields of scientific inquiry, are not always conclusive. However, that doesn't mean we give up our quest to inform our practices by the latest research.

And of course, she is right that research findings that appear to challenge the conventional wisdom are received with skepticism; I imagine the same can be said when groups of cardiologists, geologists, neuroscientists and engineers hear research results that appear to disprove deeply held theories, notions and convictions.

Nevertheless, for all of its flaws, there are lessons that should be learned from Königsberg's book; in the remainder of this article, I will articulate the four I believe are most important.

Don't quote "common wisdom" as truth. The uninformed have often quoted as "truth" principles that the facts simply don't support. Königsberg correctly points out, for example the non-factual basis to the common wisdom that married couples divorce far more often following the death of a child; my own internet search revealed websites reporting (without documentation, I might add) divorce rates among bereaved parents from 40% to 70%. From earliest days in my career, I have heard people tout this conventional wisdom, likely based on an intuitive sense of how difficult it is when a child dies.

However, there is no factual basis for this accepted wisdom. Rather, some studies have even indicated a divorce rate *lower* among bereaved parents than among the general population (Rando, 1986, pp. 29-30). After reviewing 100 studies about parental adjustment after a child's death, Murphy, Johnson & Lohan (2003) found only two studies supported the notion that couples divorce more often following a child's death; their own study of parents in the state of Washington revealed a 5-year divorce rate of 9% while statewide divorce rates hovered at 60% (p.362).

Clearly, counselors working with bereaved people must be extremely cautious about quoting conventional wisdom, even when it seems intuitively correct. Often, the common sense is simply wrong.

Remember that complicated grief is the exception, not the rule. Konigsberg is fond of quoting George Bonanno's work throughout the book (although she still references him only 35 times to Kübler-Ross' 110). Bonanno's research, reported in his 2009 book, *The Other Side of Sadness*, indicated what many already know from practice—less than 20% and perhaps closer to 10% of bereaved people have bereavement complicated enough to require professional intervention.

Since the other 80% or so will move adaptively through their experience with bereavement, Konigsberg asserts, they are really not in need of support from “the grief culture.” She asserts that in previous generations, the role of grief counselor “was usually played by someone in the person's existing support network, or perhaps a priest or psychotherapist (p. 115). She quotes psychiatrist Sally Satel in asking, “Are our priests and rabbis not up to the task? Are our families' instincts to comfort not keen enough? (p. 116)

What seems to be lost on both Konigsberg and Satel is that only about 30% of North Americans have any meaningful connection to a faith community (Hadaway and Marler, 2005, p. 318) and the number whose families are scattered geographically and/or emotionally is probably quite a bit higher. Bereavement support groups, hospice telephone follow-up volunteers, and other specially-trained supportive people likely create a lifeline for many of these bereaved individuals (Barlow, et.al., 2010), a fact attested to when one actually interviews large numbers of bereaved people.

Unfortunately, Konigsberg's “evidence” for the unhelpfulness of such strategies is largely based on her interpretation from memoirs published, for example, by widows and widowers from 9/11, hardly what one would consider a representative sample of bereaved people.

Most grieving people are extraordinarily resilient, a fact well-documented in the bereavement literature. In fact, *Death Studies* and *Omega*, the two most widely-respected journals in the bereavement field (which Konigsberg also criticizes) have published at least a half-dozen studies on bereavement resiliency in the last four years alone.

Don't confuse grief with trauma responses. Konigsberg makes a strategic conceptual error throughout her book by mixing up trauma responses and grief responses. In the context of criticizing the “grief culture,” she notes more than 9,000 mental health workers flooded into the area around the World Trade Center after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (pp. 136-37). Of course, the Association for Death Education & Counseling, whom she blames for much of this “helping culture” has fewer than 2,000 members internationally, the vast majority of whom, because of transportation disruptions, could not have gotten to New York if we had wanted to.

A more important point, of course, is that most of these people were not likely grief specialists. In all probability, many (if not most) of these volunteers were professionals and laypersons trained in Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) protocols and other trauma-response techniques.

However, the involvement of these specialists after an event like 9/11 would seem appropriate since some evidence supports early intervention with trauma survivors and most evidence supports the separation of trauma responses from grief responses. Echoing the words of others, Worden (2009) writes, "Current wisdom suggests that post-traumatic stress symptoms should be clinically addressed before grief work can be done" (p. 191). Nearly two decades ago, Rynearson and McCreery (1993) said that traumatic imagery "impair the more introspective and reflective demands of acknowledging and adjusting to the loss" (p. 260).

"Monday-morning quarterbacking" is a popular pastime, much enjoyed by Konigsberg's colleagues in the sports media. It does, however, seem disingenuous to denigrate the efforts of hundreds of concerned professionals who volunteered their time and many of whom, by Konigsberg's account, walked to the Red Cross center in lower Manhattan. Undoubtedly we would all do some things differently if we now had a "do-over" on the response to 9/11 but Konigsberg's criticism is cruel and mean-spirited, depreciating the valuable, compassionate service rendered without cost by many in those early days and weeks after that epic tragedy.

Use science as a helpful guide but not the *only* guide. Not everything valuable in life can be quantified by the scientific method. The verdict is still out, and likely will be for many years to come, on just how much good is done for bereaved people who are supported by hospice bereavement programs, children's bereavement centers, church grief groups and funeral home aftercare programs. Even if we could study and quantify every intervention, the variables of such research often become confounding.

Although she briefly quotes them in other contexts, Konigsberg ignores the seminal paper written by John Jordan and Robert Neimeyer (2003) that answers much of her angst about the research findings in bereavement. In calling for future research, they conclude, "As noted previously, there is a distinct possibility that most research-based interventions are too weak and poorly timed to show efficacy, whereas many interventions delivered in clinical settings might prove more effective" (p. 779).

Bereavement is not, as some have suggested, above scientific observation. While it is certainly a matter of the heart and soul, it also presents clinically-observable phenomenon. Like all of the behavioral sciences, we have made incredible strides in adapting clinical strategies for counseling and support to the best empirically-based studies. Like other fields, bereavement counseling is a specialty that is morphing daily in its quest to find the best evidence-based approaches to care.

In her quest to denigrate the "grief culture," she fails to mention that most people providing bereavement services are not paid particularly well and that many volunteer their time, receiving no money at all. Pathways Volunteer Hospice, the bereavement program where I "hang my clinical hat," for example, has two part-time clinicians and one ¾-time clinician, receiving aggregate pay of less than \$ 60,000 annually. While we see some people with complicated bereavement individually, most of the more than 500 bereaved children, teens and adults we serve annually are helped by caring volunteers who give generously of their time.

This month, Bill Pitt, one of our longest tenured volunteers is “retiring” at the age of 82 after leading a bereavement support group for 11 years and never receiving one dime in monetary compensation. Though Konigsberg never mentions the fact, the vast majority of bereavement centers listed on the website of the *National Alliance for Grieving Children* are exactly like ours—non-profit centers who daily earn the gratitude of families who have been helped a little or a lot in putting their lives back together after experiencing losses most North Americans are delighted to not even be able to imagine. And I’m pretty sure if you interview a few of those families, you’ll hear the *real* truth about grief.

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