



SESSION 4:

How loss shows up in caregiving



Universal experience of loss

As we live our life, moment by moment, our lives change. The seasons change, children grow up and friends move away. Change always brings new things and it means saying goodbye to things - to places, situations and to people. Each time we say goodbye to something or someone, we might feel strong emotions and grief.

It can be comforting to remember that loss is a natural part of being human. While people's individual losses may be different to one another, we all experience loss. We can't avoid it. This fact reminds us that we are connected to everyone else.

Experiencing loss as a caregiver

As a caregiver you may feel you have lost your independence, your employment, certain friends or part of your identity (e.g. as a working professional).

Taking the time to honor and process your own loss can make it easier to support the person you care for as they experience their losses. If you are overwhelmed by your own sadness you won't have the space to support anyone else with their sadness. You need to care for yourself in order to provide the best care to your loved one.

Experiencing loss and grief is not easy and can bring up powerful and unpleasant emotions and we often push them away, or pretend they are not there. Instead, try paying attention to what is experienced, at that moment without judging whether it is good or bad. This way we can learn to accept all emotions - happiness and sadness. None of the feelings are "wrong" or "not allowed."

- Some things you can do to work with your own loss are to...
 - Write a list of the major things you have lost in your life and see which emotions show up.
 - Find or make an object in memory of something or someone no longer in your life, and place it somewhere special in your home.
 - Light a candle in your home that you dedicate to something or someone no longer in your life.
 - Ask a close friend if they are comfortable talking with you about loss and share your thoughts and feelings.

Supporting the person you care for in their loss

You may see the person you care for losing physical strength and cognitive ability but also losing their identity as an independent person who plays sports, has a job or does their own shopping. **You do not need to be any kind of expert to support someone experiencing loss.** It can be helpful to simply let the person you are caring for talk about their feelings.

The most difficult part of dealing with someone else's grief can be how to start a conversation when they do not seem to know how to ask for support. One way to begin a conversation when you think you are seeing signs of grief could be to ask a question about the emotion and follow up with a question about where the emotion comes from.

- *Are you feeling sad today? What do you think this sadness is about?*
- *You seem like you are angry at the moment, do you want to talk about it? Is there anything in particular you're angry about?*
- *Is there something troubling you? Is there anything you would like to discuss?*

Remember:

- It can be uncomfortable to talk about loss, but feeling uncomfortable is completely natural and you are not alone.
- If you begin to feel overwhelmed by what the other person is sharing you can focus part of your attention on your breathing or feel your feet on the floor.
- The aim of the conversation is not to solve the problem, or make the person happy but to give them space to talk. It may take months or years for grief to pass or it may never fully pass. It is not your job to take away someone else's grief but by giving them space to talk about it you may reduce the suffering they feel.

Homework exercise

- Be aware of endings when they occur, and how you respond to them. Notice what comes up - avoidance, sadness, appreciation, anger, etc.
- Invite the person you care for to talk about something that has changed in their life. You might ask, *is there anything that has changed in your life recently that you would like to talk about?* If the person you care for does not want to discuss change or loss, let them know you are available to talk if and when they want to.

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