

SESSION 5

GRIEF AND LOSS

Session Goals

In this session, group members will:

- Develop a deeper understanding of the grieving process
- Discuss barriers to grieving after the experience of MST
- Recognize and honor any losses incurred because of the experience of MST

Session Content

Setting the Agenda

- A. Introduce grief and loss.** Grief is the acute pain that follows a loss. Most people associate grief with the loss of a loved one, but we can experience grief after losing anything. This includes losing physical objects such as relationships, work, and health, or intangible objects such as time, pride, and honor. Grief can be a painful, confusing experience overwhelmed by many feelings (e.g., fear, loneliness, betrayal, depression, helplessness, hopelessness, yearning).
- B. Review session objectives.** The goals of this session are to gain a deeper perspective on grief and how to honor what was lost.

Opening Exercise (optional) - “Favorite Childhood Memory”

- A. Set up.** None.
- B. Review instructions.** Ask each group member to share a favorite memory from childhood. For any group members having difficulty thinking of a favorite childhood memory, you may ask them to share a favorite place to which they have traveled. **This exercise shows that nothing lasts forever, even the things that we love.** Group members may notice, when recalling the memory, a sense of joy and sadness. These feelings are a natural response to remembering a happy moment that we may wish still existed.

What It Means to Grieve

- A. Discuss Kübler-Ross’ (2005; 1972) stages of grief; elicit examples for each stage.**

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- **Denial.** We experience strong feelings of disbelief and may minimize the loss. This stage is characterized by feeling shocked, confused, fearful, or even elated. Avoidant behavior is not uncommon during this stage.
- **Anger.** In this stage, there is a focus on unfairness or revenge. As we adjust to our new reality, anger and outrage are usually the first emotions that are released.
- **Bargaining.** There comes a time when we feel desperate and are willing to do anything to ease the pain. We may make a variety of promises, often to a higher power, to get a better outcome. Self and other blame may persist during this stage.
- **Depression.** We come to realize that the loss really happened. No more bargaining takes place as we try to comprehend what happened. The sadness grows. We may withdraw for a period or begin reaching out for support.
- **Acceptance.** This stage involves no longer feeling pain of the loss or avoiding reality. Sadness and regret may linger, but denial, bargaining, and anger have subsided. We begin to find a new purpose in life.

B. Mention that the grieving process is not sequential. We can skip stages, get stuck at one stage indefinitely, or cycle through the process multiple times. You may ask group members which stage resonates with them the most in their efforts to heal from the impact of MST right now.

C. Discuss potential barriers to grieving the experience of MST.

- **One potential barrier is a need to delay grief until a more acceptable time.** Survivors of MST may need to maintain status quo, which can mean postponing their reactions to loss until a later time. Unfortunately, unresolved grief may fester making emotional reactions stronger with time.
- **Another potential barrier is that mourning after sexual trauma is “disenfranchised.”** Disenfranchised grief is mourning that is or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly recognized, or socially supported by others. Survivors of sexual trauma are not afforded the same right to grieve openly in public as combat survivors, for example. This, however, may be changing with the rise of the #metoo movement.

D. Brainstorm other potential barriers with the group.

Grieving for What Should Have Been

A. Discuss types of losses following MST. You may ask (or have group members write on page 31 of the patient workbook) about any personal, professional, or health-related “injuries” they incurred because of experiencing MST. Another way of thinking about

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losses is having group members imagine how their lives would have been different had they not experienced MST. Examples of losses may include early separation from military, loss of career, compromised safety and trust, disruption in future plans, dishonorable feelings, low self-esteem, poor health, and unstable relationships. Specifically following a military sexual assault, survivors may also feel a loss of innocence if it was a first or early sexual experience.

Note: Be prepared for the possibility that group members may become emotional during this activity. It can be difficult accepting the reality of what happened and how it changed the course of their lives.

Honoring What You Lost

- A. Brainstorm ideas for acknowledging, recognizing, or commemorating MST-related losses.** Even if group members are not actively working toward the acceptance stage of the grieving process, they can think about ways to show appreciation for what was lost or never was because of the impact of MST. If it helps, ask group members to think about what they have gained since experiencing MST.

Closing Exercise - "Like A Tree" Meditation

A. Set up. None.

B. Read the following script at a slow, steady pace.

"To begin, find a comfortable position. You may close your eyes or look at a neutral point on the floor. Imagine that you are a mighty tree (pause). Plant your feet firmly on the floor, as though you are stretching your roots down into the ground. Notice the gentle tension in your feet as you press your soles against the ground (pause). Now straighten your spine and let your shoulders relax. Imagine yourself becoming more stable as your sturdy trunk rises upward toward the sky (pause). As you breathe in, feel yourself growing taller and stronger, planting yourself firmly in the earth (pause).

Slowly move your attention up your body, settling on your trunk. Your trunk includes your chest, shoulders, and stomach. Focusing on your trunk, take notice of your straight posture (pause). Breathe deeply and slowly, noticing the rise and fall of your chest (pause). Imagine air filling your lungs on the inhale, and gently release the air until your lungs are empty (pause). Take another deep breath (pause). And exhale (pause for 1-2 minutes).

Now expand your attention in every direction like the branches of a tree. Get a sense of where you are by noticing any sounds that you can hear (pause for 30 seconds). Now

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notice anything you can feel or touch (pause for 30 seconds). Notice any smells in the room (pause for 30 seconds). Notice how your mouth feels (pause for 30 seconds). And, lastly, imagine things that you saw in the room before this exercise began (pause of 15 seconds).

Take a few more deep breaths, embracing everything that surrounds you (pause). When you are ready, begin moving your attention back down the tree from your branches to your sturdy trunk to your firmly planted roots (pause). Take a final deep breath, and open your eyes.”

Homework (Optional)

- Practice the “Like A Tree” meditation once a day
- Complete the “Honoring What Was Lost Activity Planning Worksheet” SMART goals (found in Additional Resources section of patient workbook and Appendix B in manual)