Grief
A Guide to Providing Chaplain Care

Description and Background
This guide seeks to assist MChapUSA chaplains in understanding the nature of grief as well as how to provide basic chaplain care to those who are grieving. For purpose of this guide as well as for understanding the scope of chaplain care, the definition of grief is expanded to include other kinds of loss in addition to the death of a relative or loved one.

There are four objectives to this guide:
1. to recognize the causes, degrees and symptoms of grief
2. to provide a brief overview of the process of grief
3. to offer guidance to chaplains in their role of providing care to those experiencing grief
4. to provide chaplains with resources they can use in providing this care

I. The Causes, Degrees and Symptoms of Grief

June Hunt states that “Grief is a heart response to hurt, a painful emotion of sorrow caused by the loss or impending loss of someone or something that has deep meaning for us.”

Causes
The type of grief a chaplain most frequently encounters is usually connected to the death of a close relative, friend or loved one. Since death is a natural part of human experience and sooner or later touches every person or family, grief due to the death of a loved one is widespread. This form of grief is easily identified and chaplains deal with it on a regular basis.

Grief, however, can also be caused by other significant losses such as the loss of a job or severe financial loss. These forms of grief are not as easily identified or understood. In major disasters or catastrophes, feelings of grief can affect a group of people, a community, and even a nation (e.g., September 11th). Experienced chaplains are alert for the possibility of grief when symptoms go beyond simple sadness, disappointment or discouragement.

1 Webster's New World College Dictionary (1986 ed.), s.v. “grief”
Grief varies greatly in intensity and duration. Simple grief is generally usually overcome with time and the support from caring friends. MChapUSA chaplains are often part of that care support. It should be noted however, that there is another, more difficult form of grief that is sometimes called “complicated grief.” The term “complicated” refers to the presence of other factors that “complicate” or prevent or impair the grieving person from working through his or her grief. In certain instances, grief due to the death of someone very close can be this intense form of grief since the loss of the loved one may be “complicated” by other issues such as guilt, abnormal fear of loneliness or serious financial need.

The MChapUSA chaplain will want to distinguish the more serious form of grief by carefully considering the intensity of the symptoms or the length of their duration.

Symptoms
According to the WebMD, grief “is expressed physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.”

The following chart reflects some of the normal symptoms of grief:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Symptoms</th>
<th>Physical expressions of grief often include crying and sighing, headaches, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, weakness, fatigue, feelings of heaviness, aches, pains, and other stress-related ailments.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Symptoms</td>
<td>Emotional expressions of grief include feelings of sadness and yearning. But feelings of worry, anxiety, frustration, anger, or guilt are also normal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Symptoms</td>
<td>Social expressions of grief may include feeling detached from others, isolating yourself from social contact, and behaving in ways that are not normal for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Symptoms</td>
<td>Spiritual expressions of grief may include questioning the reason for your loss, the purpose of pain and suffering, the purpose of life, and the meaning of death. After a death, your grieving process is influenced by how you view death.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abnormal Symptoms
Although the MChapUSA chaplain doesn’t often encounter abnormal symptoms of grief, the following list is provided to alert a chaplain to the need for referral:

- wish for death or threat of suicide
- extraordinary feelings of guilt
- excessive anger
- onset of obsessive compulsive behavior
- extreme anxiety about being left alone
- looking for the deceased as if still alive
- prolonged withdrawal or isolation
- unexplained confusion

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II. The Grief Process

When thinking about the grief process, most persons think of the stages of grief. At the very beginning of this topic, we would make it clear that for the Christian believer, understanding the process of grief goes well beyond identifying the various stages within that process. It should also include the bringing to bear of Christian beliefs and principles. For the MChapUSA chaplain it is always important to integrate a biblical perspective in understanding the grief process.

Considerable research and study has been conducted on the process of grief in the past several years. A variety of theories have been put forth based on that research. The most notable of these theories regarding the grief process was one done in the 1960’s by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. The study she led involved researchers from the disciplines of medicine, psychiatry and theology. After studying some two hundred patients with terminal illness, Kubler-Ross and her team began to identify a common, somewhat orderly pattern or “process.” After the study was completed in 1969, she wrote *On Death and Dying* to summarize her findings. In this book she introduced the now famous, five stages:

1. **First Stage:** Denial and Isolation
2. **Second Stage:** Anger
3. **Third Stage:** Bargaining
4. **Fourth Stage:** Depression
5. **Fifth Stage:** Acceptance

Kubler-Ross originally identified these stages as observed in persons who were dying. Subsequent researchers however, quickly found the same pattern among the grieving and thus, the so-called “five stages” began to be applied to the process of grief as well.

For many the principal idea behind using the five stages of grief in providing care is a belief that a person who does not move through each stage will not be able to satisfactorily deal with her or her grief. In fact, a common perception by many proponents of the Kubler-Ross model is that unhealthy grief is simply the result of being “stuck” in one of the five stages. A biblical view would not readily accept this premise.

In the years since they were introduced, the “five stages” have, in succession, been accepted, adopted, religiously followed, modified, and more recently, questioned. As part of that questioning, it has been widely noted that the stages are not universal to all who grieve, nor do all who grieve experience each stage in the normal order. In spite of some obvious short-comings, the great contribution of Kubler-Ross’s ground-breaking work was in its attempt to understand the process of grief. Understanding the process of grief is helpful to the chaplain care provider as well.

In the past few years, a very helpful body of Christian based materials has been produced to guide chaplains, ministers and individuals as they work with the dying and the grieving. The best of these materials are biblically-based and authored by those who consciously want to provide a counter balance of hope and love to the analytical and somewhat fatalistic approach of the Kubler-Ross model.

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One such author was Orville Evans, former coordinator of chaplain service for the Teaching Hospitals in the State of Oklahoma. In a paper prepared for the Journal of Pastoral Practice, Evans offered what he saw as Christian alternatives to each of the five stages of grief:\(^5\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF</th>
<th>THE CHRISTIAN VIEW</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DENIAL</td>
<td>FAITH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANGER</td>
<td>FORGIVENESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARGAINING</td>
<td>SUBMISSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEPRESSION</td>
<td>HOPE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCEPTANCE</td>
<td>LOVE</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In offering a Christian alternative for dealing with grief, Evans includes biblical examples along with biblical principles to provide a Christian framework to the discussion of the grief process.

June Hunt, founder of Hope for the Heart, takes a clearly Christian centered approach to the process of grief and identifies three “stages” of healthy grieving:\(^6\)

- **Crisis Stage** – can last from two days to two weeks - characteristics of this stage are: anxiety/fear, shock, numbness, fearfulness, denial, idleness, crying, confusion, sleeplessness, feeling trapped

- **Crucible Stage** – can last up to a year or more – characteristics of this stage are weariness, anger, depression, bargaining, helplessness, remorse, loneliness, guilt, resentment

- **Contentment Stage** – this stage accepts the loss and leaves it in the past - characteristics are: greater humility before God and others, experiencing leaving the loss behind, greater compassion toward others, experiencing new hope for the future, greater acceptance of others, experiencing new patterns for living, greater appreciation for others, experiencing new purpose in life, developing a deeper dependence on the Lord

What value is there in understanding the grief process? Understanding the process of grief is a helpful means for choosing the appropriate guidance and encouragement to provide a grieving person. The MChapUSA chaplain remembers that the grief process or stages are only incidental to the Christian care he or she is providing to the grieving person. The affirmation of the Christian message and expression of Christian love are always the real substance of effective chaplain care.

### III. Guidance and Ministry Ideas/Concepts to Help Persons in Times of Grief

1. **Providing Care to the Bereaved**
   - MChapUSA chaplains should be especially sensitive to the wishes of the grieving person. Remember that grief is very personal. Give them time and space.
   - Be alert for the right timing for talking with the bereaved, especially at the worksite. While being sensitive to that timing, look for the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

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\(^6\) Hunt, June, Counseling Through Your Bible Handbook 191-192
• It is always appropriate to point the grieving person to the love and comfort that comes from God. It is not always appropriate to present that message with an evangelistic emphasis or appeal.

• As appropriate, suggest that the grieving person be careful to resist the negative feelings that can be a part of the grieving process like anger, doubt and self-pity.

• If the grieving person is a believer or is favorable to the Christian message, suggest a few Scripture passages, especially those that contain some of the promises of God.

• Encourage the grieving person to seek out others, especially persons of faith and hope. God often uses others to share His love and the hope that is in Christ.

• In cases where the grieving person is not dealing very well his or her grief, suggest a grief-recovery support group. Check ahead by searching online for a list of those available in your area. Care should be taken that groups for referral have a biblical orientation.

• Be alert for any danger signs that the symptoms of grief are not normal. If there are signs of abnormal symptoms, refer the grieving person for special help and care. Often the referral should be made to their medical doctor.

A few years ago, Maceo Gray, the Region Vice President for the Midwest Region of Marketplace Chaplains USA, wrote *The Christian Comfort Companion*. This book is available in a pdf version on the marketplace training website (www.marketplacetraining.com). In his book, Maceo suggests twelve (12) prescriptions for grief recovery:

• Prescription of Presence
• Prescription of Precious Tears
• Prescription of Prayers
• Prescription of Promises
• Prescription of Parting
• Prescription of Poetry
• Prescription of Pardoning
• Prescription of Penmanship
• Prescription of Pictures
• Prescription of Periodic Reconciliation
• Prescription of Physical Care
• Prescription of Pleasures

Any one of these 12 suggestions (prescriptions) may be an appropriate area of encouragement by MChapUSA chaplains.

2. Suggestions for Those Who Are Close to the Bereaved
MChapUSA chaplains are occasionally asked to meet with the coworkers of a grieving employee, (e.g., a tragic death, etc.). Chaplains can provide the following suggestions for guiding coworkers in dealing with a grieving person:

**It’s okay…**

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8 Schmidt, Lee, *Bereaved Parents Do’s and Don’ts* (Santa Monica, CA 1979).
…to let your genuine concern and caring show
…to be available -- to listen, to help with whatever else seems needed at the time
…to say you are sorry about what happened and about their pain
…to allow them to express as much grief as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share
…to affirm them in the care they provided their loved one or whatever else you know to be true and positive about the care given.

It’s probably not helpful…

…to avoid them because you are uncomfortable (being avoided by friends adds pain to an already intolerably painful experience)
…to say you know how they feel (unless you are very certain that you do)
…to say “you ought to be feeling better by now” or anything which implies judgment about their feelings
…to change the subject when they mention their loss
…to avoid mentioning the person’s name out of fear of reminding them of their pain (they haven’t forgotten about it)
…to try to find something positive (e.g., moral lesson, closer family ties, etc.) about the death
…to point out that at least they have other people (persons are not interchangeable; they cannot replace each other)
…to say that they can always get another (even if they wanted to, and could, another would not replace the one they’ve lost)
…to make any comments which in any way suggest that the care at home, in the emergency room, hospital, or wherever was inadequate (people are plagued by feelings of doubt and guilt without any help from their family and friends)

IV. Chaplain Resources

Hope for the Heart Biblical Counseling Key (can be viewed or downloaded from a link in CCS)

1. *Grief Recovery – Living at Peace with Loss* (also available in Spanish)

RBC Booklets (can be ordered by your ATM or DD)

1. *How Can I Live With My Loss?*
3. *Is There Life After Death?* (As appropriate and when requested)

Books on Grief Care-Giving

*Counseling Through Your Bible Handbook* by June Hunt.

*The Christian Comfort Companion* by Maceo Gray.

*Where is God When It Hurts?* by Philip Yancey