Secondary Losses: Grief Magnified

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What is Secondary Loss?

- Losses that occur as result of a primary loss
- Ripple effects of a major loss
- Major losses are followed by a “slew” of loss

What is Secondary Loss?

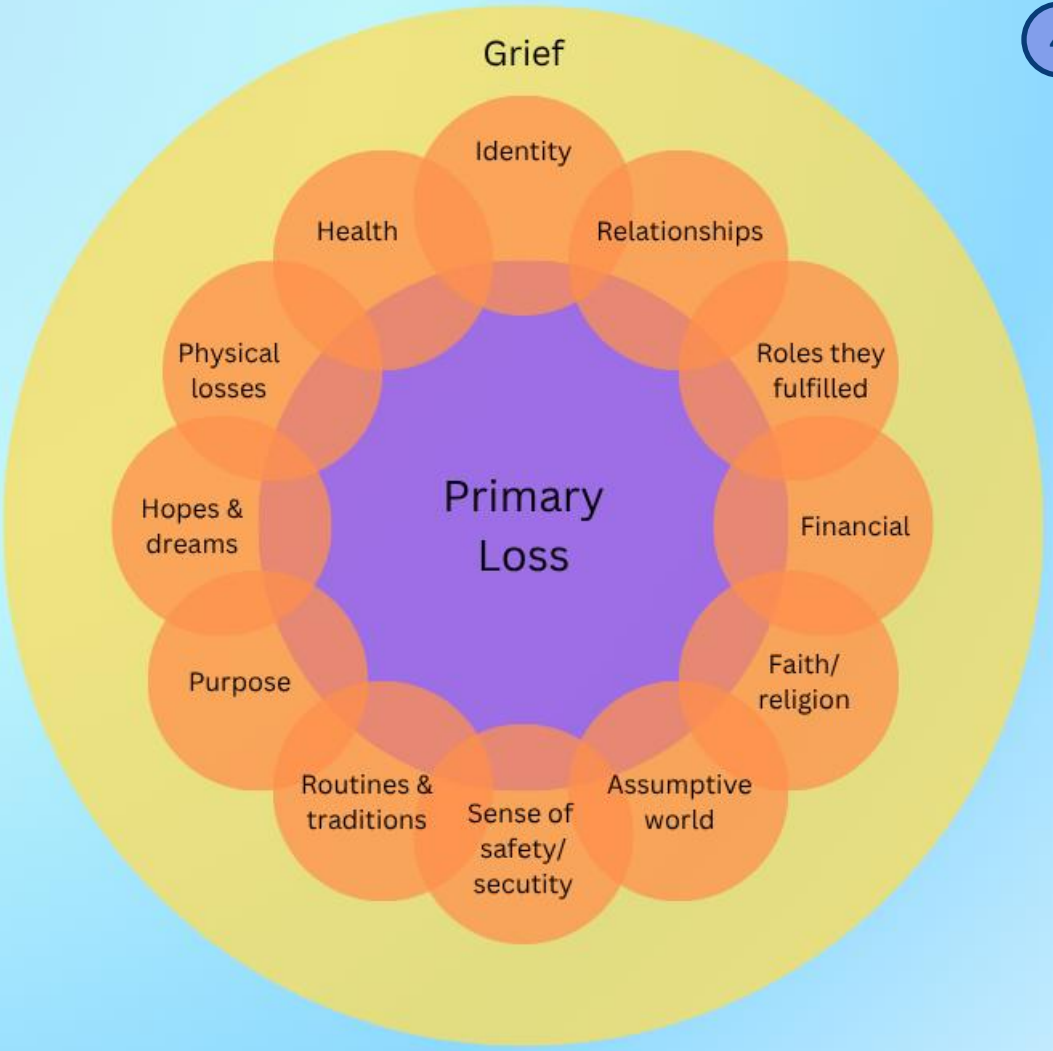
"Secondary loss is compared to a set of falling dominos; the primary grief of the death of a loved one (or major loss) is the first domino to fall and triggers the fall of the remaining dominos"

hospiscare.co.uk/how-we-help/advice-support/information-about-grief/secondary-grief-the-domino-effect-of-losing-a-loved-one/

Secondary Loss: Things to Know

- No less impactful or less difficult to mourn
- Can catch us off guard & compound our grief
- "Concept of secondary loss helps explain why grief can feel broader and more complex than expected"
  Grief Support Center, What is Secondary Loss in Grief? https://www.griefsupportcenter.com
- Secondary loss explains why grief may intensify over time instead of diminish
- Losses can emerge gradually, often months or even years after the primary loss
- As we enter new stages of life or transitions, additional layers of grief can surface
- These losses often go unacknowledged and unrecognized, thus it is difficult to receive support for them
- Secondary loss affects multiple life domains

Secondary Loss



Examples of Secondary Loss

- Loss of Identity
  - Loss of “relationship identity”
  - Am I still a husband, wife, significant other, parent, sibling, caregiver, child, friend?
  - Who am I now without them?
  - May struggle with self confidence & defining new identity

- Loss of the Family Structure
  - Changes in family composition
  - Changes in family roles and responsibilities
  - “Out of order” loss
  - Loss of “couple status”
  - Feel orphaned

Examples of Secondary Loss

- Loss of the roles our loved ones fulfilled
  - Assume tasks and responsibilities that your loved one previously performed
  - “Best friend”
  - Confidante
  - Travel partner
  - Emotional support person/animal
  - Companionship
- Loss or changes in our relationships
  - Distance themselves from us
  - We’re grieving too long
  - Discomfort with our sadness
  - Resent us as we are not like we “used to be”
  - Relationships anchored by our loved one’s connections

Examples of Secondary Loss

- Financial Losses
  - Income loss
  - Loss of home/business
  - Loss of assets
  - Loss of livelihood – not able to work as we used to

- Loss of faith or religious beliefs
  - Loss of our loved one has shaken our faith
  - “I prayed for a miracle, but it did not come”

Examples of Secondary Loss

- Loss of our assumptive world
  - Our core beliefs about the world are shattered
  - Question the reliability of our environment, the world, and the people around us
- Loss of our sense of safety, security, trust, and stability
  - Significant loss leaves us with a profound sense of vulnerability and betrayal of life's unpredictability
  - The world doesn't feel like a safe place
  - Feel a deep sense of fear
    - *CS Lewis famously notes: "No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear"*

Examples of Secondary Loss

- Loss of routines and traditions
  - Daily routines altered without loved one
  - Feel lost
  - Often a hardest time of day
  - Expect to see them upon returning home
  - Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, special days are no longer the same without loved one
  - No one to sit in “companionable silence” with

- Loss of purpose
  - Reasons for living are challenged without our loved one
  - “They were my reason for being”
  - For caregivers, “how do I fill my time without my loved one to care for?”
  - “How do I live my life without them?”

Examples of Secondary Loss

- Loss of hopes and dreams
  - Future travel, plans, goals (retirement)
  - Hope to grow old together
  - Out “script for the future” has changed
  - Loss of anticipated milestones (anniversaries, children, grandchildren, graduations, weddings)
- Physical losses
  - Physical affection
  - Intimacy
  - Sexual relationship
  - Loss of their physical presence in our world, “their chair or side of the bed is empty”

Examples of Secondary Loss

- Loss of health
  - Common grief reactions from the emotional stress and pain of losing a loved one or having a major loss can include:
    - problems with sleep & appetite
    - heart issues
    - anxiety/panic attacks
    - depression
    - headaches, stomach aches, nausea
    - exhaustion, low energy & lethargy
    - decreased resistance to illness

- Loss of support from family and friends
  - Loss can cause altered family dynamics and cohesion
  - Family conflict or estrangement
  - Support networks may be lost
  - Loss of the past – can no longer share memories of past experiences, “remember when…”

How do we cope with secondary losses?

- Identify and acknowledge secondary losses
- Writing them down can help to create a visual for how complex grief and loss is
- Realize they must be grieved and mourned

How do we cope with secondary losses?

- Be honest about what you are going through
- Express and externalize emotions
- Find other people that get it: friends, support groups, grief counselor, or therapist
- Good self care

How do we cope with secondary losses?

- Create new routines, expect trial and error
- Express emotion through artistic endeavors and journaling
- Celebrate small victories

How do we cope with secondary losses?

- For practical tasks: YouTube!
- Find ways to reconnect with your community
- When people ask how they can help, have a list ready

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Thank you

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