

I Don't Know Who I Am Anymore: grief and loss of identity

Identity is a funny thing. The way we think of ourselves, how we define ourselves, the story we tell ourselves about who we are, all of that comes together to create our identity.

And yet we don't always have a conscious awareness of our identity or even a loss of identity. It often exists in the background, like the soundtrack of a film.

We aren't consciously aware of it until something changes. Seriously, have you ever watched familiar movie clips without the soundtrack? It's weird.

Okay, back to identity. When we experience a loss we are often focused on the tangible "things" we lose – the person, the house, the job, the relationship, etc.

That's, of course, a huge part of grief.

But there is this other part of grief that we are often less aware of it. It is the secondary losses that happen like dominoes falling, creating far more to cope with than just the primary loss.

We talk about these secondary losses a lot around here and often quickly list them off, throwing in "loss of identity" without saying much more.

Today we are going to change that because there is a lot to say and to think about when it comes to loss of identity in grief. It shapes so much of how we exist in the world and research has shown that the lack of "self-clarity" that comes in grief as a result of loss of identity is correlated with higher rates of depression and post-traumatic stress.

We're going to talk about different types of identity, how we can experience identity changes or losses, and what to do about it. Spoiler alert: there are no easy answers.

Relational Identity

This is one that quickly comes to mind in grief. It is the piece of my identity that is based on my relationship with another person.

So, perhaps I am a sister, a daughter, a wife, a friend, a mother, and on and on.

When we lose someone, we often feel we have lost this relational sense of self. We find ourselves asking questions like, who am I if not a wife?

Relational identities change, even with the same person. For instance, when someone becomes ill your role might shift from being a spouse or a child to a caregiver.

There are still components of your original role, but you may find that shifting as you take on more and more responsibilities as a caregiver.

When a person dies, caregivers often feel their sense of purpose is less clear. When your relational identity becomes so defined by caring for another person, when that person is gone it can be hard to regain a sense of self.

Additionally, grief can 're-write your address book'.

Friends shift, a distance may arise between friends or family of the person who died. This can lead to another shift in relational identity, feeling a loss of community and connection to loved ones who are still living.

Professional identity

Phrases like "I am a teacher" or "I am a carpenter" or "I am a doctor" make clear that we often consider our profession as a huge part of who we are.

We have knowledge, skills, and expertise related to our jobs. Much of our time is defined by our jobs. We often have a community through our jobs. When we retire, lose or leave a job, even if it is by choice, there is often a loss of our professional identity that can have a profound impact on our sense of self.

If I have been a teacher for 40 years, it is an adjustment to conceptualize who I am and what gives my days structure and purpose if I am no longer a teacher.

Sometimes a job loss is the primary loss, but sometimes it is a result of needing to leave the workforce to care for a sick loved one or to relocate after a death. As you can imagine, this can result in multiple identity losses stacking up on one another.

Spiritual identity

Whether a Christian, a Muslim, an atheist, a Buddhist, or just someone who identifies as "spiritual" but not religious, we often have a spiritual identity that can grow, shift, shake, and disappear over a lifetime.

This can be because of a death or just at different moments in life. After a loss we hear many people describe everything from a crisis of faith to an increased sense of spirituality.

When it is the former, we often hear people describe a sense that they have lost something that felt fundamental to who they were and hence lost a bit of their footing.

Also with the sense of self as a spiritual person, there is often a sense of community that comes with a religious community that may also be lost, leaving people feeling both the loss their spiritual identity and distanced or isolated from their spiritual community.

Financial Identity

Though we often don't think of finances as part of our identity, our ability to provide for ourselves and our family financially is often an important component of our sense of self.

Whether it is a constant state of financial struggle or pride in strong financial independence, we often have an expectation about what our financial identity is and should be.

Illnesses and deaths can have a deep impact on financial identity. From overwhelming healthcare costs to leaving a job to become a caregiver, to a dual income household becoming single income, death can rattle our sense of financial security and independence and create a financial loss of identity.

On the other end of the spectrum, life insurance or inheritance after a death can improve financial security and, though this may sound like exclusively a good change to financial identity, for some people it leads to feelings of guilt after a death.

Physical Identity

Much like financial identity is often correlated with our ability to provide for ourselves and our families, physical identity often defines how we are capable of physically existing in the world.

In basic ways, like having the luxury to work any type of job, play with children, go for a walk or to the gym, and move free from pain, our physical self is fundamental to much our daily life.

For some, the physical is even more significant – people who identify as athletes or who use a lot of physical movement in their work are often even more deeply connected to their physical selves.

An illness, injury or aging can take a serious toll on the physical self, leading people a physical loss of identity that can sometimes be accompanied by a loss of self-worth.

This is something we may struggle with ourselves or watch a loved one struggle with as an illness progresses.

Outlook

Though this can be harder to label, our outlook or perspective on the world can be deeply connected to our identity and it can also be shaken by a trauma or loss.

Whether it is the belief that the world is a fair and just place, a general optimistic perspective, being a 'happy person, or a feeling that the world is predictable or safe, our lens through which we see the world has a deep impact on our identity.

A significant death or trauma can shake these assumptive beliefs about the world, leaving people sometimes feeling more negative, jaded, pessimistic, or unable to engage with other people or activities the way they used to.

This can result in an identity change or loss that feels difficult to reconcile.

Now what?

We've thrown a ton of information about grief and loss of identity your way. If you're thinking "yes, this is me!" you may also be thinking "what do I do about it??".

There is no easy answer, but the first thing to keep in mind is your identity will never be what it was before the loss.

Like so many things in grief, trying to go back to how things were before the loss just isn't possible.

Part of regaining a sense of self after the loss is accepting that identity is going to be different than it was before.

From there it is important to remember that different doesn't mean bad. As human beings, we often don't like change.

We have ideas about how life is supposed to look and who we are supposed to be. When life doesn't pan out that way, it can be easy to assume that no alternative will ever allow us to have a sense of well-being.

Though there will always be a deep sense of grief around the people and things in life that we lose, this does not mean there will not be other things that bring a sense of purpose, joy, and contentment and that will slowly become part of your identity.

Remember, you can bring the past into the present. The person you lost, the person you were, those are all things that will still be a part of you as you go forward.

The myth of “letting go” has left many grievors feeling like the healthy way to grieve is to shut the door to the past.

A continued connection to lost loved one’s as well as a continued connection to the person we used to be, can be a very healthy part of moving forward.

Finally, take some time to reflect on your identity. Whether it is talking with a friend, a counsellor, writing, art, or some other form of expression, consider how your identity has shifted.

Make an effort to focus not just on the losses, but also on gains.

This may be the new relationships that have formed, positive changes in perspective, new skills or growth that have come from changes in professional or physical identity, etc.

Though it is easy to focus on the loss of self, rebuilding self-identity can slowly come through an awareness of changes in the self.

This means bringing pieces along, acknowledging pieces that will never be the same, and establishing new pieces of the self that are built on things that came before.