

The Human Response to the Death of a Loved One

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Abstract

Everyone knows that death is a part of life, you live, then you die. But no one is ever truly prepared for the grief response that follows the death of a loved one whom you hold a deep, social, and intimate connection with. This paper explores the neurobiological activations and the multifaceted grief response to the loss of a loved one that is deeply connected to the brain's collaborative abilities with the body. Throughout the paper, we will focus on the limbic brain and the key role it plays while mediating through the emotions, feelings, and decision-making processes as it responds to the external social environment and stimuli experienced, with the primary focus being on grief. The paper will also critically analyze Antonio Damasio's theory on reason and emotion and how it pertains to the grief response to offer a thorough understanding of the human response to the death of a loved one and its implications for rational decision-making.

Introduction

Have you ever lost a loved one? Maybe a pet or a family member passed away? What did you experience because of this this loss? Maybe you felt sad or mad, your heart was racing, and you felt confused, or shaky. All of this is a completely normal response and is related to the psychobiological collaboration between your brain and your body [1, 2]. As death is an expected part of life that everyone will experience at some point in their lifetime, it is important to develop an understanding of the human response and what can be expected when someone close to you passes on.

The feelings and emotions experienced during this tragic time is called a grief response, which is a universal human experience [3]. Grief normally occurs after a loved one has passed away and is unique to each individual person [4, 5, 3]. Depending on the connection with the loved one, the grief reaction may be more severe and disruptive for one person than for others, potentially leading to illness, inability to function, and prolonged distress [6, 4, 5, 3, 7]. As the circle of life entails cradle to grave for all, it is important to understand the psychobiological response that the body and brain go through [5], as all the stimuli experienced can also impact your reasoning and decision-making abilities [8, 1].

This paper argues that grief is a multifaceted response to the loss of a loved one that is deeply connected to the brain's collaborative abilities with the body. Throughout the paper, I will outline the dynamic process that occurs with the grief response, the neurobiological activations along with the parts of the brain

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that are responsible for the grief response, the way grief affects our emotional response and decision-making abilities and will conclude with a thorough summary of all items discussed. First, let us develop a shared understanding of the key terms that will be reviewed within this paper.

Emotions, Feelings, Reasoning, and Grief

“Human emotions are an intricate and psychological phenomenon, and they vary drastically from person to person” [9]. Emotions are complex and consist of a cluster of emotions rather than a single state experience [10]. The body will generate a response based on the event or stimuli that is causing the experience and whether it is a positive or negative situation [11, 12]. This response is the result of neurological changes within the brain which causes us to be aware of the emotion [7, 12] along with some sort of feeling [12].

The feeling that is experienced, is due to the involuntary neuro-translation that has occurred through your internal thought processors [1], making you aware of the situation within the environment that has occurred [13]. Feeling is one of the four basic components of emotions, which are cognition, evaluation, motivation, and feeling, and as previously stated, people experience these on individual levels, even in shared situations [11, 12] like the loss of a loved one. Feelings encompass both physical and emotional sensations like pain, shortness of breath, and sadness or anger [11]. This feeling triggers an emotional awareness which is a response within the body and allows us to make decisions based on how we feel and the emotions we are experiencing [1].

Decision-making and reason allow us to act based on what we know is right or wrong, good or bad. For example, if we feel scared, we will likely go into fight, flight, or freeze mode and depending on the situation that caused us to feel this way, the decision we make on how to react will likely determine whether we remain safe, ensuring our success in life [11]. So, when we have a big shift in events, such as losing a loved one, this of course will stir up a broad range of feelings and emotions, which can alter our decision-making abilities, especially during our grief response.

Grief occurs when there is a significant loss in our lives, typically the loss of a loved one [5]. It is a highly complex emotion [10, 5] and frequently leads to additional bodily changes or even illness [3]. The human grief response can take place over a short or longer term, and incorporates many emotional experiences [4, 5, 3, 7]. As we continue through the paper, we will dig deeper into the process involved with the grief response, the several stages within grief, the role that the brain plays in it all and how this may impact our abilities to make rational decisions.

Grief Process

Grief, as previously mentioned is a completely normal human reaction to loss, and depending on the depth of the connection, may be experienced more strongly for some, than for others [6, 4, 2, 7]. The symptoms of grief are quite broad and may include sadness, anger, yearning, changes in skin color, psychological phenomena, avoidance behaviours, and can even lead to physical or mental illness such as anxiety or depression [6, 4, 2, 5, 7]. These symptoms can range from minor to severe and last from weeks to years depending on the severity, with most individuals adapting to the loss of their loved one within 12 months without any clinical interventions [4].

Complicated Grief

However, some individuals suffering through grief may become more complicated and their grief may turn into illness. Osterweis, Soloman, and Green (1984, p.5) describe this as the contemporary stress theory, which is when “a stressor produces certain transient biological or psychosocial reactions that

may, or may not, cumulatively lead to certain health consequences.” When this complicated grief response occurs, it is normally easy to identify and again, unique to the individual [4]. Over time, people begin to experience different sensations and emotional experiences based on the social interactions that stimulate certain memories of their loved one [6, 4, 2, 5, 7].

Mathew (n.d.) describes her lengthy, personal, and complicated grief experience with the loss of her father and how it was unlike anything she had ever experienced. She describes how she would have physical health concerns such as feeling like she was having a heart attack and her inability to do her regular daily activities. She mentions how she fell into a depressive state suffering from a prolonged, complicated grief reaction and how her health conditions were reflections of the memories she had of when she used to help her father manage through his similar health conditions, such as his cardiac problems. Mathew’s (n.d.) experience outlines the impact that such a major loss can have on us as individuals based on our social connections and relationships with our loved ones. Her deep connection with her father resulted in a deep, debilitating physical and mental illness, where no resolution was in sight for many years [5].

Chen et al. (2020) outlines similar debilitating experiences that were found within their six-month pilot study. When individuals were experiencing complicated grief symptoms and were provided with memory stimulating objects, such as photographs, their reactions and symptoms became much more exaggerated and debilitating. Prolonged and complicated grief normally occur when the loss is of great importance to the individual, such as a child, a spouse, or someone who had a large impact on one’s life, however, it may also occur if the death was of a violent nature [2]. These types of losses may result in social isolation, depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder, and a feeling of emptiness, almost like something is missing [2, 5, 7].

Stages of Grief

People experience this empty feeling and these memories because of the social connection built with their loved ones [7]. These social connections can be certain habits that have developed over time, expectations, and possibly plans or goals that one may have had with their now deceased loved one [7]. The grief response normally occurs in stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance [7]. However, there is no clear structure for how one may experience or flow through these stages [4, 5, 3].

After the death of a loved one, someone may experience denial where they find it hard to believe they are gone. They may have episodes where they see their loved one or possibly hear their voice [5] making it harder to accept that they have died. They may be angry, and lash out at those around them, break things, or place blame on someone for their loved one’s passing. At times, one may try bargaining with a higher power, asking that if they bring them back, they will change or give something back in return. They may fall into a depressive state where they find it hard to enjoy things that once brought them happiness, go to work, or even get out of bed [5]. For us to finally adapt to the passing of our loved ones and reach the acceptance stage, Ratcliffe & Fernandez Velasco (2024) describe this as “relearning the world.” Learning to reintegrate into our old habits without our loved ones, going into their homes without hearing their voice say hello, and learning to be you, without them [2, 5, 7].

With all people being unique and processing things differently, they will all flow through the stages in their own way and at their own pace. Some may bounce back and forth between stages or skip over some, but all eventually reach the acceptance stage eventually, but how? What is the connection between the brain and the body? How do they work together during this hard time in our lives?

Neurobiological Activations

Grief is a conscious psychological process that stems from adrenocortical activation within different parts of the brain such as the hypothalamus and the limbic brain [4, 3]. The limbic brain is the region within our brains that is responsible for storing our emotional memories [4] and is responsible for our emotional responses to certain stimuli [4, 7]. The stimuli experienced within our environments, such as the loss of a loved one, sends a message through our brains, which is then translated in the limbic region of our brains, such as the amygdala [13].

Limbic Brain and Grief Response

The limbic brain, which includes the hippocampus, fornix, amygdala, septum, cingulate gyrus, peripheral and hippocampal regions, is why mammals can care for, and nurse their young the way they do, or can form social attachments with their loved ones, along with playing and singing [13]. The amygdala responds to the emotional environment [6, 4] by stimulating an “autonomic and neuroendocrine stress response” [6], resulting in us feeling our emotions, such as when we are sad or distressed from the passing of our loved ones.

In fact, studies show that when grievors are presented with personalized memory stimulations of their loved ones, the amygdala actually gets larger, showing hypertrophy and enhanced reactivity, as well as increased functional connections, and the hippocampus becomes smaller [6, 4, 7]. This brain transformation showcases the immense work that the limbic brain goes through to translate the environmental stimuli effectively to allow us to have emotions and feelings appropriate for the situations we are in. This intricate limbic network plays such a large role in the way we respond to the death of loved one and our neurophysiologic stability [6, 5] that it can even impact and effect our decision-making abilities [6, 1].

Emotional Response and Decision making

As mentioned previously, a human’s grief response is unique to everyone and each situation. Based on the situation and the brain’s emotional response, havoc and turmoil may erupt because of poor decision-making abilities in the moment [1]. We know that “all emotions generate feelings” [1] and when a loved one passes away, we may experience so many emotions and feelings all at once that it becomes difficult to manage them all effectively. These extreme changes in our mental and body states are all happening because of the processes within the limbic brain, and they influence our abilities to make rationale decisions [1].

Emotional Response Process

Damasio (1994) describes a three-step process that involves the:

Conscious and deliberate thought process that evaluates the contents of a specific event and creates mental images.

Automatic and involuntary response to the mental images and thought process stimulated from the event along with past experiences and knowledge on how one should or has reacted in the past to similar situations.

Automatic and involuntary response is then signaled to the amygdala and the anterior cingulate where it communicates with the body allowing for different bodily systems to make facial expressions, alter body posture, sweat, cry, and run away if needed.

When people are faced with a complex situation, such as the death of a loved one, it places them into

unfamiliar territory, or uncertainty which requires a lot of brain power to unravel and process [6, 1, 7]. As the brain works through the three-stage process listed above, the limbic system acts like a biological interface between the external world and the internal bodily environment, helping to regulate the autonomic responses, such as our heart rates and hormone levels, while trying to interpret the social environment around us [13]. When emotions are running rampant and the brain is trying to cause a reaction based on previous experiences and with appropriate reasoning, it becomes more difficult if we have never experienced this type of loss before.

Unfamiliar Events

Sure, our goldfish dies when we are younger, or maybe a distant family member passes away and we have a simple grief response which allows us to reach the acceptance stage rather quickly. But what about when we lose someone who we held a deep, intimate social connection with? This would be new to us and would result in the amygdala triggering a bigger grief response [1]. Although the emotional response triggered by the amygdala can be useful most of the time, it can also be debilitating [1], especially when the experience is new, or if our limbic brain has been injured.

If your brain is healthy and your experience is familiar, you should be able to respond in a more flexible manner to the environmental stimuli you are experiencing [1]. However, in the instance mentioned above, where the death of a close loved one is unfamiliar, it becomes harder to be flexible with your response and reasoning abilities, and your emotions take over [6, 1, 5]. Your grief response will disrupt your body's ability to regulate its emotions, potentially resulting in social isolation or depression [6, 2, 5]. This is because of the deep connection between emotions, feelings and reasoning.

We already know that emotions and feelings are closely connected, as feeling is one of the four basic components of emotions and is basically the final experience of the emotion [11, 1, 12]. Reasoning however, is a bit different, Damasio (1994) states that emotions and reason mix as well as oil and water, and that emotions and feelings can get in the way of reasoning. Reasoning helps to ensure that we make appropriate decisions. For example, if we are in danger, we run away, if we need to go to work, we get up and go to work. However, when someone dies who was so deeply connected to us, and our emotions are high, our ability to make these reasonable and responsible decisions diminishes [1]. This highlights the potential harm that emotions can have when they influence our reasoning abilities [1].

Emotions and Decision-Making

Most of the time, emotions and feelings will lead us in the right direction and ensure we make the right decisions, that follow your gut type of decision [1]. However, when our emotions get in the way and we are so sad that we become depressed, we may decide to stay in bed instead of going to work, or in extreme circumstances, some people may decide to take their own lives rather than feeling their emotions. This neurophysiological process of our emotions, feelings, and reasoning abilities assists us in our future planning and decision-making abilities, which determines the outcomes of our lives and ensures our survival [1].

Conclusion

Grief is a complex, unique response to the loss of a loved one. It entails a multifaceted process between your limbic brain system and the many systems within your body. This process is deeply rooted within your neurobiological structures and includes your emotions, feelings, and decision-making abilities. The grief response that we experience is determined by the deep social connection that we hold with our loved ones. The stronger the connection, the more complex and detrimental the grief response may

be, and based on this response, could potentially alter our abilities to make responsible, rational decisions. Should our emotions become so strong that they impact our judgement, we could make inappropriate or dangerous decisions, which could have negative impacts on our future. The limbic brain does its best to mediate through these difficult moments by using memories, knowledge, and experiences, however, if the limbic brain is injured or the experience is new to us, there is not much for it to work with.

With death being the known future for everyone, it is important to understand the grief response and the impact that this may have on our abilities to continue to make rational decisions within these stressful moments. If we can develop an evidence-based understanding on how the death of a loved one impacts us as individuals and how our brain and bodies respond, we may be able to develop more effective coping mechanisms that can help strengthen our resiliency and decrease the number of complicated or prolonged grief reactions people experience.

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