Religion as a Resource for Bereaved Parents

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the relationship between bereavement and religious beliefs for parents. In-depth, qualitative interviews of twenty-seven couples were used to address the question of the relative value of religion as a coping resource during grief. Also addressed were ways in which religion was a positive resource (enhancing recovery), a neutral resource (having no impact), or a negative resource (retarding recovery). Conclusions are presented regarding the resource value of religion and ways in which others, primarily clergy, family, and friends, can enhance positive and minimize negative impact of religion during bereavement.

Parents who experience the death of a child are often devastated and comprehending in the wake of their loss. The senselessness of such a death confronts long-held beliefs. How could God allow such an event to take place? In the event of the death of a loved one, a belief in a supreme being is commonly thought of as a help in resolving and recovering from the loss. Religion is seen as giving strength and providing a means by which the bereaved may organize and make sense of their thoughts regarding their loss experience. This is believed to be especially true when they begin to ask, “Why me?” Why should their loved one die while others, much less deserving, are allowed to live?

In order to explore the place of religion in the grief process of bereaved parents, this paper examines bereavement as a cognitive process involving a gradual change in perception, a “redefinition of normal.” Through this process, the individual modifies his or her “assumptive world”:

... a strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self which is confidently maintained and used as a means of recognizing, planning and acting ... [this belief structure] is learned and confirmed by the experience of many years.
It is this assumptive world that allows one to organize information encountered in the environment and to anticipate and plan for future events reasonably. When an event occurs that does not fit the assumptive world, the result is that we confront these basic assumptions. As a core element of one’s belief structure, religious beliefs must also be confronted.

For parents who have lost a child, then, grief is the reaction to the disintegration of that part of the assumptive world that depends on the existence of the child. With the death, bereaved parents are faced with basic assumptions, basic meaning, about life that no longer makes sense. In a very real sense, the world has become meaningless and new ways of understanding their experience must be constructed.

The meaning of religion. Researchers have suggested that religious beliefs may be among these assumptions that no longer have meaning after the loss of a significant other. Therefore, these beliefs may not be available to help explain the death. Parents must face the reality that innocence does not protect a child; children can die before their parents, and parents are powerless to affect that reality.

Alternatively, a frequently cited benefit of religion is that it helps us to make sense of life. Parkes has suggested that widows resolve their grief by incorporating a religious explanation into an explanation of their loss. This personal or healing theory acts as a bridge, linking the assumptive world that existed before the loss and the one that exists afterward. It allows them to reestablish the sense of control and predictability felt prior to the event and to regain a new sense of meaning. Therefore, religious beliefs may not be destroyed. Rather, they may provide a structure upon which new assumptions may be based.

A contradictory image results. If, in fact, one needs “something to believe in,” that is, religious beliefs, to survive the loss of a significant other, they should serve as core elements of the assumptive world. Yet a basic premise of the assault on the assumptive world suggests that the death of a child may cause such basic beliefs to be disrupted, challenged, and possibly destroyed. Thus, one may ask if religion is able to serve as a resource in times of loss. Alternatively, does the assault on the assumptive world create such a meaningless world that religion also becomes meaningless? Might it then act as a hindrance in the recovery process?

A hypothesis of this study was that religion had served as a core belief prior to the loss of the child and would continue to do so after the loss, sustaining the respondents and providing a structure of meaning to explain the world they encounter. In considering this hypothesis, several questions come to mind: Did religion serve as a basis for explanation of the loss experience? Were they able to use religious beliefs to organize information after the death? Was it a resource, that is, was it helpful to them? Did it provide comfort to them?