

# **The Grief and Loss Context - An Important Variable in Changing Criminal Behaviour?**

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## **O/H 1**

- ◆ this discussion examines grief and loss from a disenfranchisement perspective in relation to longterm, male offenders
- ◆ highlights the impact of grief and loss within disadvantaged 'life scripts' rather than more familiar loss/death related contexts
- ◆ discusses enhanced assessment processes that encourage offenders to use life crises positively, to 'take stock' and move on
- ◆ challenges the notion of 'denial' - interrupts the criminogenic 'self fulfilling prophecy'

## **O/H 2**

the Northern Metropolitan Intervention team delivers core therapeutic programs under the auspice of the Department for Correctional Services, South Australia, including:

- Alcohol and Other Drugs
- Victim Awareness
- Anger Management
- Cognitive Skills
- Living Skills
- ◆ offenders often disclose problematic life issues within these (relatively) safe, group settings (particularly notable given their involuntary status)

- ◆ however, feedback shows clients often mask underlying difficulties eg low self esteem, lack of trust (related to limited/poor chances)
- ◆ these unexplored feelings indicate that offenders are suffering from disenfranchised grief

O/H 3

### **Typical Client Profile**

- ◆ offenders' lives are typically characterised by socioeconomic disadvantage and limited educational opportunities
- ◆ these problems are exacerbated by offenders' (frequent) inability to appropriately communicate their problems to others
- ◆ these inadequacies can be due to a number of factors, but **key** amongst these is poorly developed/immature **'manhood'**
- ◆ many boys and men do not have access to positive male mentors - with little practical training in favourable masculine norms, boys grow physically bigger but do not develop matching, mature inner strength (Biddulph 1995)

## O/H 4

- ◆ many male clients see themselves as 'different' saying things like:
  - '...I don't fit into normal society'
  - '...I'm a drongo, I'm useless...I'm a total bloody failure'
  - '...my family/'straight society' won't ever trust me again, why would they?'
- ◆ significant relationships are often tenuous and/or unstable - most clients struggle to understand and work through relationship/life's problems
- ◆ learned helplessness compounds, disillusionment becomes normative, and individuals are unable to get their lives 'back on track'
- ◆ pressures build and lives increasingly unravel - clients give up, fail and re-offend
- ◆ **traditional offender programs tend not to recognise the source of this emotional burden**

## O/H 5

### **What is 'disenfranchised grief'?**

- ◆ disenfranchised loss/grief are losses that cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported (Doka 1993)

- ◆ losses are a natural part of existence, we all experience losses repeatedly and inevitably throughout our lives
- ◆ society's 'grieving rules' specify who, when, where, for how long and for whom we should grieve (Doka 1993)
- ◆ unwritten rules prescribe that, after an 'appropriate' period of mourning, we should 'move on'
- ◆ disenfranchised grief is not easily identified and there are few rules to assist us to move on

## **O/H 6**

there are two main kinds of loss:

1. physical (tangible) eg death of a loved one, loss of a valued possession
  2. symbolic (psychosocial) eg divorce, job loss, demotion, loss of status
- ◆ offenders typically suffer a great number of ongoing symbolic losses eg abusive childhood experiences, loss of relationships, trauma from drug abuse, imprisonment
  - ◆ however, symbolic losses are not seen as **real** losses, and there is no opportunity to grieve, deal with feelings and move on – this can lead to 'in kind' free floating feelings of deprivation
  - ◆ these losses are exacerbated by inept socialisation skills associated with immature masculinity

- ◆ these unresolved feelings compound overtime resulting in a self fulfilling prophecy

## **O/H 7**

### **A snapshot of clients' life experiences pre and post prison**

- ◆ low education levels, dysfunctional home lives, unstable unemployment and difficulties with relationships reinforce ongoing, unresolved issues with low self esteem
- ◆ the processes and experiences of imprisonment ascribe inmates a subordinate status
- ◆ prisoners quickly realise that they no longer have control over almost all aspects of their lives
- ◆ many offenders become preoccupied with regaining whatever semblance of self determination they can eg ending relationships before going into prison (to avoid a 'dear John letter')
- ◆ experiences/behaviours result in a re-offending/re-imprisonment vicious cycle that is difficult to break

## **O/H 8**

### **Reintegration, 'moving on'/out of the offending cycle**

- ◆ a personality formed in an abusive/dysfunctional background is not prepared for adult maturity

*'(T)he survivor is left with fundamental problems of basic trust, autonomy, and initiative' (Herman 1994, p110)*

- ◆ many offenders present as frustrated, angry individuals
  - feelings that parallel their marginalised life status (and mask unacknowledged loss and grief issues)
- ◆ traumatised by life experiences, yet not recognising or sharing their feelings, they become disconnected from others
- ◆ their predicament becomes 'a way of being'...mind altering experiences, alcohol/drug abuse and/or antisocial behaviour become their escape

## **O/H 9**

### **Issues to consider in the rehabilitation process**

- ◆ given the typical male offenders' life script, they are an archetype for disenfranchised loss/grief
- ◆ however, tailoring appropriate interventions to break the cycle of disadvantage can be difficult as:
  - on initial contact, many clients strongly deny their life/offending problems, and
  - many strongly maintain that therapy is 'a waste of time'

- ◆ effecting change within this context, while challenging, is not impossible!

## **O/H 10**

- ◆ the key to triggering change is engaging clients with experienced practitioners whose role is to challenge clients to reflect and open up, thereby facilitating a therapeutic 'window of opportunity'
- ◆ offenders tend to think differently to pro social thinkers (people like you and me!) eg
  - many offender see themselves as 'the centre of the universe'
  - their world revolves around what they want, when and how they want it and are unable to feel empathy for others
  - they do not to conform to social norms or respect lawful behaviours, they can be deceitful, irritable, aggressive and callous
- ◆ however, offenders can be coached to think in a more reasoned manner

## **O/H 11**

- ◆ identifying past events within a loss and grief framework, making connections, reflecting and making

peace with 'the demons' has the potential to provoke powerful opportunities for change

- ◆ engaging clients in an assessment process that incorporates grief and loss as integral to their lived experiences has the capacity to forge a more meaningful, effective practice context
- ◆ the practitioner's task is to pare back roadblocks to assist offenders to identify and work through their underlying problems before undertaking more routine change intervention work
- ◆ successful practitioners are able to delve beneath the day to day 'hum drum' and identify, what is it that motivates that one individual – a powerful ally in sustained positive outcomes

## **O/H 12**

### **The enhanced assessment process**

- ◆ the enhanced assessment process is designed to identify disenfranchised grief and, thereby, improve intervention processes and outcomes, in practice this includes:
  - discussion of loss and grief issues such as unemployment, failed relationships, loss of freedom
  - exploration of thoughts, feelings and behaviours often associated with loss and grief issues

- discussion of the tendency for men not to recognise or to mask their feelings
- an invitation to the client to think about and write down his/her particular losses, to date
- encouragement to think about/describe the feelings associated with such losses, then and now
- exploration of warning signs that indicate mounting stress
- encouragement to reflect on (negative) coping strategies eg using (more) alcohol/drugs, blaming others, engaging in offending behaviours and whether they want to change

### **O/H 14 Summary/‘In a nutshell’**

I have a strong professional interest in furthering the implementation of appropriate interventions to redress previously unidentified disenfranchised grief issues in respect of male offenders.

I believe that the enhanced framework has the potential to shed light on an issue otherwise ignored in the current Community Corrections policy/program context of bureaucratic hierarchies, paltry/limited resources and ‘throughput’.

The result of such reductionist philosophies is that staff are operating in the context of, time limited, offence

focussed interventions. While we might be winning the occasional battle, clearly, are (still) not winning the war.