



LUKENOTES

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CASE STUDY

"Father George" • Grief

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Father George, a 60 year old pastor of a large and dynamic parish, is aware that he has experienced many losses in his life, and that he has always "worked through them" by remaining steadfast in his duties and serving others. Five years ago, he officiated at the funerals of both his parents who had died within a short time of each other. At the time, Fr. George believed his grief was transformed, in part, by remaining strong for his remaining family members. He felt good about the praise and appreciation he received from his brothers and sisters for "being the strong one" in the family, and for allowing them to lean on him. During his many years as a gifted priest, he was often praised for his ability to support others in his parish during their times of need. Fr. George was stunned recently when he began experiencing intense feelings of nearly incapacitating sadness, anxiety, and fear following the death of an elderly parishioner. The situation was especially confusing to him, given that Fr. George had not been particularly close to the man or his family. Although it went against his nature and style of coping, after several meetings and some convincing, he accepted the recommendation of his Vicar for Clergy to seek an evaluation at Saint Luke Institute.

Understanding and Accepting Grief

From the beginning of his week-long evaluation, as he struggled to find words to express his feelings about his own parents' deaths five years earlier, Fr. George recognized his need to attend to his own grief. The evaluation team confirmed his growing understanding that he was likely experiencing a delayed grief response, triggered by his parishioner's death. He surprised even himself by accepting, with some degree of relief, the recommendation that he participate in residential treatment to focus on this issue. Fr. George later acknowledged that his relief stemmed from the realization that he could no longer bear up under the pressure of being in the "priest role" for both his parishioners and his own family. In fact, much of his ensuing therapy involved debunking some long-standing personal/family myths that he could not and should not attend to his own feelings, even during times of grief. He discovered that, like some other clergy he knew, he routinely rationalized his own feelings away, thinking he could either deal with them himself or reasoning that he could do nothing to change the situation. He also came to understand that it had seemed easier for him to "stuff his own feelings" than to acknowledge them in all of their complexity.

One of the most difficult aspects of therapy for Fr. George was experiencing the totality of his feelings, both positive and negative, toward his parents. Recognizing and accepting the reality of his complex feelings (including anger, in addition to love and gratitude) toward them was a

critical step in honoring their memories more honestly and completely. Fr. George felt greater peace when he realized that he was not being disloyal to his family by acknowledging his true feelings.

Managing Grief

In addition to learning how to practice self-compassion by accepting help in dealing with his own grief, Fr. George also practiced some general guiding principles about managing grief and loss. Initially, Fr. George learned that there are three basic steps to intentional grieving: acknowledging the losses, telling one's story to others, and expressing felt emotions. He now understands that feelings are critical in the grieving process and that core feelings often include anger, guilt, fear and powerlessness. He also realizes that grieving can be a long process, and that it needs to be done in each individual's own time and unique way. Two additional learnings have been very helpful to Fr. George: namely, that blaming of self, others, and God is common and that grief is not "bad" or to be avoided and should not be equated with weakness. Through his own process, Fr. George has learned that intentional grieving can lead to healing and that avoiding grief causes harm over the long term. Finally, his experience has taught him that one may feel worse before feeling better.

During treatment, Fr. George also explored applications of specific stage models of grieving, including Kubler-Ross' sequence of Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance, to better understand his own circumstances. He became more self-aware as he constructed and analyzed a grief and loss time-line. This exercise helped him to observe how grieving had been managed in his family and to look at his own early attempts at managing grief, including the use of behavioral and emotional defenses.

Through the therapeutic process, Fr. George was surprised but also enlightened to realize that the death of a sibling when he was a teenager had a profound influence on his emotional style of coping with grief throughout his lifetime. In addition, he discovered that the strategy of letter writing to his deceased family members was highly therapeutic and a source of great emotional relief. He also realized that it was especially helpful for him to share his discoveries along the way with his fellow residents and with the clinical staff at Saint Luke.

It should be noted that while Father George experienced greater self-understanding and emotional relief by actively grieving and intentionally working through grief issues relating to death and dying, many of the same techniques and methods are applicable to grief related to other losses including friendships, self-esteem, and vocation. As with many other emotional issues, the key to Fr. George beginning to work through his grief was his self-compassion, his ability to accept help and his willingness and courage to recognize that change is possible.

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