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BEYOND THE CONCEPT OF RECOVERY: GROWTH AND THE EXPERIENCE OF LOSS

RICHARD G. TEDESCHI and LAWRENCE G. CALHOUN
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Responding to D. E. Balk (2004) about use of the term recovery *to describe bereavement outcome, the authors take the view that this term is inadequate. Among the points raised are (a) the term recovery may imply a response to psychological disorder, whereas bereavement responses are generally normative; (b) recovery does not easily allow for transformative outcomes in bereavement, e.g., posttraumatic growth; and (c) terminology guides the thinking of bereaved persons, clinicians, and researchers in this area, and the term* recovery *may produce bias toward viewing bereavement as a disordered state. More neutral terms such as* change *or* resolution *avoid some of these pitfalls.*

Balk (2004) has raised some helpful and stimulating ideas in his overview of the use of the term and concept of *recovery following bereavement.* In this article we accept his recommendation that others respond to his proposals. First, we will examine the use of the concept of *recovery* in the context of grief and make suggestions that differ in some ways to Balk. Next, we examine briefly the possibilities for growth from the struggle with loss, and we conclude with some brief suggestions about possible next steps in understanding the unfolding of grief.

Recovery: Helpful (but Limited) Idea, Undesirable Term?

Although in the context of bereavement it can be argued that both the word and the concept of *recovery* can have clinical and scholarly

Received 16 June 2006; accepted 15 June 2007.
Address correspondence to Richard G. Tedeschi, Department of Psychology, 4037 Colvard, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001. E-mail: rtedesch@uncc.edu

utility (Balk, 2004), there are aspects of these that are problematical. First, to the extent that we accept the truism that "language is a living organism," the word *recovery* and its variants appears to have attained, at least in the United States, undesirable connotations both for the bereaved and for many clinicians and scholars. Many bereaved persons probably would be irritated or offended to have said of them that they were "recovering" from their bereavement, as if they had been sick. It may connote a leaving behind of their connections to their loved ones, a connection that carries much meaning and comfort. The use of the term *recovery* in the context of bereavement may also have socially undesirable consequences unintended by its users. For example, it is now a common word that is used to refer to people who are coping with addictions (although people in the addictions field view being "in recovery" as a sign of health). More importantly, perhaps, the concept of recovery does not seem to be the best way to capture, even in the "reflexive" sense suggested by Balk (2004), the experience of persons who lose a loved one.

Although grief can be an emotionally exhausting experience with many similarities to clinical depression, and although it is not universal, it is normative in circumstances of loss. What is also normative is the sense that for most people the loss is always an issue, and that missing loved ones, and remaining connected to them, is part of the bereaved person's typical experience throughout life (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). This response is different, it seems, from the experience people have in the aftermath of a clinical depression and from most other psychiatric disorders from which they "recover." Some clinicians may wish to emphasize the similarities to psychiatric disorders such as depression, and in doing so, put bereavement on the map in the DSM as more than a "V" code. Perhaps "complicated grief" can be reserved for this purpose (Bonanno, 2006). Although the normative early responses to the loss of a loved one tend to be characterized by distress, this is not true for all persons, and for most, but certainly not all (Wortman & Silver, 2001) of those who do experience significant levels of distress, the distress tends to abate with the passage of time (Bonanno, 2004). The experience of bereaved persons, at least in most Western contexts, may reflect a sense of going through difficult times, followed by times that

are experienced as less difficult, but the word *recovery*, although it may appear to fit with that experience, may currently have too much "baggage" associated with it.

Furthermore, the struggle with bereavement may produce more than recovery—many bereaved persons report growth experiences as a result of coping with bereavement (Gamino & Sewell, 2004; Riches & Dawson, 2000; Talbot, 2002; Znoj & Keller, 2002). Although perhaps an excessively simplistic proposal, why not think of bereavement as typically producing *changes*? Those changes produced by the struggle with loss typically include at least temporary negative psychological consequences for most persons, and for many the changes also include the experience of positive personal transformations, and these positive and negative responses tend to coexist. Some people do not change at all, but most do, at least for a while. It may be more useful, then, to think in terms of a more neutral concept such as the presence or absence of change, and to more fully articulate the many ways in which the struggle with "the loss of close others by death" can produce multidimensional changes that include both positive and negative elements. Only a few people need to "recover" from bereavement and some people never do. But bereavement changes most people and our task would seem to be to understand the full measure of what those changes are, and how they unfold over time. Perhaps it would be best to use words and concepts that are more neutral and allow for the representation of a much broader domain of the human experience following significant loss. No one term or concept may do the job of reflecting the diversity of experience of bereaved persons.

The question then becomes what words to best use in referring to the point at which people report they no longer consider themselves to actively experience grief, and the process leading to this outcome. Does "change" capture this idea or is it too generic? Perhaps we could simply refer to "change in the aftermath of loss." But this phrase is not only rather generic but also a little clumsy. Perhaps a compromise between "change" and the overly clinical and pathological recovery is the term *resolution*. Looking at the term *resolve* in terms of dictionary definition, we see that to resolve can mean "to fix or settle on by deliberate choice and will," "to convert or transform," or "to clear away or dispel" (*Random House College Dictionary*, 1975). All these can be aspects of bereaved

persons' attempts to manage their experience. Many bereaved persons might not see resolution as a way to characterize their grief, because they may feel that there is always some feeling for the deceased, and because there is feeling, or connection, there can not be complete resolution. Use of particular terminology guides our conception of bereavement, and what is possible or expected in the experience of bereavement.

It would be interesting to see what the bereaved themselves might say about what terms describe their experience best. Depending on their circumstances and perspective, some bereaved persons might say they recovered, some might say they reached resolution, some might say they experienced change, and others would probably indicate that none of the above capture their personal experiences. Although we surmise that many bereaved persons would not choose the term *recovery* to represent themselves, this is an empirical question, which some kind of survey might help to answer.

As far as the use of terminology by professionals goes, we recommend neutrality to protect against promoting viewpoints or assumptions that pathologize the people we study or serve. Beyond that, our choice of terminology might inadvertently promote some perspectives on bereavement that are questionable. Much of what is at issue with the choice of the term *recovery* versus something else is the question of whether or not grief is a process that leads to a conclusion, or should lead to a conclusion. For many people, the process of grief leads neither to recovery nor to resolution. For example, here are the words of a mother, 5 years after the death of her son who was killed in a shooting.

> I thought at the beginning that I couldn't survive this. I have. But it is a strange survival. I'm not the old me. I can't imagine how you get back to who you were after something like this. But I function. And in some ways better than before. I don't sweat the small stuff, as they say. But I will always be haunted by this, I think. I don't think I'll ever be able to get that night out of my mind.

Perhaps in these traumatic bereavements, one of the reasons that recovery or resolution is so hard is because of the traumatic aspect, and the PTSD-like symptoms of re-experiencing and intrusion to which people are then prone. That was the case with this mother. She could function again and she was changed in positive ways she could see, and yet was haunted by the images and

thoughts about her son's violent death. There are instances when recovery is not quite the right language and instances where recovery does not fit. Grief is not like a pathology, and here we have the example of grief that has a pathological element. Because that element of traumatic response is not likely to be easily eliminated, recovery is not quite suitable. Finally, in both kinds of situations, the positive aspects can be evident, also making recovery a term that leaves something to be desired.

For these persons, then, the idea that they have, or even will "recover," fails to accurately describe what has happened and what they expect will happen to them. The word *recovery*, then, fails to accurately describe the experience of some, perhaps many, bereaved persons.

The concept of recovery might be most applicable to people who subjectively no longer are actively suffering for their loss (i.e., it is no longer emotionally intense or debilitating). But the connotation of the term is that they have returned to the way they used to be. But many persons who experience major losses in life, even when they have not returned to the pre-loss psychological states, describe a component of their experience that has been called *posttraumatic growth* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Whether or not distress is still present, posttraumatic growth might be considered the highest form of change associated with grief, or in the word Balk (2004) preferred, *recovery*. The experience of positive change arising from the struggle with loss can occur in a substantial proportion of persons coping with bereavement, and for most grieving persons it tends to coexist with the experience of psychological distress (Cadell, Regehr, & Hemsworth, 2003; Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2003). This mixture of suffering and growth is not well represented by a term such as *recovery*. The enduring pain doesn't feel like recovery, and the growth seems to extend beyond it.

To avoid any potential misinterpretation (Wortman, 2004), it is important to make clear that our assumption, suggested by the current data on the grief experience, is that major losses lead to major emotional distress for most people and this distress tends to persist for some time, and for a few this distress can last many years. However, it is also true that for many persons, the struggle with loss and grief can be accompanied by the experience of positive change, that is, posttraumatic growth. In what follows we will review the forms that growth associated with the struggle with grief

can take and then we will make some suggestions about directions that research on grief might take.

Struggle with Loss and the Experience of Growth

The view that the struggle with grief can, at least for some persons, lead to personal transformations that are experienced as uniquely positive is neither new nor modern (Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998). The idea that the confrontation with suffering, loss, and grief can lead, along with the great distress such circumstances can produce, to positive transformations is ancient. What is somewhat new[1] is the systematic attention given to this experience by scholars and clinicians working in the areas of trauma and grief (Aldwin, 1994; Hogan & Schmidt, 2002; Nerken, 1993; O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Schaefer & Moos, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). The kinds of growth experiences described by persons who have faced the struggle with bereavement tend to fall into five general categories: the experience of the emergence of new possibilities, changes in relationships with others, an increased sense of personal strength, a greater appreciation for life, and changes in existential and spiritual orientations. More extensive descriptions of these dimensions are available elsewhere (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), and we will provide only brief overviews of each, with illustrations from the experience of bereaved persons.

New Possibilities

The experience of a group of widows (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989–1990) illustrates the way in which bereavement, along with the distress it typically produces, can, for some people lead to the opening of new doors in life. Many found themselves faced with tasks that their husbands had taken in their traditional marriages. Some widows reported handling finances and doing physical labor, even

[1]Although systematic research investigations, especially with a quantitative focus, are of somewhat recent vintage, the idea that the struggle with major life challenges and suffering can produce positive change is ancient, and several modern scholars have already described the possibilities for growth in the struggle with crisis, including Caplan (1964), Frankl (1963), Yalom (1980), and scholars working within the tradition of humanistic psychology (Greening, 2001).

working on cars—things they had never done before. They felt good about finding that they had these abilities. We have also found bereaved parents to sometimes report finding new paths in life in the aftermath of the deaths of their children. Here is an example of a mother who had cared for her son throughout his cancer treatments. She developed nursing skills, knowledge, and a sense that she was experienced in facing death.

> I've become very empathic towards anybody in pain and anybody in any kind of grief. I think that's one reason why I went into oncology nursing was because I felt so comfortable around grief. I would rather be around someone who was in pain rather than someone who wasn't. And I felt very comfortable around death and dying because I've learned so much about it and love talking about it.

Changes in Relationships

The death of a loved can lead to relationship difficulties, but for some bereaved persons, a significant positive change occurs in their relationships with other persons. They experience growth in this domain as a greater sense of compassion and connectedness to other human beings, perhaps especially to others who undergo similar losses, and an experience of greater intimacy with some friends and family members. These responses are reflected in the following comments from bereaved parents.

> We realize that life is precious and that we don't take each other for granted. In fact my daughter in Raleigh, I talk to her almost every day on the phone, and I've found I've become much more protective than I've been before. And I'm also very much more generous with her than I have been with her previously.

More Vulnerable, Yet Stronger

The encounter with major losses teaches the bitter lesson that the individual is vulnerable to experiencing great suffering. The death of a loved one teaches that very bad things can happen in life. However, a prevalent theme in the experiences of bereaved persons is that that they have experienced a major, difficult trial in life, and if they managed merely to get through that, then their understanding of their own strength is increased.

I've been through the absolute worst that I know. And no matter what happens, I'll be able to deal with it.

Greater Appreciation

The loss or the threat of loss can lead to perspective change in which the individual comes to better appreciate some aspects of life (Jordan, 2000).

And I realized before, well you say you realize, you realize things, you read 'em and say yeah that's right you know like God first. And you think your marriage then your family and children and read that and say something like this happens and you know it becomes more real to you, that priority and what's important. So you know it maybe intellectually before, but you realize it in a different way.

Existential and Spiritual Growth

For many persons, the loss of loved ones can lead to a struggle to make sense of and find a purpose in their lives. Such spiritual and existential experiences are more likely when the loss does not "fit" into the individual's general worldview (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2006; Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004) and this kind of struggle may be one of the most important ways in which grief can lead to significant personal changes. Deaths that are sudden, unexpected, violent, or the deaths of children may be more likely to lead to ruminations about causes, reasons, purposes, and existential meanings of the loss. For some, an encounter with a loss may have elements of senselessness, may remain unresolved and may produce continuing questioning, doubts, and confusion. Even when the loss was within the domain of what might culturally be considered natural and expected, the reminder of one's own mortality may lead some persons to engage in existential considerations that may lead to a more satisfactory set of answers to the questions about one's purpose in life (Campbell, Brunell, & Foster, 2004; Martin, Campbell, & Henry, 2004).

The main thing is the strength. The understanding that God is going to get you through anything that happens to you. And that gives you a different outlook on life. That gives you a different view of how to handle things. That takes away a lot of the fear and trepidation that most of us walk

> through life with, and that doesn't mean I don't have any fear or that I don't think about the future or any of that stuff. I do, just like normal people. But I'm not constantly worried about it.

The report of positive spiritual change by individuals struggling with loss indicate that their understanding may sometimes be radically different from before the confrontation with loss. However, the current ways of understanding their purpose in life and connection to something experienced as transcendent are viewed as much more satisfactory than it was before the loss (Calhoun, Tedeschi, & Lincourt, 1992). The trajectories and the content of such experiences differ greatly between individuals, and for some, the journey leaves them in a much less satisfactory place. For some, then, the encounter with bereavement and the struggle with grief represent much more than spiritual recovery. Although the pain of the loss can persist, it does so alongside deeper and more satisfying understandings of the individual's place and purpose in the world. Pargament, Magyar, Benore, and Mahoney (2005) suggested that just as people make cognitive appraisals of traumatic events, they also make spiritual appraisals. They described losses of the sacred aspects of people's lives that are accompanied by sadness and rumination but also by self-reflection and posttraumatic growth. Interestingly, persons who saw their losses as an example of "desecration" missed fewer days of work, but they were angrier and showed less posttraumatic growth. These findings demonstrate the complexity of responses to loss—the mixture of the positive and the negative. It should also be clarified here that many persons do not show posttraumatic growth, and this kind of outcome should not be held out as a new expectation for full "recovery." There may be various reasons why certain persons do not report growth in the aftermath of their losses. These include certain coping patterns (Znoj, 2006) and social constraints on disclosures of grief (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

Understanding *Recovery* Further: Next Steps

Although in the past few years great progress has been made in the process of understanding what actually happens in the lives of grieving persons, clearly there is much that still needs to be known and following are some suggestions for possible avenues

of inquiry into the changes that can occur in the aftermath of bereavement.

Contemporary scholarship encourages new investigators to focus on knowing more and more about less and less. The extensive investigation of very limited phenomena is a laudable goal to be sure, but it perhaps may be time for the field to widen the focus of its lens and begin to encourage general ways of understanding the process of grief from a wider and more comprehensive perspective. All investigators are constrained by the resources available and by the ways in which they themselves have been trained, but it seems desirable to begin to encourage investigators to look at grief using methodologies that not only acknowledge but actually examine a variety of mutually influential psychological, social, and even biological variables—within the same investigation. One next step, then, may be to encourage the development of broader and more comprehensive models and longitudinal research studies of the grief process (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Goss & Klass, 2005).

One element that seems desirable to include in broader investigations of the grief process is the close by, proximate socio-cultural net of influences within which individuals exist. This suggestion is by no means new (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), but it is one about which contemporary researchers and clinicians need to be reminded. Although some areas (e.g., social support) have been widely investigated, very little is known about the influence of the characteristics and dimensions of the proximate social worlds of individuals. Specific areas of investigation could include the experience of social constraint or freedom about disclosing grief-related content in the context of primary references groups (neighborhood, extended family, network of close friends), the degree to which there is, or is not, congruence between the content and process of grieving person's cognitive and emotional experiences and those of significant others (e.g., to what extent is the "co-rumination" on the part of one parent congruent with the other and with other members of the family), and the ways in which highly significant others and members of primary reference groups respond to visible signs and direct expressions of the internal grief experience are just some of the possible ways of taking the next step of looking at the mutual influence of the individual's grief experience and his or her proximate socio-cultural niche

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Finally, although we do not think that we should abandon highly structured, quantitative investigations of grief, it seems desirable to continue to encourage the utilization of methods that allow the intensive study of the grief experience. A promising way to understand the experience of grieving persons is the increased use of qualitative approaches to research. However, it seems desirable to encourage qualitative methodologies that combine the promise of faithfully reflecting the actual experience of grieving persons with ways of data collection and analysis that offer at least some degree of replicability (Carverhill, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

It has become clearer with the progress in understanding made in recent years that responses to loss are complicated, involving the interplay of individuals, significant others and close-by "micro-systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and broader societal influences (Goss & Klass, 2005), along with an oscillating set of experiences where positive and negative are intermixed over time (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Because of this better understanding of grief, the word *recovery* seems a bit too constraining and limited. A better guide for researchers, and ultimately clinicians and the bereaved as well, is to make the assumption that grief involves changes over time that include a mixture of the positive and the negative (Znoj & Keller, 2002) across a long and complicated trajectory. To clarify this process further, researchers need to engage in longitudinal research that looks at a broad array of variables guided by broad models of change, as well as the study of the grief of people whose experiences can be studied intensively but reliably.

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