

Grief and IFS: Mapping the Terrain – Derek P. Scott

N.B. To access the links referenced in this article please go to the online source.

In this world of the finite we attach. We attach to our mothers, our fathers, to our identity, our partners, to our ideas of ourselves, our health, our children, our assumptions... we live in a world defined by our attachments. And in this finite world of change we lose much of that to which we are attached. Our personality systems mount a response to loss and the process we go through as a result of these lost attachments we call grieving.

These words sound very simple yet describe a process at times overwhelming, bewildering, isolating and so painful it can sometimes feel that to continue living is a questionable choice.

What can the IFS model offer by way of comfort? How can it illuminate the grief response? In order to answer this question I think it will be helpful to first consider the strengths and limitations of current approaches. For readers wishing to bypass this review, please skip ahead to "Compassion heals."

The traditional monolithic view of the personality has informed the development of grief theory. For a comprehensive overview of the field I recommend this article from the *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, "Connections between counseling theories and current theories of grief and mourning".

There is a distinction often made in the field of Thanatology between grieving a loss and mourning a loss. Grieving is considered to be the involuntary passive reaction; mourning the active process of coping. I consider both terms to be referring to different parts, or clusters of parts involved in the process so will use the terms somewhat interchangeably. Although many parts of our systems that are involved in responding to loss will become activated as a result of any significant loss, I am focusing this discussion on death-related losses and bereavement.

Stage and Phase theories of Grief

Many counsellors and therapists use the stage and phase theories of grief. Whilst often providing comfort and a "roadmap" for some people and "making sense" of the bewilderment common in bereavement; for others these stages and phases become expectations about how one "should" grieve and can activate anxious parts concerned with "getting it right". Where I think these descriptive theories are extremely helpful is in identifying the cluster of parts connected to the loss response. Parkes described numbness, yearning, searching, disorganization, despair and reorganization which we may, through the IFS lens, identify as parts commonly activated in response to loss. This list is neither intended to be prescriptive nor exhaustive, but can guide our enquiry of the parts involved.

Crisis of Meaning

Loss also invites questions of meaning for some parts. If I lose my license to drive what does that mean for my parts connected to driving? How will I need to engage differently with the world? These questions occur as a loss is experienced within the relative stability of the rest of the personality system as well as external systems. But a more significant loss (bereavement) affects so many parts at once that the distress and bewilderment is experienced throughout the system as some parts may need to redefine their role. For example, if my child dies do I still have a parenting part? So much of the internal and external systems shift simultaneously that there may be a crisis of meaning experienced within the system. Attending to the presenting cluster in the crisis will invariably invite other parts to come to the fore that will have strategies for coping while the other parts live into the loss and engage in the search for meaning. Our assistance here is to hold as much Self energy as we can to bear witness to the distressed parts; thereby inviting the client to do the same and discover their internal resources.

Limits of the Client-Centered approach

What informs much grief counselling from the viewpoint of the monolithic model of the personality is an approach that invites the counsellor/therapist to act as a proxy for the client's Self (offering the unconditional positive regard so valued by those trained in the Rogerian method). In light of the counsellor's compassion the client's parts will blend and then vent the affect/beliefs that they are holding. The client's system may experience distress and/or relief from this expression, yet from an IFS perspective the parts have not been witnessed by the client's Self, nor have they been unburdened as this is not attended to within the Rogerian framework. The next time they are triggered, when the next wave of grief hits, they will likely blend and flood again. While it is true that parts need to have their feelings witnessed, it is not a sufficient condition, as Rando notes, to be able to work through the loss. Counsellors and therapists need to be able to facilitate a bereaved client's journey through the loss process, and that goal is best served by being a "parts detector". Through the IFS lens the apparent linearity of Worden's model of tasks and Rando's "6 'R' Processes" may be revisited and considered to be aspects of grief (parts) that can and do exist at the same time.

The Dual-Process model

The dual process model (DPM) of coping with bereavement (DPM) identifies (from an IFS perspective) two clusters of parts: one cluster is oriented towards the loss; the other towards restoration (dealing with the new complexities in life for the bereaved that are occasioned by the loss). Stroebe and Schut contend that these two models (clusters) oscillate as the mourning proceeds – a dance very familiar to the IFS therapist as affect-laden parts may occupy the attention of the client, then pragmatic protectors may hold the floor to afford a break from the intensity of the other parts. It is this dance of self-regulation that allows the bereaved to avoid psychic numbing on the one hand and emotional flooding on the other.

Grief and Gender

It bears mentioning here that some proponents of the DPM see these clusters as gendered: that men's grief will be more restoration focused; women's loss-orientated. Similarly the term "instrumental grief" has been applied as a descriptor of men's grief responses ("intuitive" for women). Aside from the heterosexist and monogenderist bias exhibited here the normalising of grief responses attributed to the presenting gender naively assumes that there is an essentialist "natural" difference in grieving. What is more likely happening here is that women are socialized to have readier access to loss-oriented responses, with the restoration-focused cluster being exiled. The reverse is likely true for men. Loss responses in relation to gender may also be culturally and generationally informed. To assume that men don't have or have access to affect-laden parts that respond to loss is to do men a disservice. To assume women don't have or have access to parts capable of restoration is similarly damaging in a therapeutic context. Both clusters will present themselves and it behooves the IFS therapist to be curious about the process whereby a cluster may have been exiled.

Limitations of the Interpersonal approach

For therapists/counsellors trained in the interpersonal process approach this will seem like a radical reorienting of their understanding of the healing process. Yet the interpersonal process, which "is built upon a base of three traditions: interpersonal theory (Sullivan, 1968), object relations (Kernberg, 1968), and family systems (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996)" (Connections between counseling theories and current theories of grief and mourning) and assumes that the relationship with the therapist can facilitate repair and greater flexibility in other relationships, does not access the exiled parts. As I argue in "Counting our Losses" (Harris, 2011, p. 187), object relations theory may be seen as referring to the internalization of relationships: multiple subjects engaging with multiple objects. Attachment disordered relationships – and the parts engaged in them – can remain exiled while other parts engage with the therapist; yet when we pay attention to the rupture that inevitably occurs in the therapeutic relationship, we can begin to access the deeper exiles connected to attachment. Once the Self-led therapist takes responsibility for their blended part that contributed to the break in the alliance, the client's protective system may relax and allow access to the triggered exiled part.

Compassion Heals: An IFS perspective on Bereavement

1. Compassion heals. Bringing compassion to another invites their compassion for their own parts
2. The more significant the loss, the more profound the disruption to the system
3. The system responses to the loss may be manager led, firefighter driven or characterized by erupting exiles
4. The protective system may be in disarray and unable to function normally; resulting in the client feeling particularly vulnerable
5. The protective system may become entrenched because of the perceived threat from or to the exiles
6. Present loss experiences trigger parts connected to former loss events seeking healing
7. Unburdening parts in the loss cluster will facilitate healing and greater resiliency in terms of subsequent losses

Some guiding principles in working with the bereaved from an IFS perspective

While acknowledging the needs of the cluster of parts oriented towards restoration I am focusing the following on the cluster of parts responding to the loss.

1. Do your best to be aware of your own “blindspots” (your own parts connected to grief) William Worden’s Loss History can be a helpful tool in accessing them

As you work your way through the questions you will become aware of different parts of your system connected to loss events in your life.

2. If the client’s grief is fresh and feels raw then s/he client will be presenting as blended parts. Work with direct access until there is less agitation presenting in the system, i.e. bring curiosity and compassion to the blended part as you hold the Self energy not available to the client.

3. Be aware of the “Loss cluster” generally evoked in bereavement. These are parts that hold:

- disbelief
- numbness
- depression
- sadness
- missing/yearning
- protest (anger)
- guilt
- powerlessness/despair/resignation

3.a.i Common Managers

Disbelief.

The parts that initially present after a significant loss are disbelieving and numbing protectors. If you think back to a time when you lost your car keys or misplaced your car you will probably remember a part telling you, “This can’t have happened, I can’t have lost my keys/car.” The same disbelieving protector gets activated with significant loss, This is why a recently bereaved spouse or partner, for example, is often able to function well at the funeral, deliver a eulogy, etc. The protective system is facilitating what passes for “normal” functioning and folkloric wisdom tells us it “hasn’t hit them yet”. It seems to me that as these protectors are taking the lead as the other parts of the system impacted by the loss are afforded time to adjust to the new reality. It is as if the sad, yearning, guilty and protesting parts sit behind the protectors that allow the information to be gradually filtered to them.

Numbing

This protector has to work very hard in the face of significant loss to prevent the system from being overwhelmed by parts holding the feelings. It can hold the reins for a long time; but bursts of feeling tend to erupt through it/past it and are often experienced as waves of feeling coming from the exiled parts.

Depression

As when any other time when this manager part shows up, a helpful question to ask it is, “What part, or who are you depressing?” This part also works very hard as a response to loss to keep other (exiled) parts from coming into consciousness.

3.a.ii Working with the Manager Protectors

As always take the time to acknowledge and appreciate the work that these protectors are doing. Be aware that they may be responding to a loss event from the past so may need to be updated about who you are and what year it is (if they think you are 10 years old they will not be inclined to relax their protective stance). Ask them about their concerns re: you accessing the parts they are connected to. Commonly these will include fear of overwhelm. Ask what might help with overwhelm: does the system need time? Would the managers be willing to work with you as the exiles present their information to you? If so they may agree to come in and block the exile after some information has been released and then integrated into the system; giving other parts a chance to accommodate to what is being released into the system. You may also ask manager parts to assess how much Self energy you are bringing to your enquiry; and if there is the requisite “critical mass” to proceed. If not then you probably have a part blending with you that has an agenda with regard to the exiles other than simple connection and witnessing.

3.b.i. Common Exiles

Sadness

When I am talking about exiles here I am not assuming that there is a part that is “only” sad or guilty etc, but that the part leads with that feeling. Current losses, as stated earlier, will evoke former loss experiences and parts that present with sadness are often burdened with holding the weight of unresolved events from childhood. Children’s grief is often not well supported (if you took the “Loss History” questionnaire you probably have a sense of your own) and the experience of sad parts in the loss cluster can be exiled. As parent’s dismiss or minimise the experience of losing a pet, or moving house, or changing school, divorce etc, parts that experience the distress become exiled as protectors mimic the parental injunctions to ignore the agitation in the system.

The part burdened with sadness from earlier losses will become activated by the disruption occasioned by the present loss and will seek attention – with all the intensity that children or child parts open to in their distress. Following the manager’s concern about overwhelm it is important to inform the sad part know that you want to get to know it better, and in order to do that it would be helpful for it to present its information to you less powerfully. Let it know that if it floods you, which it may have felt it had to do to get your attention, then you can’t see it. Make sure it knows that this is not a rejection, but an invitation to present in a way that enables it to be seen by you and is less activating of the protectors.

Missing and Yearning

Often experienced as a gut feeling of emptiness, missing and yearning exiles just want what has been lost to come back. Often young parts (6 and under) don’t comprehend the permanence of loss and will just want the person/thing back; repeatedly asking why they can’t have them/it back. These parts are often evoked by parental loss as parts of the system from different ages miss the parent. Although hearing the distress of this part can be activating of caregiver parts that want to soothe its distress, this part is best served by attending to it, acknowledging what a hard spot it is in, and gently enquiring of it how it has come about that it is all alone there in its unhappiness.

As with all exiles, when it knows it has your attention and you hold sufficient Self energy to allow it to tell you its story without moving to “fix” or change it (and thereby implicitly give the message that you consider there to be something wrong with the part as it is) it will be able to let you know more about the burdens it is carrying, and when fully witnessed can release its distress.

Protest (anger)

“I don’t want this to be true!” If only things could be the way they were before the loss occurred; it seems so unfair that this has happened. Poet Dylan Thomas believed his dying father should, “Rage, rage against the dying of the light” and it is important to validate the protesting parts. Protesting parts may be more difficult to access for women

socialized into “good girl” anger-denying roles (similarly sad parts may activate more protector parts for men). The anger these parts hold, particularly if directed towards the deceased (“I’m so mad at you for leaving me!”) may be deemed unacceptable by protector parts and displaced. It is helpful to normalise the response of these parts to help people “join the dots” from their angry behaviour to the protesting part. Very commonly after the death of an animal companion mourners will attempt to replace the animal (and thereby avoid the grief) too soon. As a result the new animal will often exhibit “behavioural problems” as it has become the repository for a lot of the resentment that it simply is not, and cannot be the beloved pet who has gone.

Anger can also be a firefighter protector and it is always helpful to ask the part if it is connected to other, vulnerable parts.

Guilt

Significant loss often invites parts that reflect on the “bad” things they said and did in the relationship. The manager protector’s voice telling us we “should” have done more, “should” have been a better spouse/friend/kid will point the way to parts experiencing guilt. If these well-intentioned managers (concerned with ensuring that you are a good and virtuous person) will allow you access to the guilty exiled part then you can discover more about its burden. Listening to a guilty part’s regret can bring it comfort and it may be helpful to let it know that if there were things it wanted to do but didn’t then it is probably because other parts were in the lead and it was literally unable to do what it needed. Once a part is invited to recognise that it was unable and not merely unwilling to do the things it regrets it may experience a lessening of the guilt.

Often when a guilty part is tracked in the system it will hold big feelings about something it has done as a child in relation to another. Letting it know that you get how bad it feels can provide it some relief. Because children’s guilt can be so huge in relation to the crime (“I stole my brother’s candy bar and blamed the dog”) their “confessions” can activate parts that find them sweet or silly. It is important to be vigilant and ensure that these protectors do not blend and minimise/trivialize the distress of the guilt-ridden part.

Powerlessness/despair/resignation

Parts can and do feel sad, mad and bad; yet their feelings do not alter the fact of the loss. The irreversibility of the loss, the “death permanence” so difficult for young parts to grasp conceptually is lived into for a time and the reality of the situation activates this grouping of parts. Expressed through different terms, there is a recognition from these parts that we are powerless to change our reality and that loss is certain and inevitable. This recognition can be humbling and inviting of resigned, despairing or hopeless parts. Again these parts may activate parts of the counsellor/therapist that are uncomfortable with witnessing, and so attending to these uncomfortable parts internally is essential in asking them not to blend so you can continue to attend to the other’s system.

The experience and response of these parts is a normal response to significant loss.

3.b.ii. **Working with the exiles**

It is my experience that very few of us were supported in our grieving as children experiencing loss. In the face of parental/social discomfort and misperceptions of how children grieve, the lack of appropriate support and interventions resulted in the grief cluster being burdened with extreme feelings and beliefs that did not get to be witnessed or gently corrected at the time (“No honey, sticking pins into the doll didn’t kill your grandmother”).

My hope is that as the legitimacy of Thanatology informs and reshapes our “death-denying” culture things are changing. But my guess is that people over 25 are pretty much guaranteed to have grief-related exiles.

I think it is important to make a distinction here between the roles of the parts informing the grief cluster and burdened exiles. I believe that there are parts in the system that have the “job” of responding to the human condition of finitude and attaching and losing. When we experience a loss we will notice our sad, protesting, missing, guilty and resigned parts becoming activated. By attending to them as and when they arise we are able to go about our lives and move through our grief work without becoming overwhelmed, stuck or incapacitated. However, because many of these parts are burdened from earlier loss experiences, we need to help them to release the burdens that interfere with their ability to help us. This is why they will ride the wave of disruption flowing through the system after a significant loss in order to get our attention so the system can move towards healthier functioning.

4. **Be alert to the special considerations of complicated grief**

Complicated or complex grief can result from losses where the death is sudden and therefore unexpected, traumatic (involving suicide, homicide or mutilation), involves extreme or prolonged suffering and distress or occurs “out of order” (as in the death of a child). Disenfranchised grief resulting from a loss that is not socially supported or recognised may also result in a more complex response. Complex grief can also result from an ambivalent relationship (for example to an abusive parent or partner).

Complex grief activates protective managers that may not be seen in less complex grief, due to the intense affect and or isolation experienced by the exiled parts. These managers are not “unique” in their responding to complex grief however, and it is prudent to be alert to their strategies for any loss experience.

This cluster of managers tend to use one or more of the following strategies to ensure the exiles don't "threaten" the system:

- **Postponing** – agreeing that there is griefwork to be done but "later". When asked to be specific about "when" these parts become evasive or propose a future time that subsequently is not used for attending to the other parts
- **Displacing** – as mentioned earlier with regard to anger, the emotional responses connected to parts grieving the loss are displaced onto other targets; being sad about a movie, angry about poor service in a restaurant etc.
- **Replacing** – reinvesting too quickly after a significant loss, often a strategy in reproductive loss to ameliorate the disenfranchisement
- **Minimising** – cognitively diluting the experience of parts with big feelings by framing the relationship as one that "wasn't really that close"
- **Avoiding** – not going to the gravesite or talking about the loss. Removing pictures and not going to places that will evoke memories of the deceased and activate the exiled parts
- **Somaticising** – bringing physical distress into the system (migraines, gastrointestinal distress, sleep disturbances) to distract from or channel the emotional responses of exiled parts
- **Shaming** – particularly present in disenfranchised grief, shaming protectors will reinforce the social belief about the loss being one that the person is not "entitled" to grieve. Miscarriage, loss of a child who is a rapist, death of a spouse to AIDS; these are examples of losses that may carry a stigma or be trivialized by the broader community

5. **Be aware of polarizations.** No relationship is without its polarized parts and especially so when the relationship has been abusive in some way. Therapist/counsellor parts that may wish to support the part that is glad of the death because it means the end of being hurt; and in so doing may inadvertently silence or re-exile a polarized part that misses the deceased and wants him/her back. What are typically defined as "ambivalent relationships" can lead to complex grief. But attending to the natural (if at times extreme) polarizations within the system can facilitate the more complex responses being validated.

6. **Share the above information with clients.** Psychoeducational interventions have the effect of normalising and validating the experiences of the parts and may facilitate protector parts relaxing sufficiently to allow exiles to be recognised. Be sure that you are not determining the client's experience, merely floating what you know by their system to see if it has any resonance. This is particularly important to bear in mind with compliant clients, or clients' seeking a way to comprehend what is happening to them. Whilst it can be extremely helpful to articulate the terrain of grief, it is important for the counsellor/therapist to attend to their own parts that might have an agenda about how the client moves through the mourning process. Otherwise compliant parts might "produce" according to the expectations of the counsellor/therapist's parts and this may inhibit rather than facilitate the process.

7. **Bear in mind that no two personality systems are alike** and there are many individual factors that may contribute to the grief journey. Whilst attaching and losing are universal experiences and every individual has parts that respond to loss, the unfolding of those parts is always unique.

8. **Firefighters.** Inform the client that as they become more aware of exiled parts they can expect increased firefighter activity. I have not focused at all on firefighters in this article because firefighter activity (intended to distract from the activated exile) does not seem to be unique to coping with loss. The firefighter protectors may be expected to do what they always do in light of activated exiled parts related to loss.

That being said, the firefighter activity may increase (drinking, drugging, raging, TV watching, food bingeing, sex bingeing, overworking etc.) as ways of coping with increasingly activated exiles. It is also possible for new firefighter activity to emerge at this time. For example suicidal ideation is common after the death of a child and may be a firefighter (or manager) protector's solution to the pain of the other parts. Firefighter activities formerly prohibited by manager parts may now experience greater support within the system and alcohol use or sex bingeing may become activities of choice; leading to an increased sense of “not knowing who I am” in the swirl of systemic disruption occasioned by the loss event. When the system is primarily firefighter driven prior to the presenting loss event, the firefighter activity may have become chronic in response to one or more significant childhood loss.

9. **Transpersonal phenomena.** Traumatic loss, may be defined as a loss or losses that are so intense that they profoundly overwhelm the resources of the bereaved (for example being witness to the murder of a loved one). As in other trauma, particularly when experienced at a young age, these incidences can magnetize beings or entities that are not inherent to the personality system, but can enter in from elsewhere. Clients often report that these entities don't “feel” like a part and a helpful assessment tool is to ask the part/critter if it is a part of the system. It will say no. Generally speaking they have a limited presentation (perhaps repeating one phrase over and over such as “It's your fault”, “You are evil” or somesuch) and when asked do not have the full presence and history in the system that a part does. They may also intrude in individuals with a propensity for psi phenomena (thought to occur in about 15% of the population) that have not experienced traumatic loss.

These “critters” (as Dick Schwartz refers to them) need to be expelled from the system. It is possible to bring Self energy to them, let them know that this is not their home, and invite them to leave and enter the light to continue on their journey to their true home. If a critter refuses to leave then it must be clearly and firmly directed to do so. Sometimes there may be parts of the system attached to the critter or worried about its absence so it is important to reassure those parts that the system will be fine without it and with Self in the lead.

Once the critter has left the parts that inadvertently magnetized its presence can be attended to.

To sum up, the IFS model offers much to the bereaved individual. Traditional work in the field of Thanatology can and does recognise the affective states (parts with big feelings) and what are often termed mechanisms of avoidance (the protective system). What IFS offers is an understanding of the relationship between the two, an appreciation of how Self energy is available to all clients for healing burdened parts in the grief cluster, and how to therefore facilitate a return to equilibrium within the system more efficiently and effectively than using traditional methods entrenched in the monolithic model of the personality. The compassionate unburdening of grieving parts and the establishment of a Self-led relationship with the grief cluster and the restoration cluster serves to facilitate confidence that the inevitable future losses need not be threatening to the system. As the grief/restoration related parts learn to trust that Self energy can lead the system there may be less concern about the inevitable future losses, and perhaps a greater readiness to attach.