



Sub-module 3.3 - Coping behaviors and defense mechanisms

Faced with the intense pain of grief, grieving individuals can adopt various coping behaviors and defense mechanisms to manage their emotions and get through this ordeal. These strategies, although sometimes necessary in the short term, can become inappropriate or counterproductive if they are prolonged over time. It is essential for the GRIEF COACH to understand these mechanisms in order to help bereaved individuals develop healthier and more sustainable coping strategies.

One of the common defense mechanisms in grief is denial. Denial can manifest as a refusal to believe in the reality of loss, a minimization of its emotional impact, or an attempt to continue living as if nothing has changed. For example, someone who has lost their spouse may continue setting the table for two, talking about them in the present tense, or avoiding conversations related to their death. Although denial can provide temporary relief from pain, it can hinder the healing process if it is prolonged over time.

Another common defense mechanism is emotional repression. Grieving individuals may try to suppress their painful emotions, ignore them, or hide them behind a facade of normality. They can immerse themselves in work, daily tasks or distractions to avoid fully feeling their grief. For example, a parent who lost a child might overinvest in the activities of their other children without allowing themselves time to grieve or express their sorrow. Although emotional repression may seem effective in the short term, it can lead to unresolved grief and long-term emotional problems.

Search for meaning is a common coping behavior in grief. Grieving individuals may try to find an explanation or meaning for their loss to make this experience more bearable. They

may turn to religion, spirituality, or personal beliefs to find comfort and meaning in their suffering. For instance, a person who has lost a loved one due to a long illness may find some solace in the idea that this person is no longer suffering and is watching over them from beyond. While the search for meaning can be a healthy coping strategy, it can also lead to painful existential questions or a questioning of fundamental beliefs.

Avoidance is another common defense mechanism in grief. Grieving individuals may avoid situations, places, or people that remind them of the loss in order to protect themselves from emotional pain. They may stop frequenting certain places, participating in family events, or interacting with mutual friends. For example, a person who lost a child may avoid parks, schools, or family gatherings where the presence of other children revives their pain. Although avoidance can offer temporary relief, it can hinder the healing process by preventing the bereaved from facing their emotions and adapting to the new reality.

Seeking social support is a healthy and crucial coping behavior in grief. Grieving individuals may seek comfort, understanding, and help from their surroundings, support groups, or professionals. They may feel the need to talk about their loss, share their memories and emotions, and feel supported in this ordeal. For example, a person who has lost a parent may find comfort in sharing anecdotes with their siblings or participating in a support group for the bereaved. Seeking social support is an essential adaptation strategy, as it allows for breaking isolation, normalizing emotions, and finding resources to get through grief.

The role of the GRIEF COACH is to help the grieving individuals identify their defensive mechanisms and coping behaviors, and assess whether they are appropriate or not. The GRIEF COACH can encourage grieving individuals to express their emotions healthily, gradually face painful situations, and seek support from their environment. They can also assist in developing healthier coping strategies, such as practicing mindfulness, creatively expressing their emotions, or engaging in meaningful activities. By accompanying the bereaved in exploring their defense mechanisms and guiding them towards more appropriate coping strategies, the GRIEF COACH can promote a healthier and more sustainable healing process.

Takeaways:

1. Grieving individuals may adopt various coping behaviors and defense mechanisms to manage their emotions, but these strategies could become inappropriate if they extend over time.
2. Denial, which manifests as a refusal to believe in the reality of the loss or a minimization of its emotional impact, can offer temporary relief but can hinder the healing process if prolonged.

3. Emotional repression, which consists of suppressing or ignoring painful emotions, may seem effective in the short term but can lead to unresolved grief and long-term emotional issues.
4. The search for meaning, which aims at finding an explanation or meaning to the loss, can be a healthy adaptation strategy but may also lead to painful existential questions.
5. Avoidance of situations, places, or individuals that remind of the loss can offer temporary relief but hinder the healing process by preventing the individual from addressing their emotions.
6. Seeking social support from one's surroundings, support groups, or professionals is a crucial and healthy coping behavior for breaking isolation, normalizing emotions, and finding resources.
7. The role of the GRIEF COACH is to assist grieving individuals in identifying their defense mechanisms, evaluating whether they are appropriate, and developing healthier adaptation strategies to promote a sustainable healing process.