



#### Sub-module 4.8 - Colin Murray Parkes's Theory of Grief as a Psychosocial Transition

The theory of grief as a psychosocial transition, developed by British psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes, offers an original and enlightening perspective on the process of grief. According to this theory, grief is not only a painful emotional experience but also a major psychosocial transition that shakes the foundations of the grieving individual's identity, beliefs, and relationships. Parkes emphasizes that the loss of a loved one involves not only the loss of the person themselves, but also the loss of a social role, status, lifestyle, and worldview. Grief is therefore a process of adapting to these multiple losses and of rebuilding oneself in a deeply transformed world.

Parkes describes grief as a journey through different phases of psychosocial transition. The first phase is one of shock and numbness, where the grieving person struggles to believe and accept the reality of the loss. This phase can be accompanied by a sense of unreality, confusion, and denial, as well as physical reactions such as insomnia, loss of appetite, or palpitations. The second phase is one of yearning and searching, where the grieving person feels an intense longing for the lost person and may feel as though they perceive or communicate with them. This phase can be accompanied by rumination, dreams or hallucinations, as well as restlessness and desperate search for meaning. For example, a person who has lost their spouse may continue to talk to them, prepare their favorite meals, or wait for their return, while experiencing profound distress over their absence.

The third phase is one of disorganization and despair, where the grieving person becomes fully aware of the reality and irreversibility of the loss. This phase can be accompanied by intense sadness, a feeling of emptiness and absurdity, and a questioning of core beliefs and values. The grieving person might feel as though they are losing themselves, not knowing

who they are or how to live without the person they have lost. They can also experience anger, guilt, or bitterness over this unjust and incomprehensible loss. For example, a person who has lost their child may sink into deep despair, question their faith in God or in life, and experience intense rage against the world.

The fourth and final phase is one of reorganization and renewal, where the grieving person begins to adapt to the loss and to rebuild their life on new terms. This phase involves active grieving work, where the grieving person learns to live with the absence of the loved one, internalizes their memories and values, and invests in new projects and relationships. It can also involve a redefinition of oneself, one's roles and priorities, as well as a quest for meaning and personal growth. For example, a person who has lost their best friend might decide to join a charity in their memory, reconnect with former artistic projects, or travel to broaden their horizons. This phase does not erase the pain of loss, but allows it to be integrated into a life that has found meaning and direction again.

Parkes emphasizes that these phases are not linear or universal, but represent common stages in the psychosocial transition process related to grief. Every grieving person will experience these phases in their own way and at their own pace, with possible reversals and overlaps. Some people may become stuck in a particular phase, while others may move through them more quickly or easily. The role of the GRIEF COACH is to accompany grieving individuals through this psychosocial transition, helping them understand and accept the profound changes taking place within and around them. They can guide them in exploring their emotions, beliefs, and relationships, and support them in the search for new landmarks and perspectives.

The GRIEF COACH can rely on Parkes's theory to normalize grief reactions and place them in a psychosocial transition process. They can help grieving individuals identify the various losses they are going through, beyond the loss of the person themselves, and measure the impact on their identity and daily life. They can also encourage them to express their emotions and thoughts without judgment, to seek support from their surroundings, and to engage in meaningful and comforting activities. Finally, they can accompany them in the redefinition of their roles, values, and projects, helping them to find a balance between maintaining bonds with the deceased person and investing in new horizons.

In short, Parkes's theory of grief as a psychosocial transition provides a rich and nuanced framework for understanding the multidimensional challenges of the grief process. It invites the GRIEF COACH to adopt a comprehensive and integrative approach, taking into account the emotional, cognitive, relational, and existential aspects of the loss experience. By relying on this theory, the GRIEF COACH can provide tailored and caring support to grieving individuals, helping them to navigate this psychosocial transition and turn it into an opportunity for growth and resilience. In doing so, they can contribute to the prevention of grief complications and promote healing trajectories full of meaning and hope.

Key takeaways:

- Colin Murray Parkes's theory of grief views grief as a major psychosocial transition that shakes the identity, beliefs, and relationships of the grieving individual.

- Grief involves not only the loss of a loved one, but also the loss of a social role, status, lifestyle, and worldview.

- Parkes describes four phases of grief's psychosocial transition:

- 1) shock and numbness
- 2) yearning and searching
- 3) disorganization and despair
- 4) reorganization and renewal

- These phases are not linear or universal, each person experiences them in their own way and at their own pace.

- The role of the GRIEF COACH is to accompany individuals in grief through this transition by helping them understand and accept the profound changes in themselves and around them.

- The GRIEF COACH can use Parkes's theory to normalize grief reactions and help grieving individuals identify multiple losses, express their emotions, seek support and engage in meaningful activities.

- This theory prompts a comprehensive approach that considers the emotional, cognitive, relational, and existential aspects of grief, for an adjusted support favoring growth and resilience.