

USING THE EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES OF THE BEREAVED  
IN THE FORMATION OF A NEW IDENTITY

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*Abstract*

*Millions of people throughout the world have reported Extraordinary Experiences (EEs) when mourning the deaths of their loved ones. These experiences are not associated with a psychic. Rather, they are spontaneous in nature and appear to originate from an outside source. They include visions of the deceased, synchronicities (acausal experiences not governed by known forces), hearing the loved one, sensing his or her presence, telepathic thoughts, visitation dreams, and various symbolic signs, to name a few. These events have been occurring since the dawn of human history and appear to be a normal phenomenon giving great comfort and insight to the bereaved. Because they can neither be proved nor disproved, little is done to show how they can be used in supporting the bereaved, or accepted as a gift to be shared and discussed. They are of special importance in the formation of a new identity, one of the major tasks of grieving. This paper suggests ways the Extraordinary Experience can be used in assisting this important task.*

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Why are Extraordinary Experiences an important part of the grief process for millions of mourners? Simply put, they serve the human spirit and the tasks involved in grief work by causing mourners to consider where they originate, their purpose, and who controls when they occur. The brush with mystery is a significant source of comfort and peace. More specifically, EEs convince the person who has the experience that they are still loved, there is an afterlife, and there will be a reunion. These are powerful antidotes to ongoing sadness and depression. Mourners consistently approach this mystery with gratitude, awe, and respect.

Among the numerous positive changes which often take place, of special concern is the influence the EE has in facilitating the development of three salient cognitive and intra-psycho processes: decathexis (emotional emancipation), the establishment of a new relationship with the deceased, and the formation of a new identity. This presentation focuses on the use of Extraordinary Experiences in the development of strategies to facilitate new identity formation—a normal and critical part of grief work.

Death changes the mourner due to the absence of the physical presence of the beloved. It may mean that the survivor will have to learn new skills or take on new roles. Of added importance is the realization that every time the survivor follows an old routine that normally involved the loved one, it is a different life. What has occurred is the death of the interactional self, that part of the person that used to interact with the loved one. That physical experience can no longer occur. In short, it is a new life. During this changing time, one begins to establish the new identity.

WHAT IS AN IDENTITY?

It is essentially who you think you are—a mother, a father, a good worker, skillful, important, loved and trusted by others—the list could go on and on. Sometimes people possess a failure identity in which they believe they are a nobody, basically devoid of a positive self-image or self-concept. They withdraw and become delinquent in their duties and responsibilities. It is not unusual for one spouse to over-identify with their significant other and allow him or her to take over tasks that should be self-initiated and mastered as a normal part of life. When death intervenes, the surviving spouse who was over-dependent has a major challenge in new identity formation. This can be a daunting process, filled with fear and trepidation.

One's identity is structured on the nature of interpersonal relationships engaged in, spiritual or philosophical beliefs, various skill levels, and the roles one fills in daily life, among others. Of particular significance for a mourner, are the new behaviors that need to be developed due to the death of the loved one. The perception of the self is critical in this regard (I am capable, I am good, I am loveable, I can love). Those who already possess a success identity, featuring love, worth, and approval have an easier task of reestablishing their new identity as they adapt to the absence of the loved one. Many widows and widowers experience a decrease in their social circle after the death of their spouse. As many say, "I feel like a fifth wheel and those we used to socialize with no longer call." The reduction in social contact often hinders identity formation.

#### FORMING A NEW IDENTITY

How does a mourner begin forging a new identity? It often occurs initially without full awareness. Eventually, one realizes a significant lifestyle change has set in and that it must be developed and accepted. Life is different or as one woman put it, "It's a new life." At the heart of this new life—and what specifically affects identity change—are a host of new demands and new routines that commonly have to be developed.

1. In-house routines. Often, chores or responsibilities that once were assumed by the loved one now have to be taken over by the mourner. It could be something as simple as doing the shopping, fixing a leaky toilet or learning to pump gasoline at the local station. Or it could be something taking much more time, effort, and new knowledge like going back to school or looking for a new job to pay the bills.
2. Learning routines. Death often causes us to grow up or to regress. It is not unusual to have to seek new insights and knowledge in the process of adapting to change. Not infrequently, it is essential to gain knowledge of the grief process in order to counter many of the cultural myths that cause added pain and a prolonging of intense grieving. New knowledge and the release of false beliefs accepted as a child, often has an impact on behavior and identity formation.
3. Caring routines. Caring for family members may also take on greater significance after the death of a loved one. New meaning of the importance of relationships springs into one's awareness. Increased interest in caring for others who are in need or volunteering time and energy in various causes changes those who choose these routes of reinvesting in life. Obtaining and caring for a pet becomes another option for reentry into life without the beloved.
4. Travel routines. Choosing to get away from the current environment or to visit places where one can relax and find comfort may be a challenge or a welcomed release. In any event, such travels brings the bereaved in contact with others, often

demand making key choices, and presents new experiences that frequently remind one of the absence of the loved one. Safety issues may also arise if one travels alone. All become part of the reforming of the inner self and assuming new responsibilities.

5. Communication routines. The nature of how one communicates with others is a major factor in creating a positive identity or developing a perception of isolation. Perception, the personal meaning we give to experience, may have to be examined carefully with the idea of how one can recognize and fill basic needs in those we interact with. For example, how can one increase their behaviors to fill the needs of attention, acceptance, appreciation, and affection that we all crave? Many mourners have to look into how to better their communication and interactive skills.

## HOW THE EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE CAN BE USED

In assisting a mourner in identity formation after reporting an EE, consider the following approaches.

1. Determine what the claimant believes to be the message received from the experience is a key strategy. Assuming the experience appears to be authentic, the most important initial step is to allow the person to verbalize what they have received and the specific message of the experience. This includes asking questions such as, "What have you learned that others should know that would help them lead a more productive life?" Or, "What do you think you should begin working on now that you know your loved one is okay?" Getting the person to be specific about positive action that can be taken based on the message (for example, strengthening one's inner life or helping others) can open up a whole new view of existence. In some instances the caregiver may also want to suggest other possible messages for the mourner to consider.
2. Suggest using the experience as a motivator for learning new roles, routines, and skills. Social isolation is often a major reason for unnecessary suffering and the onset of reactive depression. One question that needs to be discussed with a mourner who has an EE is: Now that your loved has signaled he/she knows what you are going through, what does that mean you should begin developing? Accepting the reality of the loss, and mastering new skills and routines, frequently result in strengthening one's self-image. Helping the person focus on the gift of love he/she has received and the call to love in return can be a significant transforming task.
3. Encourage EE readings. In an effort to reinforce the normalcy of EEs and the meaning they hold for expanding awareness it is useful to encourage reading what others have experienced. There are many books on the market dealing with the subject. The variety and scope of these experiences will impress anyone and reinforce the validity of one's EE. The person will begin to realize the great importance of the gift and just how special he/she is to have received one.
4. Recommend talking to others who have reported similar experiences. There is considerable evidence to suggest that social cohesion and mutual support have a positive effect on how mourners cope with their great losses. Strong interpersonal relationships keep hope alive and strengthen the way one feels about the self.

Friends impact identity often for good and sometimes in a negative way. However, those with mutual interests and experiences commonly develop strong connections resulting in social bonding which is a key component in a success identity. Grief support groups often have several members who have had an EE and this can be the basis for ongoing mutual support and needed interaction. Telling one's story can have profound healing effects.

5. Discuss what has been discovered about love and service through the EE. The EE in itself is an example of love living on from the other side. What is commonly forgotten is that it also sets the example of the importance of giving. Someone who loves the mourner has given comfort and affection, which are two of the universal messages of the experience. These two items are critical to emphasize and explore as they can open up a new way of looking at life and how the mourner can increase his/her ability to do the same. Simultaneously, this behavior can be looked upon as honoring of the deceased. Importantly, it will have a major part to play in one's new identity because of the new behaviors it will demand.
6. Create ways to memorialize and celebrate the life of the loved one through the EE. Depending on the type of experience reported, there are many ways the EE can be used to celebrate and remember the person. If there is an object involved in the EE such as a coin, clock, shell or a favorite item belonging to the deceased, ask the mourner how it can be preserved and/or displayed in a special place in the home. If the EE was a dream visitation or a vision, determine what the deceased was wearing or what was said. Then decide how it can be represented in something the mourner can create. Whatever the message in any EE, it can be put into one or two words or a specific symbol. Have an artist or a calligrapher create a painting or drawing of the chosen word or sign to be framed and displayed. The way an EE can be represented in the view of the mourner is unlimited. Putting the EE into a specific symbol that the mourner likes not only nourishes one's symbolic life, but can be utilized as a remembrance that the mourner has been blessed with such an event.
7. Keep in mind that identity beliefs are at the core of who we think we are and the EE often affects the spiritual dimension of identity. This topic needs to be examined carefully by one who has the experience and changes in beliefs discussed and shared with trusted family or close friends. Identity beliefs in general, as well as those flowing from the Extraordinary Experience, reflect purpose in life and reinforce the feeling that we are loved. They frequently provide options for engaging life in new ways.

Last but not least, the call for validation is a crucial need in all of our lives. Mourners especially need to be recognized for the suffering they are enduring as part of our attempt to provide solace and comfort. Validating the EE experience by encouraging survivors to tangibly commemorate and use the event as part of their new identity will help them adapt to their great loss and establish a new relationship with the deceased through memory and tradition. This is a task of grief not commonly recognized as very significant in adapting to the death of a loved one. Yet, it is a major task in coping with loss.

In summary, EEs have the potential to shift a person's worldview, beliefs, and values. When it is perceived as a spiritual experience, as it often is, resilience emerges with a direct effect on building a success identity. And not to be minimized is the help that is

given to those who have unfinished business with the deceased or an ambivalent relationship with him/her at the time of death.

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