

GRIEF: THE FORGOTTEN EMOTION
OF
ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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One emotional concern that has far too often been overlooked in adults who have for the first time been diagnosed as having learning disabilities and/or ADHD is that of grief. Grief is a normal reaction to a traumatic life event (i.e., death in the family, diagnosis of cancer, loss of a job, diagnosis of a learning disability, etc.) Grief has definite stages which may lead to resolution as was demonstrated by Kubler-Ross' work with terminal cancer patients in England. Persons going through a grief reaction may experience a loss of interest in things they previously found pleasurable, depressed mood, sluggishness, problems with sleep and/or appetite, as well as guilt. Grief has a natural progression and is usually time limited.

Murphy and LeVert (1995) wrote about the six stages of coping that a person may experience following the diagnosis of ADHD. These can be applied to those with learning disabilities. They are as follows:

Stage 1: Relief and Optimism

I'm not retarded, I'm not schizophrenic, I'm not Bi-Polar or just plain stupid. I have ADHD....

Stage 2: Denial

There is no such thing as ADHD, I'm just lazy...

Stage 3: Anger and Resentment

If my third grade teacher would have noticed this, I may have gone to college....

Stage 4: Grief

*My undiagnosed ADHD made life so painful for me...
How do I cope with ADHD and repair the damage of the past....*

Stage 5: Accommodation

I accept I have ADHD, I am using work/school accommodations to compensate for it...

Initially it was believed the grief reaction adults would have to receiving a diagnosis of learning disabilities and/or ADHD would be non-existent or at the very worst, quite mild. However, as clinical antidotes have been accumulated this does not necessarily appear to be the case. The severity and chronicity of the grief reaction an adult with learning disabilities and/or ADHD may experience appears to be quite variable. Individuals with very mild learning disabilities and/or ADHD symptoms without a history of significant life trauma may experience a minimum grief reaction. If the person does have a grief reaction its course tends to be short and that person reaches a level of acceptance of the disability quickly, with few relapses. However, a person with severe learning disabilities and/or ADHD as well as more pronounced life trauma may have a chronic and intense grief reaction. In such cases, a person may need individual counseling, and psychoeducation to learn more about the disability and/or medication to help treat depression, etc.

Regarding prolonged grief, Goldstein (1997) wrote: *It has been reportedly suggested that adults with ADHD and LD struggle with grief over their perceived incompetence and lifetime difficulty with meeting everyday expectations* (p. 260). Often adults with learning disabilities and ADHD have problems with low self-esteem as a result of their more difficult life course created by the disability. As Ryan (1994) wrote...*when the dyslexic succeeds, he is likely to attribute his success to luck. When he fails, he simply sees himself as stupid* (p. 9). This low self-esteem may compound a grief reaction, by making it more severe and chronic. It is not uncommon for an adult with learning disabilities and/or ADHD to repeatedly re-experience grief reactions after the initial experience of grief. This re-experiencing of the grief reaction tends to be triggered by present day life traumas and perceived failures, which the adult with learning disabilities and/or ADHD believes are caused by the disability. Hence, unchecked grief can be a constant companion.

Sometimes a person can become lost in grief and develop a Major Depressive Episode. If the person goes at least two weeks with a significantly depressed mood, is socially withdrawn and has lost interest in things the person usually is quite interested in, the person may have clinically significant depression. In such situations, it is important that the person be assessed by a mental health professional and treated if necessary.

The newly diagnosed adult with learning disabilities and/or ADHD should be made aware of the potential for a grief reaction and the possibility of a Major Depressive Episode, which will require a consultation with a mental health professional. This should be done by the diagnostician. Just sharing this with an adult with learning disabilities and/or ADHD can help to normalize the grieving process and reduce the risk of complications in its progression. In a very real sense, *knowledge is power*.

Often the loved ones of an adult recently diagnosed with learning disabilities and/or ADHD are negatively affected by the individual's grief reaction. The diagnosed adult may become less attentive to personal responsibilities, lash out toward others, or become withdrawn. Such behaviors can make family life taxing and difficult. It is important for the family and loved ones of the adult with learning disabilities and/or

ADHD to know that grief is a normal human reaction to their *loss* or disability. If the person's depression and grief is significantly taxing to the family, family therapy should be considered.

Sometimes the stress of learning to compensate for and cope with one's learning disability and/or ADHD can be overwhelming. For example, learning how to use Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic, a voice activated word processor, or how to work with an ADHD coach while one struggles to maintain home and/or school/work responsibilities can be quite stressful. Often the initial attempt at accommodation may be ineffective. Finding the accommodations that are most helpful may be the result of a prolonged course of trial and error. This process can be disheartening, which may further complicate the grief reaction. Families and loved ones need to be aware of these new stresses in the recently diagnosed adult's life. Their understanding may serve to diffuse family tensions.

Employers also need to understand the challenge facing the newly diagnosed adult and how the disability may affect his or her productivity. Often newly diagnosed employees have not met employer expectations, and the employees will need to remedy this. Employees need to learn about their disabilities and how to accommodate them. These employees may not know their rights, how to ask appropriately for reasonable accommodations, or how their disability is manifested. Employers should be encouraged to instruct their personnel manager to expedite this process by being open to the recommendations of consulting professionals who have worked with the employees. An informed employer will be aware that the process for a newly diagnosed adult to become a better worker can be emotionally difficult for the employee. Thus, it is important for an employer to be flexible. This may include reducing the employee's responsibilities or granting a temporary leave of absence (i.e., *mental health days*). It is important for an employer to remember that often it is less expensive to help the employee through this transition than it is to terminate the individual, search for, hire and train another employee. The above assumes there have been no violations of the employee's civil rights (i.e., ADA, etc.).

The area of emotional and mental health concerns of adults with learning disabilities and/or ADHD is quite complex and new. This article has dealt with the grief reaction often experienced by newly diagnosed adults. There are many more types of significant emotional problems experienced by adults with learning disabilities and/or ADHD, which the LDA mental health committee will address in future issues of *Newsbriefs*.

References:

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