GRIEF, LOSS, AND THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

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GOALS FOR THIS PRESENTATION:

- Describe the differences and similarities between a spiritual crisis and a psychological crisis.
- Describe the relationship between grief, loss, and spiritual crisis.
- Describe the relationship between spiritual crisis and the spiritual journey.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CRISIS

A crisis of identity

Brought on by: adolescence, i.e., identity achievement v. identity diffusion;
life transitions such as job change, graduation, marriage, divorce, retirement

Symptoms can include: depression, anxiety, suicidality, isolation

Questions asked: Who am I? Where do I fit in society? Who am I to others?

Resolution found through: formation of new identity, developing a new sense of purpose; connection with new social group with whom one feels a sense of belonging

Help found through: therapy, peer support, support groups, community involvement
SPIRITUAL CRISIS
A crisis of: Meaning
Brought on by: Traumatic grief/loss; chronic/terminal illness; death of a loved one; an event over which you have no control that brings about unwanted change
Symptoms can include: depression, anxiety, suicidality, isolation, hopelessness
Questions asked: Does my life have meaning? Why am I alive? Is there a God? Is life worthwhile?
Resolution found through: Acceptance of mystery; descent and surrender; transformation and transcendence

In grief and bereavement terms, a spiritual crisis can occur when death/grief/loss shatter our assumptive world view.

ASSUMPTIVE WORLD VIEW
--A set of fundamental assumptions
--A cognitive framework
--An often unacknowledged source of structure and control
Examples: The world is basically a good place.
People are nice.
God is benevolent.
God punishes.
If I have positive thoughts I can control my destiny.
Good things happen to good people.

Among those who grieve, who is vulnerable to spiritual crisis?
--Those who experience traumatic grief; anyone grieving a sudden, violent death or loss
--Those with religious belief systems
--Those with no religious belief systems
--Those with a developed awareness of themselves as spiritual beings and a defined relationship with the God of their understanding
SPIRITUAL ISSUES AMONG THOSE WHO GRIEVE:

--Questioning faith/beliefs, i.e. "religion has failed me."
--Loss of image of God; loss of relationship with God
--Loss of control; facing vulnerabilities

The healing journey through spiritual crisis is a transformative one. Thoughts and behaviors may change, but primarily YOU change.
--requires surrender, again and again
--change happens to you, through you; you do not make change happen
--your job is to remain open, receptive, humble
--one must enter into mystery and let go many times

This piece of work is in direct contrast to our ego needs for mastery, dominance, and control.

-This is a very typical inner struggle on the spiritual journey; a see-saw battle between mind and soul.

"Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness."
Paul Tillich

Spiritual crisis can lead us to a place where we are facing something we cannot control, fix, or explain. This is the very point where transformation can occur.

"One always learns one's mystery at the price of one's innocence."
Robert Davies
Signposts/Questions Along the Transformative Journey:

--Can you surrender your religious/spiritual framework when it is in ruins?
--When your image of God is in ruins, can you surrender this even though you are not sure who/what God is?
--Can you surrender the need for answers?
--Can you enter into mystery trusting that what needs to be revealed will be?
--Can you accept suffering?
--Can you let go, let go, let go?
--Can you allow change to happen within you without demanding to know where that process is going?

What can I do as a bereavement professional?

--realize you cannot "fix" a spiritual crisis
--realize that homework assignments, cognitive behavioral therapy, or doing our "grief work" typically do not lead an individual out of a spiritual crisis and into a transformed state
--realize that a spiritual crisis can be excruciatingly painful and last a very long time; some individuals feel they never work through this
--realize that a client may benefit from work with their minister, rabbi, priest, spiritual director, etc.
--realize that a wonderful gift you have to offer is your very presence and to simply be with an individual in spiritual crisis takes great courage

Annie Dalby currently works as a geriatric care manager at Wexner Heritage Village. She has also served as Director of Social Work and Bereavement Services for Zusman Hospice and was a committee member for the Central Ohio Conference on Grief and Camp Hope for several years. In 2009 she received a certificate of graduation from the Wellstreams Ecumenical Training program in spiritual direction and has had a private practice as a spiritual director and bereavement counselor since then. She has lectured extensively on grief, bereavement, and spirituality in the Columbus area. She has been a member of Spiritual Directors International since 2009. Annie lives in Powell, Ohio with her husband and two teenage sons. She can be reached at 614-286-1697.