



Portland Institute  
For Loss and Transition

## Principle of Practice

# Assess non-death losses

The dramatic images of hospitalized COVID-19 patients on intensive care units of hospitals, and the rapidly rising curves on the graphs of statistics of infections and deaths, stick vividly in our minds. They bring our own mortality and the impermanence of our lives to the center of our awareness and our society, however much we try to push them to the fringes of our consciousness. COVID-19 reconnects each of us on our own way to the smaller and bigger questions of loss and finiteness. In that respect, the counselor is wise to realize that the losses we suffer include but go beyond bereavement of a loved one; in fact the majority of losses are far less tangible.

Examples of non-death losses that deserve attention include the many jobs lost, bankruptcy, being unable to spend valuable time with loved ones due to social distance policies, travel restrictions, and projects and programs that have been deleted from our calendars.

These non-death losses can be categorized as:

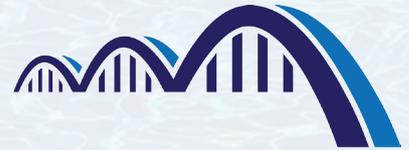
- Loss of attachment – *with whom or where do I feel safe?*
- Intimacy – *with whom or what am I bonded?*
- Territory – *where do I belong?*
- Structure – *what is my role?*
- Identity – *who am I?*
- Future – *where will I go?*
- Meaning – *what is the point in this?*
- Control – *I feel overwhelmed, how do I regain some sense of control?*

Non-death losses are at great risk of causing disenfranchised grief, not being recognized by the suffering client or his environment. The all-too-human inclination to compare our own sorrow or situation with others can also cause people to disregard or discount non-death losses when other people are sick or dying. Without being acknowledged, these losses manifest themselves through the same grief reactions as death-related losses.

It is important for counsellors to recognize and acknowledge these losses. Accessing the natural resilience in clients when counselling non-death losses is exactly the same as when counselling death related losses. Treat clients with the caring and daring approach that is at the heart of *secure base counselling*, addressing the duality of grief same as in death-related loss. The client can then begin to reconstruct a sense of meaning and move steadily from asking '*why me?*' to '*what's next?*'.

Guiding questions for the counselor can include:

- *From the perspective of loss: what did you have to say good-bye to, what was lost?*
- *What else is there? Can you tell me more?*
- *What is the significance and meaning to you of what was lost?*
- *What is it like for you to address this, what are you experiencing in the here-and-now?*
- *What is it like for us to explore this together, what new perspective that you did not have before, could emerge?*



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A mindful visualization exercise can be used to bring the client into the here-and-now, make them aware of their body and what they feel: *“Please sit up straight in your chair with me, relax your hands and put them in your lap or on your thighs. Let’s both close our eyes now, or just focus on a point on the floor. Breathe in and out consciously several times. When you are ready, please consider your losses as if they were pieces of a puzzle. What comes to mind?”*

Give the client some time to reflect and respond.

*“What kind of puzzle do you see in your mind’s eye? When you are piecing the puzzle together again, how do the pieces of the puzzle come together? What changed from before? What possibly new image arises? What does that tell you?”*

More on *secure base counselling* can be found in the Principle of Practice *Dealing with loss and unsolicited change*, and in *Loss, Grief, and Attachment in Life Transitions. A Clinician’s Guide to Secure Base Counseling*. (Van Wielink, et al., 2019. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group).

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This principle was coproduced with Klaartje van Gasteren, Marnix Reijmerink and Leo Wilhelm of [De School voor Transitie](#) in the Netherlands.

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