



CHANGE: THE EXPERIENCE OF LOSS

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Most of us think of mourning and loss as having to do with losing a loved one by death, or else with no longer having something obviously vital to one's life, such as a job or a marriage.

We are not as likely to realize the elements of loss involved in our attempts to change our attitudes and behaviors, particularly when they are self-destructive or seem to be of no help to us in making our way in the world. Others may say to us "You should change that behavior or attitude. It just gets you into trouble!"

We may even agree with them. So why don't we change? I believe that we hold onto such attitudes and behaviors because we fear going through the experience of loss. To change our attitudes and behaviors, even self-destructive ones, involves giving up familiar ways of being. It is often unsettling, scary, and anxiety-provoking to confront the world without familiar and time-worn ways of living.

A client in therapy who was going through an extensive period of internal change and re-direction, had the following dream: "There was this man who had to kill his 800 lb. steer. He's going to cut the steer up. The law is that he must "dress out" at least three quarters of the beef that very night." In working on the dream, the client was asked to talk as if he were this man, which is a common method for understanding a dream message. As he identified with this man, the client became very sad, and talked of all the time and energy that had gone into fattening up the steer which now had to be killed. The client realized the vivid parallel to his own life, in which time and familiar ways of thinking and being had to be given up, if he was going to change his life for the better.

What kinds of changes am I talking about here? I'm thinking of such attitudes and beliefs as having an "inferiority complex" or seeing oneself as unlikeable or unassertive. I'm also referring to such behaviors as over-

eating, smoking cigarettes, problem drinking, and not taking care of one's health. To change any of these attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors involves loss — giving up something familiar. Individuals who have quit smoking sometimes say in describing their experience of the loss of cigarettes in their life, "I feel like I've given up a close companion, who's been there for me for so many years." For a formerly obese person, who has lost many pounds of weight, often the hardest aspect is coping with the "loss of the body I used to have." Often it is so anxiety-provoking that the person puts the weight back on rather than go through the loss experience.

Going through the experience of loss often involves uncomfortable and painful emotional states, including depression, sadness, and anger. There is often a concentration on what has been lost, and a hopeless sense that these unsettling feelings will never leave us. Thus many of us hold onto our negative behaviors and attitudes, or go back to them when the uncomfortable feelings arise. We need to realize that these anxious and painful feelings will eventually pass. We need to involve ourselves in activities and with people who are supportive of the changes that we are trying to make. If we feel that the emotional states brought on by the loss are too uncomfortable to manage by ourselves, then we may need to seek out a professional who can help us through the loss experience.