

*Review and Reflection by Lyn Dowling
Seasons for Growth – Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle*

The following paper summarises an article by Stevenson and McCutchen, The author then discusses the theoretical and practical relevance of the Seasons for Growth program in the light of their findings.

When Meaning Has Lost its Way: Life and Loss “Behind Bars”

R. Stevenson, R. McCutchen

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Grief was my prison...guilt was its warden. Nomi Berger

Data from US indicates ‘that those who complete time in a therapeutic community are rearrested at a significantly lower rate than those who do not receive such support.’

The authors list some of the ‘multiple and acute’ losses described by inmates:

- Loss of freedom – the detailed moment when they are first locked into a cell...sounds, smells, and feelings. This is the moment of really feeling the loss of freedom ‘for the first time’
- Loss of self and of past life – which becomes a memory [an idyllic one as time and distance increase]
- Loss of material goods – [a few, or a significant one, in particular]
- Loss of family and friends. [Authors note it is recognised that when loss is permanent or irreversible, strong support systems are needed. Yet such support is not usually provided in prisons.]
- Loss of health [including HIV, sexually transmitted disease, hepatitis]
- Loss of social roles – [in prison there is no place for the role of parent, spouse, lover, etc]
- Loss of drug(s) of choice. Authors note many prisoners ‘have used drugs including alcohol as a method of coping with emotion, pain, and stress. That method is now possible only with illegal drugs, chiefly heroin and marijuana.’
- In recovery from addiction, loss of fellow users.

The authors state that bereavement tasks include: ‘a need to accept their losses and to try to find a place for them, and for the changes that accompany them, in their lives.’ This statement aligns theoretically with the tasks of grieving articulated by Worden. Note: Worden’s work also underpins Seasons for Growth.

The authors continue ‘...the only real way to gain control over the emotional and psychological aftermath of loss starts by accepting that a loss has, in fact occurred. The men who cope through denial often cannot take this first step on their own.’

Yet, 'few of these men had any knowledge of the grief process. They sometimes know how they felt, but they did not know what grief was or how it might affect them and their lives.'

3 ways prisoners may try to cope with loss behind bars.

The authors state that prisoners tend to cope with loss in one of three ways:

- 'Avoidance or denial, including self-medication with drugs, alcohol or meaningless repetitive activity;
- Activities that compensate for loss by promoting feelings of greater personal control; and
- Using their mental and spiritual faculties to examine the present condition, to acknowledge past actions, and to create an action plan for their future.'

Avoidance and denial

Many prisoners 'deny their emotions because by denying them they believe they can avoid painful episodes'. They may also exhibit many forms of 'defiance to maintain an illusion of personal control'.

The authors state Finlay & Jones, 2000 found that 'young offenders who most often had difficulty coping with bereavement were more likely to have "used drugs to cope with emotions, had suicidal thoughts, reported previous depression and anxiety"'.

The authors report that another coping mechanism may include the belief in 'special knowledge' (for example beliefs about government conspiracies), or a belief that everything will be alright in some 'always future' time.

Activities the promote a sense of greater control

Bodybuilding, for example, may be used as an effort to gain back some personal control.

Meaning making and group identity

Gangs can provide a sense of belonging.

The authors also note the growth of some religions amongst prisoners in the United States: Nation of Islam, the Nation of Gods and Earths, and even Buddhism. These can break a sense of isolation, hopelessness and loneliness, and they can promote ways to find meaning. Stevenson notes that Christianity can also offer similar supports, but the message of Christianity often comes from outside the prison, whereas the other religions are being taught by prisoners.

Promotion of meaning making through addressing issues of loss and grief

‘From the moment he told – and faced – his story, he began to make positive changes.’

In working with prisoners Stevenson found that acknowledging past actions and taking responsibility for them and their consequences can provide an increased sense of control, with a corresponding reduction in feelings of helplessness and worthlessness.

He developed a 4 week program with a bi-weekly didactic/group session on loss, grief, and coping. All participants had experienced multiple losses in early life, and had had no help in working through these losses, and no support system.

The ‘recognition, and the knowledge that there was something that could be done to deal emotionally/psychologically with past losses, was a turning point in helping the man to take responsibility for past decisions and to start making changes in his life.’

Groups were shocked to learn about grief, but linked it quickly to their stories, acknowledging, loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, anger, and guilt. They made the link between these and their increased risk of suicide.

Note: the group questioned why more had not been done in the past, and the authors’ preferred answer was that these issues are being addressed now, and it would be better to take advantage of this opportunity rather than directing energies to blaming past policies and procedures.

Stevenson states:

‘The starting point was the identification of each man’s personal losses.’

He notes this was often harder for the counsellor to hear!!

Note: This highlights the importance of debriefing and support for the Companion!!

Clinging to ‘freedom’ - the risks of positive risk-taking

The authors state that there are risks in moving forward.

‘Once a man acknowledges relationships, there is the risk of losing that relationship. Once he takes ownership of past mistakes, he risks feeling the pain caused by some of those actions. Once he begins to hope for a better future, he risks having that hope stripped away....Having a goal means risking the loss of that goal.’

Note: If prisoners are to take such risks, they will need ongoing and consistent support.

Seasons for Growth – a compatible model? Some Reflections.

Lyn Dowling

The Seasons for Growth Adult Components are theoretically compatible with the ideas expressed in the article by Stevenson and McCutchen. The Adult Components are educative and are designed around Worden's 'tasks' of grieving.

That Seasons for Growth is an educational program, and not therapy, is significant, and, in my experience, this appears to provide a great sense of safety for participants. It does not carry the stigma that can be associated with the idea of needing counselling.

Experience in the Hunter

Adult Component 2

In the Hunter interested parents, carers and family members have participated in the short two-three hour Adult Component.

This Component has also been used as part of basic and/or continuing professional education by groups such as teachers, social workers, welfare workers, health workers, community workers and volunteers. It appears to provide a useful and safe framework for understanding and dealing with loss and grief. The feedback from all these groups has been consistently positive.

This Component also appears to provide a safe place for 'systems' issues to be examined (including the impact of these on staff). It appears to provide a safety valve - a safe place where staff and/or volunteers in organisations can consider such issues. I believe this has positive benefits for staff or volunteers as well as for their clients.

The theoretical attention to understanding *behaviour* as linked to *loss* promotes a better understanding by staff¹ of their client group, and, I believe, thereby significantly reduces the likelihood of abusive or punitive staff-client behaviour.

Many teachers report that using a '*lens of loss*', articulated in the Seasons for Growth program, allows them to understand the particularly difficult behaviour of some students better.

That new understanding appears have a positive flow-on effect on the teacher's relationship with the student. One teacher states: 'As soon as I wondered whether this behaviour was linked to loss, something shifted between us (even before I uttered a word), and our interactions were different from that point'.

The theoretical explanation of the links between change, loss, grief and behaviour appear to be highly relevant to a prison setting. I believe this Component could be used with staff as well as prisoners. It could be used with family members.

¹ I include volunteers here. In the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, volunteers in the Diocese are undertaking this Component as well as Component 3 as part of their basic training.

Note: Teachers in the Hunter report that children with a parent in prison gain a great deal from participating in the Seasons for Growth programs for Young People.

Adult Component 3

As discussed previously, Stevenson developed an educational program for prisoners focused on understanding loss and grief. It seems to have had extremely positive results.

The four session Seasons for Growth Adult Component 3 appears to be somewhat similar to the program developed by Stevenson, and could provide one strategy [within a wider group of strategies] to support and assist prisoners.

Seasons for Growth fosters strengths. It encourages communication, decision-making and problem solving. Over the four sessions it builds relationships.

It does not 'fix' people. Rather, participants choose to take responsibility for their decisions, and work together to look at positive strategies to address feelings.

The four sessions are linked to the theoretical work of Worden. The actual work of the group is achieved through group sharing as well as through a variety of reflective, individual activities that focus on individual meaning making and personal story.

One of the important principles articulated in the program is that all feelings are okay. This can be a startling discovery for staff and other participants. However, participants move to considering that it is the way we habitually deal with feelings, rather than the feelings themselves, that may not be useful to ourselves or to others. Underpinning the Seasons for Growth sessions is the belief that an essential strategy in dealing effectively with feelings is the accurate identification and naming of these.

In the third session of one of my Adult groups, a participant announced that he had *found* his word. It was 'anger'. He was an articulate person, and although 'anger' was clearly part of his vocabulary, he had not previously linked this word to his *own* story or to his pain.

The following week, he told the small group, that he had a *new* word. This time the word was '*recluse*'. He said that once he identified his own anger, he realized that it had been keeping him a recluse, and he was no longer going to allow it to do that.

Strengths vs Deficits approaches

Seasons for Growth is a strengths-focused program that fosters resilience.

There is a significant qualitative difference between a *strengths-focused* and a *deficits* approach. Some traditional individual and group work approaches view the worker as 'unflawed', professional and in control, and the participants regarded as somehow 'flawed'. There is a subtle, yet significant, qualitative difference between these approaches. This difference must be grasped by the Companion.

As well as describing the personal qualities of a good Companion, the Seasons for Growth training program expects Companions to be able to acknowledge their own vulnerability and losses. While not losing their professionalism, the Companion must be philosophically comfortable working with a program where all group members, including the Companion, are viewed as potentially resilient, but also potentially vulnerable.

In some of my training sessions, some youth workers expressed concerns about shedding their own 'masks' of invulnerability in front of tough clients.

This is an issue that is particularly relevant to the prison setting. Careful consideration should be given to the qualities expected of a Companion in the program, **and** of the fit with organisational practices and attitudes of staff in a prison setting.

Safety of the participants and the Companion

In relation to the above, we need to remember that participants can also feel at risk if they 'tell' their story, or acknowledge their own vulnerability in front of others.

Attention to this would be extremely important in a prison setting, where there may be, as stated by Stevenson and McCutchen, a 'sub-culture of violence' or other abuse.

In the group:

Before a sense of safety and trust between group members is established, I have found it important to stress in the group contract:

'Only share what you feel safe sharing'.

All groups involve a group contract. These contracts always include reference to the importance of confidentiality. However, I also explain limits to confidentiality in relation to my role, and I let participants know that if I feel that they, or someone they are in contact with, are not safe, I have to take action. In a prison setting, it would be extremely important to decide and articulate what the limits of confidentiality are.

Companions need to have a wide understanding of grief and loss theories. They should have an understanding of group work theories, and be experienced in running small groups.

The participants do discover, and frequently share, deep and painful stories of loss. As Stevenson notes, these can be difficult for the hearer. Attention must be paid to appropriate debriefing and safety issues for the Companion and the participants.

The Resource Handbook for Site Coordinators was developed for use with the Seasons for Growth Young People's program. It offers a rich theoretical and practical resource for the Companioning of Adult groups, including a section on the use of two Companions.

A co-companioning model is recommended by this author. In 2006 I undertook a review of current group work literature. This review identified the many benefits of a co-leading model. These include the sharing of roles, the modelling of positive

interactions, a joint response to difficult issues, and access to instant debriefing. However, co-leaders must be compatible, be prepared to meet before and after the group, and be willing to discuss 'process' issues openly.

Systems support for the program must include provision of debriefing for Companions. A co-companioning model can provide valuable and instant debriefing, but it is also important for Companions to access skilled debriefing beyond the group. The Site Coordinator's role in the school or community setting includes the provision of debriefing.

While Seasons for Growth is considered an educational program, the Adult Component 3, moves slightly along the scale towards a more therapeutic model. Particularly in relation to Adult Component 3, it is my belief that appropriate 'clinical' supervision should also be structured in for Companions. This is supported by Steven's comments about how hard it is for the Counsellor to 'hear' the prisoners' stories of loss.

Companions should also be able to identify where they 'are at' in their own grieving, and, based on this, know what issues can be shared and what should not be, as well as when *not* to Companion a group.

Careful attention should be paid to the selection of group members [in relation to size and safety for the Companions and the other participants].

In relation to safety, or other risk factors, I do **not** recommend, or allow in my own groups, the presence of an adult who is not also participating in the group activities, or who has not signed the 'group contract'. I believe that having such a presence would severely impact on group dynamics as well as on the participants' sense of safety.

Beyond the group

Appropriate supports must be available to help those who need further individual support with loss and grief issues.

As well as providing appropriate clinical support, social and practical supports need to be considered and provided. This point is brought out particularly well by McCutchen, and he provides practical examples.

What Seasons for Growth is not.

The Seasons for Growth program should not be viewed as a critical incident response. Nor should it be seen a behaviour modification program [even though it appears to influence behaviour]. It is certainly not a fix-it program. Yet experience in the young people's program has revealed that Principals and other staff can think that it is all of these things, and make inappropriate referrals. Providing these staff with Information Sessions and inviting them to participate in Component 2 helps to clarify such misunderstandings.

Finally, yet most importantly, Seasons for Growth is not a stand alone intervention. Where it works best, it is offered as one of a range of initiatives, and it is backed up with ongoing systems support for the Companions and the participants.

In view of the risks (articulated by Stevenson above) that participants take in moving beyond avoidance and denial or the use of unhelpful strategies in dealing with change and loss, it is vital that Seasons for Growth is only implemented where there is a commitment to the provision of ongoing and appropriate individual and social support.

What Seasons for Growth is:

The principles of the Seasons for Growth program are underpinned by multiple strands of theoretical, practice and research literature, including narrative models, strengths perspective work, resilience literature, community work and group work.

There is a strong evidence-based support for the program. The Young People's Program has been externally reviewed by the Commonwealth Government, The South Australian Government and Melbourne University.

In the Hunter an ongoing qualitative review of the Adult Program has taken place since 2003. Feedback from Participants has been consistently positive.

In discussions with a variety of health and educational professionals, I have come to believe that while there is the *program*, Seasons for Growth, there is also the *philosophy* of Seasons for Growth. Practitioners² report that the philosophy underpinning Seasons for Growth has increased their understanding of the individuals with whom they work, and in turn has altered their interactions with these individuals outside any group setting.

We can also work well with groups using the Seasons for Growth program. A Principal in a Hunter school states that the young people who have attended Seasons for Growth concentrate better in class. A different Principal tells me that four eleven year old 'social isolates' now sit together. Teachers and parents report positive differences in behaviour.

I believe the Seasons for Growth group work can contribute to a wider change. A Principal in yet another school states that he believes Seasons for Growth has changed the 'culture' of his school. He cites the example of Year 6 boys forming a 'group hug' around the child of a parent who had hanged himself. He says, 'And Year 6 boys do not do that unless there has been a change in their culture.'

These statements by Principals remind me that it is crucial for the program to be supported by organisational leaders and by organisational practices. Seasons for Growth should be implemented in a wider organisational culture that embraces a similar philosophy and supports the Participants **and** Companions with ongoing individual, social and practical support.

² I include: Community Health social workers and psychologists, community workers, teachers, teachers' aides.