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7 Interpersonal Emotion Regulation

This chapter builds on the conclusions of chapters 5 and 6, by turning to the nature and role of emotion regulation in grief. Although emotion regulation has become a well-established field of research in recent years, it has received little attention from philosophers. However, if we are to understand the temporal structure of emotion processes such as grief, it is important to consider how they are shaped and regulated over time. To do so, I begin by distinguishing some different conceptions of emotion regulation, after which I focus specifically on the interpersonal and social dimensions of regulation. Given the extent to which human emotion regulation is reliant on relations and interactions with particular individuals and the wider social world, I suggest that grief poses a distinctive regulatory challenge. As we have seen, grief can involve the prolonged disturbance of an experiential world that more usually lends structure to emotional experience. Furthermore, it often involves losing the very person to whom one would otherwise have turned for guidance and support. So, there is both emotion dysregulation and a reduced ability to negotiate that dysregulation. Even so, relations with other people can continue to support emotion regulation in a number of ways, as can continuing bonds with the deceased. Hence, the course of grief over time is not dictated solely by internal psychological processes, but—to a significant extent—by processes that are interpersonally and socially structured. There is also considerable variation in the types of regulatory resources available to people and the ways in which they are used. To illustrate the important roles of interpersonal relations and interactions in shaping and regulating experiences of grief, the chapter concludes by reflecting on first-person accounts of grief during the COVID-19 pandemic. These indicate several ways in which privation of interpersonal and social interaction can influence the course of grief over time.

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7.1 Regulating Emotions

How we respond emotionally to situations and events depends on our values, commitments, projects, pastimes, and habitual expectations, relative to which things matter to us in the ways they do. Hence, disturbances of life structure can involve widespread disruption of emotional experience. In the absence of cohesive, dynamic patterns of significant possibilities, emotions are no longer elicited in organized ways. Furthermore, it is unclear what we *ought to* feel in response to events, as the context in which those events matter is itself in flux. During grief, our various emotions, including those integral to grief, are therefore susceptible to disruption. However, as discussed in chapter 2, grief is also the process whereby we navigate that disturbance. So, it involves a response to dysregulation that is itself susceptible to dysregulation.

Emotion regulation can be conceived of in different ways.[1] According to James Gross, whose pioneering work helped to establish emotion regulation as a substantial research field, it encompasses a diversity of processes and strategies that influence which emotions are experienced, the intensity with which they are experienced, when they occur, how long they last, which other emotions they lead to, and how they are expressed. He distinguishes between the regulation of something *by* an emotion and the regulation *of* an emotion, restricting his use of the term "emotion regulation" to the latter (e.g., Gross 1999, 2001). Nevertheless, this also involves indirectly regulating other aspects of our lives, insofar as the relevant emotions influence wider experiences, thoughts, and activities. It can also involve regulation of one emotion by another emotion.

For Gross, emotion regulation includes both conscious and nonconscious strategies. He draws a broad distinction between "*antecedent-focused* and *response-focused* emotion-regulation strategies" (e.g., Gross 2001, 215). The former are implemented before an emotional response is fully formed, whereas the latter involve manipulating the effects of emotions that are already under way. However, this distinction is not clear-cut, as there is no nonarbitrary moment at which an emotion might be said to be fully formed rather than still in development. This is especially apparent when considering emotions that take the form of multifaceted, temporally extended processes.

Gross also identifies a number of more specific strategies for manipulating emotions: selecting or modifying one's situation; directing and redirecting

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attention; cognitive change (such as reevaluation); and modulating one's response to a situation. He regards reevaluation of one's situation, in particular, as a "powerful means of emotion regulation" (Gross 1999, 560). Emotion regulation is not simply a matter of seeking to elicit or enhance emotional experiences that are pleasant, while avoiding unpleasant emotions altogether or attempting to reduce their unpleasantness. There are, as Gross (2014, 13) observes, "trade-offs" between competing motives such as pleasure and practical gain. For instance, one might be motivated to carry on working in order to achieve a long-term goal, despite a strong hedonic preference for going to the pub.

Emotion regulation involves varying degrees of awareness, insight, and agency. It could be conceived of more specifically as the explicitly motivated "pursuit of desired emotional states" (Tamir 2016, 199). However, like Gross (1999, 2001), I will adopt a more permissive conception that includes both conscious and nonconscious regulatory processes. Although I am concerned with the phenomenology of emotion, rather than nonconscious processes, the trajectory of an emotional experience can depend in part on regulatory processes that involve little or no first-person awareness or insight. There will also be cases where we take ourselves to be doing *p* when we are actually doing *q*. Furthermore, emotion regulation involves a range of experiences that are not, first and foremost, experiences *of* emotion regulation. As we will see, interpersonal interactions of various kinds have important regulatory roles to play. In particular, they contribute to the temporal structure of grief.

We could think of emotion regulation as something that occurs only on occasion (e.g., in challenging circumstances or when an emotional response has gone awry) or, alternatively, as a ubiquitous feature of emotional life. Kappas (2011) notes insightfully that, in mundane situations, emotional responses to situations "auto-regulate" by adjusting in ways that track our changing relationships with eliciting stimuli. So, there is no distinction to be drawn between processes that constitute and regulate emotion. For example, a fast-approaching car no longer elicits fear once that emotion has led to situational change; one steps out of the way and the significance of surrounding events shifts to reflect this, as do one's emotions. More generally, emotional responses do not "stay on" until a "dedicated emotion regulation system" steps in to switch them off (Kappas 2011, 20). This is consistent with my suggestion that the experiential world within which

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emotional episodes occur provides much or all of the required regulatory structure; emotions wax and wane with changing patterns of significance that reflect our projects and values. However, the regulatory challenges posed during grief are quite different. They include negotiating, over a prolonged period of time, a pronounced and pervasive disturbance of one's world. It is thus important to distinguish between (a) ubiquitous regulation enabled by life structure and (b) regulation of a kind that is required when life structure is substantially disrupted. The two scenarios are not exhaustive. For instance, there are also circumstances where emotions themselves prove disruptive—they may be overly intense, insufficiently intense, or situationally inappropriate. This need not stem from disruption of the context within which they operate. Indeed, it can be unruly emotions that disrupt their established contexts. However, where grief is concerned, the contrast between (a) and (b) is of particular interest.

To refer simply to *regulating grief* would be simplistic. As we have seen, there is no single, simple emotional response called "grief," which might be manipulated in however many ways. The regulation of a temporally extended emotion process that engages with matters of importance is very different from the regulation of a fleeting emotional response to events that are of little or no long-term concern. Regulating grief involves regulating numerous different emotional responses that occur over a prolonged period. So, a type of regulatory process or even a single instance of regulation may influence a variety of constituent emotions, rather than acting upon one brief emotional episode. The distinction between regulation *of* and *by* emotion is thus difficult to maintain in this case. Grief is not an episode; it is a process that involves emotions influencing thoughts and activities, which then influence other emotions, where all may participate in the process of comprehending and engaging with a loss of life possibilities.

One might object that talk of emotion regulation is therefore inappropriate here. Grief is not a target of emotion regulation at all, given that the term "emotion regulation" instead relates to much shorter-term emotional episodes. For instance, Gross (2014, 8) distinguishes emotion regulation from the longer-term challenge of "coping" with bereavement. However, restricting the scope of emotion regulation in this way would risk excluding those emotions that have the most profound impact on our lives. Moreover, it would prevent us from acknowledging an important *type* of regulatory achievement. The task of regulating grief differs in kind from that of

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regulating mundane episodic emotions, such as being afraid of the dog or angry about missing the bus. One reason for this is that regulating emotion in the context of an intact life structure differs from doing so when that structure is lacking. But grief is also distinctive in another way; it can involve losing a person to whom one would ordinarily turn for support in difficult circumstances. So, by limiting the scope of emotion regulation to short-term episodes, we lose sight of a distinctive challenge: restoring regulatory structure (in the form of a stable experiential world), without the support of that structure or access to certain interpersonal processes that compensate for its absence.

7.2 People as Regulators

Emotion regulation could be construed as something that we accomplish ourselves with varying degrees of awareness and insight. However, as Gross (e.g., 2014, 6) observes, there is a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic emotion regulation, where the former involves shaping one's own emotions, while the latter involves shaping someone else's emotions. A further distinction can be drawn between interacting with someone in order to alter their emotions and doing so in order to alter one's own emotions, where one of these is sometimes achieved via the other. My focus here is on how we relate to others in ways that regulate our own emotions, wider experiences, patterns of thought, and activities, in circumstances where we are deprived of relationships and life structure that might otherwise have enabled us to do so. This need not amount to *using* other people in a self-centered way, so as to achieve some desired goal. We often regulate our emotions in order to take others into account, as when acting out of concern for them or negotiating competing goals.

Gross's work is occupied mostly with intrinsic emotion regulation. However, others have identified a range of contributions made by interpersonal and social processes. In fact, it is questionable whether a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic regulation is sustainable in the human case. Rather, one might suggest, the two are "necessarily entwined in the generation of affect" (Campos et al. 2011, 27). Some studies of interpersonal emotion regulation are concerned specifically with deliberate manipulation of one party by another (e.g., Reeck, Ames, and Ochsner 2016). However, I will continue to adopt a broader conception, according to which we regulate others and are

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regulated by them without always being aware of acting or being acted upon in the relevant ways. In addressing the interpersonal and social dimensions of emotion regulation, we could focus on fleeting interactions with other people, routine interactions that follow shared norms, repeated patterns of interactions with specific individuals (friends or family members), or interactions with wider social environments (such as going to a cinema or café). Here, I am concerned principally with how particular people, including the deceased, are implicated in emotion regulation during grief. This spans a range of processes that influence the kinds of emotions we feel, their intensity, when we experience them, how long they last, what their effects are, and how they are interpreted by ourselves and others. The case of grief, I will suggest, illustrates both the extent to which habitual patterns of emotion regulation depend on relations with others and how we turn to others when those patterns are disrupted.

Interpersonal emotion regulation is especially evident in early attachment, where it is well documented that the emotional behavior of a caregiver ordinarily elicits emotions from an infant in patterned ways and vice versa (e.g., Hobson 2002). It has been further suggested that regulation of emotion via structured interactions with specific individuals is not limited to childhood but continues throughout the human life span: "Social partners continue to serve as external emotion 'regulators' over the life course, through diverse mechanisms" (Diamond and Aspinwall 2003, 145).[2] For instance, romantic love has been conceptualized as an attachment process comparable to infant attachment, where a number of different attachment styles can similarly be discerned (Hazan and Shaver 1987). Such attachments include intricate patterns of coregulation, thus rendering people vulnerable to dysregulation in the event of relationship loss (Hofer 1984, 1994; Sbarra and Hazan 2008; Mikulincer, Shaver, and Pereg 2003; Shaver and Mikulincer 2014).

Interpersonal processes can contribute to the type of emotion we experience on a given occasion, the content of that emotion, and even whether we are able to experience an emotion of that type at all.[3] Regulation might involve a token emotional response being manipulated by one-off interaction with another person. Alternatively, a particular person might act in consistent, reliable ways in a certain kind of situation or range of situations. In the case of a close relationship with a partner or other family member with whom one lives, there is likely to be an intricate web of variably shared

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regulatory processes. Family units also provide enduring structure for emotion regulation (Thompson 2014). How another person or group of people acts upon one's emotions will reflect not just the types of relationships in question (e.g., parent, child, spouse, friend) but also the "perceived *quality*" of potential regulators (Coan and Maresh 2014, 223).

Interactions with other people not only serve to *regulate*; they are themselves *regulated* by shared expectations, which reflect wider norms, familiar types of situations, and established relationships. Thus, in mundane circumstances, many interpersonal interactions *take care of themselves*, just as emotions do. The experiential world, the emotions that it elicits, and one's interactions with others interrelate in ways that are familiar, cohesive, and fairly stable over time. Kappas (2011, 20) thus refers to "social autoregulation." However, we also turn to others for support during times of upheaval, when life structure is lacking.[4] To appreciate the potential scale of emotion dysregulation during grief and the consequent need for external support, it is important to acknowledge the full extent of our everyday reliance on external regulators, along with the ways in which bereavement can impede the ability to draw on them.

The unfolding of an emotional experience often depends directly on our interaction with another person; our emotions influence theirs and vice versa. Thus, as Griffiths and Scarantino (2009, 446) observe, there is a "dynamic process of negotiation mediated by reciprocal feedback between emoter and interactants." However, even when we are not interacting with others in this way, emotion regulation processes continue to depend on habitual expectations concerning the behavior of specific individuals and other people in general. Colombetti and Krueger (2015) develop a wider-ranging account of our reliance on environmental "scaffolding" for emotion regulation. This scaffolding consists in a diverse assortment of entities, places, and activities, all of which we rely upon in order to alter our emotions in predictable ways.[5] Many forms of scaffolding do not involve other people but instead the likes of wearing certain clothes, reading and writing letters, listening to music, and visiting places such as art galleries, cinemas, churches, and cafés. Furthermore, many regulatory activities will be solitary in nature. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the effectiveness of an impersonal regulator will often depend on expectations concerning other people. Sometimes, those expectations concern particular individuals, groups, or types of people (e.g., partners, friends, families, teachers, technicians, waiters, musicians, drivers, advisors),

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and sometimes they involve other people in general (that is, anyone you might encounter or anticipate encountering during the course of daily life). For example, relaxing bicycle rides would not be possible if you constantly doubted the competence or intentions of all drivers in the vicinity; you would not feel at ease in a favorite set of clothes if you expected everyone to laugh at you for wearing them; you could not become pleasantly immersed in a film if you experienced the rest of the cinema audience as threatening. Even the regulatory effects of drinking a cup of coffee may depend on sitting in a café where there are other people. In fact, almost everything we anticipate from the surrounding environment depends in some way on what we anticipate from others. By implication, so does our use of environmental resources as regulators.

In chapter 2, I discussed how the significance of the surrounding environment can come to depend, to a large extent, on one's relationship with a particular person. With this, so does the ability to engage with numerous other regulators: the significance of this song relates to us; going out for a meal together is something we do in order to relax; the place where I walk in the evenings is imbued with happy memories of what we have done together; this is our favorite café. Other interpersonal relationships can also depend on the deceased: they are our friends; we are meeting up with the other parents. Some of these relationships may play important regulatory roles and also enable access to further regulatory resources, such as shared pastimes. Loss of an interpersonal regulator can thus impact upon the availability of other regulators.[6] Families become closer or fall apart; some friendships are lost while others are established; and people's behavior changes over time:

> I have severed relationships with some family members and friends. Other relationships have been strengthened. Some of those closest to me let me down, some relative strangers became good friends. (#31)

> I found most people, if not everyone, very supportive in the beginning, which was fantastic, but slowly I realised who was in for the long haul. (#54)

How people respond to upheaval will vary considerably, depending on factors such as age, gender, culture, education, upbringing, health, and other personal circumstances.[7] Nevertheless, most people turn to others for one or another form of support. What distinguishes bereavement is that it often involves losing an important regulator, sometimes the very person

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to whom one would otherwise have turned in order to comprehend and navigate upheaval. Suppose one's experiential world is disrupted to such an extent that it no longer indicates a route for one's emotions to follow, as might be the case following loss of a job, a life-changing accident, or the onset of chronic illness. In chapter 4, we saw how such phenomenological disturbances can involve a pervasive lack of direction; it is no longer clear what one ought to do next or even what the salient options are. Nevertheless, in situations where we lack a sense of how to proceed and where decisions are still needed, there is the option of delegating parts of the decision-making process to others.[8] We also draw on relationships in ways that sustain certain aspects of our lives and enable the development of new structure.

Where the loss of a person is at the same time the loss of a resource for coping with loss, it is *doubly disorienting*. One is not only lost in the middle of a forest without any visible paths to follow; one is lost in the absence of a potential guide. For instance, in the case of a close relationship with a partner, one may be faced with losing (a) projects and pastimes that were central to one's life, (b) access to a distinctive personal *style* that shaped one's world in an ongoing way, (c) scaffolding for interpreting and engaging with emotionally challenging events, (d) various other kinds of practical support, and (e) access to any other regulative resources that depend on (a), (b), (c), or (d):

> You lose everything when your husband dies. You lose your best friend, your lover, your confidante, your guiding hand, your listening ear, your present, your future, your way of living, your financial standard of living, you become mum and dad to your kids, you lose companionship, you lose shared history, you lose someone to help with chores, you lose someone to fix things or do the DIY or car maintenance, you lose joy, you lose hope, you lose a purpose to your life. (#87)

How we relate to other people thus has an important role to play in shaping the trajectory of a grief process.[9] Another important consideration is whether there is a continuing bond with the deceased and, if so, what form it takes. I have suggested that the distinctive *style* of a particular person can continue to be experienced even after that person's death. This can serve to shape one's experiences of significance, sustaining a sense that the world has new possibilities to offer.[10] Continuing bonds are also relevant to emotion regulation in other ways. For instance, which possessions one retains, what one does with them, and the significance they have in

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light of a continuing relationship can affect the ability to regulate emotion by experiencing and interacting with objects. In addition, by influencing how we relate to the world as a whole, continuing bonds contribute to the availability or unavailability of wider regulatory resources. For instance, the emotional effects of a walk through *our* favorite park will vary considerably, depending on whether it fosters a sense of ongoing connection or serves only as a painful reminder of loss.

However, grief also involves experiences of turning to the deceased and not finding them. Some of these experiences can be construed in terms of habitually seeking a person who would otherwise have provided regulatory support. In earlier chapters, I suggested that what Parkes (1998, 47) describes in terms of a "strong impulse to search" is often better thought of in terms of habitual expectations that have yet to be revised. It can be added that searching behaviors sometimes take the more specific form of habitually seeking a source of support. One believes the person to be dead and experiences an associated disturbance of life structure. But what remains integral to one's world, at least sometimes or in certain situations, is the prospect of turning to that person for support. Didion (2006, 44) refers to something like this as "magical thinking," where explicit acknowledgment of the death runs alongside the implicit project of "bringing him back" via some kind of "magic trick."

The capacity for emotion regulation further depends on one's various relations with the living. For instance, sustenance and revision of life structure both rely on expectations concerning the motivations, capabilities, and likely actions of others—specific individuals and others in general. Almost every project and situation we engage in depends in some way on what we anticipate from others. Indeed, we could not have a meaningfully structured, temporally enduring experiential world at all without having certain general expectations involving other people: they won't try to mow us down as we cross the road; they won't give us false information when we ask for directions; they won't hurt us for no reason as we pass by them on the street. So, the extent to which bereavement disrupts one's world will depend, in part, on whether or not relations with other people are compromised too—whether and how social activities, friendships, and bonds with family members are sustained, lost, strengthened, or otherwise altered. Activities that are relatively untouched by a bereavement also play an important role in sustaining life structure. For example, Oates (2011, 172–174) describes

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how, during the semester after her husband's death, her students became a "lifeline," providing "two lively and absorbing hours" of respite from the "chaos" of grief.

Perhaps the most profound form of dysregulation consists in a pervasive loss of what we might call trust or confidence in other people; one loses a principal regulator and is then confronted with a world where it seems that nobody can be relied upon for anything. For the most part, what we anticipate from other people involves a nonlocalized, unreflective set of expectations concerning how interactions are likely to proceed: they will not cause me harm; they will help me when I am in need (Ratcliffe 2017). Granted, we do not anticipate all people in this way at all times. Nevertheless, distrust is ordinarily the exception rather than the norm. It is a localized experience that stands out as anomalous relative to a more generally confident or trusting engagement with the social world. However, consider what world experience would be like if this overarching style of anticipation were eroded or even wholly absent, if others offered no prospect of the kinds of relations that might aid in sustaining or repairing one's world. All projects, commitments, and values would be transient, fragile, or unsustainable. In place of a stable world, there would be a pervasive indeterminacy of the kind described in chapter 4, involving a lack of guiding structure. Furthermore, there would be no prospect of relief from this. (I will return to such experiences in chapter 8, when I consider the nature of pathological grief.) This is to be contrasted with all those cases where an experiential world continues to be shaped and regulated by relations with others. Here, lack of structure is offset by another form of indeterminacy, identified in chapter 5, which points to the prospect of new possibilities.

In summary, then, bereavement can pose a distinctive regulatory challenge, the nature of which renders the course of grief both fragile and inseparable from interpersonal and social relations. It is important to distinguish (1) emotions that are regulated by life structure, (2) emotions that involve responding to disturbances of life structure, and (3) emotions, such as grief, which can further involve a loss of access to regulatory processes that one would otherwise have drawn upon. The nature of emotion regulation in grief is qualitatively different from the tasks of eliciting, sustaining, modifying, or suppressing episodic emotions that occur during the course of daily life. This regulatory challenge is associated specifically with personal loss, although it is not exclusive to bereavement. For instance, the breakup of a long-term

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relationship could similarly involve disruption of an experiential world, loss of a principal regulator, and being unable to seek support from others.

7.3 Narrative

One important resource for shaping, interpreting, and regulating emotion during grief is narrative. People sometimes remark on how being able to articulate or write about what has happened can play an important role in comprehending the death and its implications: "I wrote, to begin with, because there was no other option, no other way of making sense of an overwhelming feeling of disbelief about what was happening" (Rosenfeld 2020, 8). Both the narratives that one constructs and the act of narration itself have potential roles to play in regulating the course of grief. One such role is the provision of a coherent framework for interpreting what has happened and guiding one's responses to it. In her memoir of bereavement, Anne Roiphe writes,

> Writing this book provides a floor under my experience. Having used writing to hold myself erect all my adult life, I am bold enough to believe that I cannot fall because of this word scaffolding that, all invisible, props up my days. (Roiphe 2008, 21)

How grief is shaped and regulated by narrative will vary from one person and one narrative to the next. In Roiphe's case, it could be that the act of writing itself comprises a project relative to which her activities have continuing coherence and meaning. In addition, the content of the narrative may provide much-needed structure. An explicit, narrative scaffolding can serve as a partial and temporary substitute for an experiential world that is lacking in coherence. The emphasis of the narrative will vary. It might be concerned principally with what has happened, one's relations with others, or what one now faces. It might provide a means of interpreting events and emotions, a rationale for one's current activities, or a way of facilitating interactions with other people.

Where the ability to assemble a certain narrative on one's own is lacking, the prospect of doing so with others may remain. According to Walter (1996), one important role played by narratives is that of establishing an enduring, shared biography of the deceased. This, he suggests, "enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their ongoing lives," something that is ordinarily achieved collaboratively, through conversations

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with others who knew and cared about the person. The result is a coherent story of that person, their death, and their value to others, an achievement that influences the path of grief and also the kind of connection that one retains with the deceased (Walter 1996, 7). Consistent with this, it has been reported that those who are able to construct coherent narratives of loss are generally better able to integrate loss into their lives (e.g., Neimeyer, Baldwin, and Gillies 2006; Sbarra and Hazan 2008.[11]

Walter (1996, 13) emphasizes the importance of establishing an "accurate picture of the deceased." However, this can be contrasted with a role that the *process* of narration sometimes plays. The latter is not a matter of accuracy and completeness but of dynamism and open-endedness. As discussed in chapter 5, sustaining a sense of the distinctiveness and otherness of the deceased involves experiencing any fixed image, any set of memories, any story, as incomplete. To retain a sense of that person's style is to be open to new possibilities involving them, new ways of being affected by them. Interactions with others can involve sharing different perspectives and different stories, together invoking a sense of spontaneity and novelty that enriches participants' sense of *that person*. Higgins (2013) suggests that such interactions can also assist in reorganizing one's life, not by establishing a new, fixed narrative to replace one that has become unsustainable but by cultivating something that is ongoing and open-ended.

One might object that this emphasis on interpersonal emotion regulation and, more specifically, narrative construction overstates our dependence on others. For instance, one could appeal to various criticisms of the widespread view that explicit "grief work," of a kind that involves reflecting on one's emotions with others, is required in order to come to terms with loss (Stroebe and Schut 1999; Stroebe, Schut, and Stroebe 2005). However, the target of such criticisms is more specific than what I have in mind here. Sharing and co-constructing narratives about the deceased does not have to involve explicitly *working through* something, a point that applies equally to numerous other forms of interaction that influence the course of grief. Furthermore, narrative construction need not be preoccupied with the fact of loss or its integration into one's life. Talking about a person for whom one continues to care can be interpreted by all parties concerned as just that. An emphasis on the importance of interpersonal emotion regulation is therefore compatible with a lack of effortful, explicitly directed grief work. It is one thing to question the need for grief work. But it would be

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something else entirely to maintain that interpersonal relations are of little consequence to the course of grief.

Sometimes, when sharing experiences and stories, comforting one another, or participating in other bereavement-related activities together, it might seem more natural to say that *we* are grieving than that *I* am grieving and, independently of that, *you* are grieving too. In light of this, Krueger (2016) considers whether a token emotional experience can be shared between two or more people, such that there is—at a given time—only a single, shared experience of grief, rather than two separate experiences of grief that influence one another. He suggests that certain cases of coregulation might be understood in this way, given that the dynamic unfolding of both parties' emotions depends upon a single, shared, regulatory structure.

However, there is no straightforward relationship between the degree to which emotion regulation in grief is integrated and the experience of being a "we." Experiences of interpersonal emotion regulation equally involve encountering one another as *you*. This is sometimes accompanied by a sense that *we are grieving*, but not always. After all, engaging with loss often involves relating in similarly intricate ways to others who are not grieving. Thus, even though both parties' emotions participate in a common, dynamic structure, it can remain the case that only one of them undergoes a certain type of emotion process. Nevertheless, there are at least three ways in which a given experience of grief might be said to be "shared." First of all, two or more people's grief can have a common object. This is of little interest, as it amounts only to there being two or more token emotions of the same type, elicited by and directed at the same situation. A second way in which grief can be shared is when the object of emotion impacts upon a shared life structure, upon possibilities that are *ours*. This still does not amount to an experience of grief that is itself distributed between two or more parties—I grieve over our lost possibilities and so do you. But a third option comes closer to what Krueger identifies: two or more people's experiences of grief are shaped over time by a single, interpersonally distributed regulatory structure. When this is combined with a common object and a shared life structure, it seems right to say that *we* grieve over *our* loss, rather than that I grieve over a death and you also happen to grieve over the same death. Even so, this does not add up to a single, token experience of grief that is somehow shared between two individuals. Neither does it warrant the claim that there is only one grief process, considered over its entire

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course. Even when those who grieve have a close relationship, grief processes will interact in different ways and to varying degrees over time. What could be maintained is that, for a time at least, two grief processes fuse together. Where a single individual is concerned, grief consists in a unified, temporally extended process, despite gaps during periods of unconsciousness. It does so because the process as a whole comprises a cohesive engagement with a loss of life possibilities. Perhaps engaging with the loss of *our possibilities* can be cohesive in a comparable way. Thus, although I have one emotional experience, while you have another, they can be regarded as integral to a singular emotional process without there being a singular, unbroken phenomenology.

However, there is a risk here of obscuring the nuances of interpersonal experience in grief. Even while experiencing *our* grief, I may continue to address *you* as a distinct individual, recognize your experience as distinct from mine, and be affected by it in virtue of its distinctness. So, even with considerable integration of regulation, there remains an interplay between commonality and difference. Where "our" world is affected and "we" engage with loss together, the two parties coregulate by retaining perspectives that continue to differ from each other, sometimes clashing.[12] As illustrated by the co-construction of narrative, sharing one's grief with others involves their being able to open up new and unforeseen possibilities. They harbor the potential to play certain regulatory roles precisely because they are distinct from oneself and continue to be experienced as such. Furthermore, increasing the intricacy and duration of interactions between a *you* and an *I* need not involve gradually dissolving the phenomenological boundaries between them. Rather, there remains a sense of the other person's ability to open up possibilities in ways that one cannot. Hence, although it is plausible to maintain that two or more parties can share a single regulatory structure, the intricacy of emotion regulation and shared experience in grief cannot be captured in terms of a single, token emotional experience shared by two or more subjects.[13]

In addition to recognizing how particular people regulate our emotions, it is important to acknowledge how these interactions are shaped by their wider social and cultural settings. A co-constructed narrative concerning the deceased can be ephemeral, assembled through spontaneous conversation between people and never repeated. Alternatively, it might endure for a longer period, during which it is told, retold, revised, elaborated, and

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disseminated to others. In both these cases, the narrative concerns a familiar person and their place in our lives. However, other narratives consist of generic or canonical accounts of grief, which are already established within a culture as interpretive resources or guides. This applies to the seemingly conflicting narratives of severing ties and continuing bonds, discussed in chapter 6. Such narratives, and the wider frameworks of rituals, practices, and norms to which they belong, further contribute to emotion regulation, by providing shared interpretive frameworks, facilitating or interfering with interpersonal interactions, and describing or prescribing ways of acting.[14]

For example, in an interesting book, *Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain*, Geoffrey Gorer (1965) documents a variety of mourning practices and norms established in Britain at the time he was writing, along with certain changes that had occurred. His discussion emphasizes how cultural norms associated with grief had shifted and diversified, coming to place more weight on the preferences of the individual. Practices affected by this included funerals and other rituals, dress codes, and periods of abstinence from social activities. As a result of these changes, Gorer suggests, grief had become “unpatterned” (64). Although not in these terms, he indicates that people’s emotion processes at the time had been dysregulated by the erosion of established, normative, sociocultural scaffolding and a move toward individual choice. Gorer distinguishes between various trajectories that grief might follow, which depend in part on sociocultural structures that regulate its unfolding. Being able to “weep freely,” he claims, is a “reliable sign that mourning is being worked through and overcome” (77). In contrast to grief processes that involve movement and change, there is what he calls “mummification,” where one “preserves the grief for the lost husband or wife by keeping the house and every object in it precisely as he or she had left it, as though it were a shrine which would at any moment be reanimated” (79). Gorer connects the inability to “get over grief” with “the absence of any ritual either individual or social, lay or religious,” to guide the bereaved and those they interact with (83).[15]

Whatever we might say about the specifics of Gorer’s account, he is right to observe that interpersonal, social, and cultural processes are integral to the *dynamism* of grief, something that is essential to the recognition and negotiation of loss. As we saw in chapter 3, a ubiquitous theme in first-person accounts of grief is that of feeling, at least for a time, cut off from social life. A world of shared norms and practices endures. However, a more

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specific life structure, which gave meaning and value to one's own activities and enabled one to engage with that world, has been lost. Gone is an organized future, filled with possibilities for meaningful self-development, a future in which others continue to participate: "I don't know where I fit in anymore" (#45); "I have no future" (#87); "I feel I never will be able to move on" (#94). One of the most important ways in which interpersonal and social interactions shape and regulate the course of grief is by contributing to the integration of loss into one's life structure, in a manner that renews the sense of participation in a shared world. As I will now show, the nature and extent of this contribution becomes more apparent when we reflect on situations that prevent such interactions from occurring.

7.4 Grief and the Pandemic

I will conclude this chapter by reflecting on how social restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic affected people's experiences of grief. To do so, I will draw on first-person testimonies obtained via two qualitative surveys, one of which was introduced in chapter 1. The other survey, conducted during spring and summer 2020, set out to investigate the phenomenological effects of social restrictions (e.g., their effects on people's experiences of interpersonal relations, certain emotions, time, and the surrounding world). In those cases where respondents had suffered bereavements during or shortly before the pandemic, this included the impact on their experiences of grief.[16] Responses to both surveys identify several ways in which losses of interpersonal and social opportunities affect grief and its course over time. However, I do not seek to make any generalizations concerning the effects of restrictions. Even in more usual circumstances, experiences of grief are diverse, as are the ways in which the bereaved depend upon others. Furthermore, restrictions will have affected people in many different ways. For instance, some grieved alone, whereas others shared homes with families, partners, or close friends. So, my more modest aim here is to illustrate some of the ways in which grief is regulated by interpersonal and social relations by considering experiences of grief during the pandemic.

A consistent and prominent theme in first-person accounts is not being able to attend a funeral or, at least, a *proper* funeral and how this interfered with grief. For some, there is a lingering sense of unreality concerning both the funeral and the death: "It feels disconnected and unreal. I guess that it

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is related to the inability to be there and grieve as usual, with other people by my side." As discussed in chapter 3, grief involves a process of "sinking in," whereby the implications of a death are integrated into one's life in the form of altered habits and expectations. Attending a funeral can be an important part of this process. Restrictions also inhibited many other interactions that involve confronting, engaging with, and adapting to loss: "lockdown has made everything a million times worse; it has prevented me from doing all the things that were helping me through my grief" (#178). One respondent, whose mother had died shortly before social restrictions were imposed, mentions being unable to "clear the house out as charity shops are shut" and how the resultant inability to "get a break" from all the associated memories had affected her father. Another recurring theme is being deprived of the opportunity to comfort one another in person and how this makes grief somehow harder:

> I was fortunate to be able to attend but whilst at the funeral social distancing had to be observed. So, even when I was by my family we were unable to console each other by hugging or touching. This lack of being able to console one another definitely made the grieving process harder.

Some accounts emphasize how the loss of social opportunities amounted to a removal of support structures. For one respondent, "coping mechanisms were not there," while others describe feeling "cut off from other people" and from institutions such as churches that would otherwise have provided emotional support. All of this contributes to a pervasive sense of detachment from the shared world:

> I've been in a little bubble and the Covid lockdown has reinforced this and I'm not sure what normal is anymore and how I will ever reach it. . . . Lockdown has been awful. All of our support networks were pulled and it made us feel very alone, which is the worst. (#151)

Disruption of interpersonal and social processes that would otherwise have aided in recognition of and engagement with loss can also lead to an experience of grief that is lacking in dynamism and change. Consider the following passage:

> I said goodbye to my father via technology. We could see each other. We just accepted it. I fear that when and if this situation resolves, I will look back on that time and feel unable to cope with the way the end of my father's life was. I hope that I can recall that it was out of my control at that time and accept that I could not change things. . . . I feel unable to let go of the grief as I feel that I am putting

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> it on hold while we wait for this situation to end and we are all, in a sense, fighting for survival. I feel that this is preventing me from reflecting on what has happened to our family. I feel as though my father's death was part of a world event rather than a private family matter.

Several themes can be discerned here. Grief's being "on hold" is not a matter of its being delayed. Rather, this is a grief that cannot be "let go of." The grief persists, but without changing over time as one comprehends and adjusts to loss. Furthermore, a backdrop of shared upheaval eclipses the particularity of one's own loss and also disrupts attempts to make sense of what has happened, to let its many implications *sink in*. Interestingly, this response also includes concerns about grief's future course. There is an appreciation that the death and the circumstances in which it occurred are yet to be fully acknowledged and that doing so will be emotionally challenging. There is also the *hope* of eventually arriving at a perspective involving acceptance, rather than an alternative perspective involving guilt or regret in relation to events over which one lacked control. This suggests a form of emotion regulation whereby one strives to interpret events in ways that will influence one's future emotional experiences. It is likely that many others who were denied the opportunity to be with loved ones as they died (and often during the weeks and months leading up to the death as well) will face similar challenges. We can thus see how emotion regulation in grief relates closely to the changing significance of memories. One is tasked with integrating one's memories of a person in life, the reality of their death and the circumstances under which it occurred, and one's own orientation toward the future.

Many of those who did not suffer bereavements during the pandemic also experienced a wide-ranging sense of loss concerning life possibilities that were never actualized and will never be recovered:

> I have felt grief because my new baby grandson was born shortly before lockdown and I only saw him twice. He's now nearly 6 months old and I've grieved that I will never be able to get those precious times back that I've missed—the cuddles, the nappy changes, just being able to be there to support his parents and coo over their little one and enjoy him together. So many "firsts" have gone—they are "one and onlys" and can never be experienced again. I love that little one so much and I've missed him so much, it's been like an ache in my heart and has also made me feel angry, frustrated and cheated.

This experience of loss can also extend to possibilities that others have been denied or will be denied due to the unfolding situation: "I grieve for

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the changed world that my children, and others their age, have to deal with; how their prospects have withered with the socioeconomic drought that we are entering." For those who did experience bereavements during this period, we might say there was a *grief within grief*, a loss of possibilities within a loss of possibilities. Although some report that their sense of estrangement from the world was exacerbated by lockdowns and the like, others state that a shared sense of disruption, strangeness, and loss reduced the gulf between their own grief-world and the world of others:

> Lockdown actually helped me not feel so different from everyone else. (#75)

> My husband died a week before lockdown, so I have been struggling with the double weirdness of widowhood and lockdown which made everything much harder. For a while I was in a bubble of grief and didn't really notice the impact of lockdown on others. Then I emerged from that to notice that the world was really horrible for everyone else too. After a while it helped that all the world was strange as I didn't have to deal with life going on as normal all round me while I was suffering so much. (#126)

The distinction between one's own loss of possibilities and this wider experience of loss can also become hard to discern: "the world is different for everyone just now, it's difficult to tell if this is a reaction to grief or the Covid pandemic" (#97). With this, the sense of there being a world to which one might find one's way back is diminished. Consequently, the process of adjusting to the loss might well be impeded, slowed down, delayed, or otherwise altered: "I still think of him as if he were alive because I've been in my little lockdown bubble and haven't had to consider his loss in real terms yet, I think" (#204).

In extreme cases, the regulatory challenge posed by social restrictions takes the following form: (a) an experiential world that previously regulated one's emotions is profoundly disrupted; (b) this disruption involves the loss of a person to whom one would otherwise have turned for support in negotiating disruption; and (c) social support that might have compensated for (a) and (b) is denied. However, it is important to add that people's experiences of grief were affected in *different* ways by social restrictions. In contrast to those who felt deprived of a proper funeral, one respondent expressed relief at not having to attend funerals or engage in other uncomfortable social interactions: "when lockdown came it was a relief, in that I didn't have to pretend I wanted to go out" (#38). Another appreciated

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having time away from the demands of social life, in order to attend to their grief: “lockdown has helped me process my grief” (#215).

Taken together, these different experiences serve to illustrate how grief is shaped by relations with other people, in the context of larger social and cultural environments. Our life structures depend on relationships with specific individuals and, as grief’s fragile trajectory makes clear, we also rely on other people when responding to losses of structure. In chapter 8, I will show how this emphasis on the interpersonal and social dimensions of grief can aid us in understanding what distinguishes “typical” from supposedly “pathological” forms of grief.

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Grief Worlds

A Study of Emotional Experience

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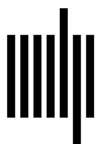

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