

Stop... Take a step back... and breathe.

Preface

The following is a collection of articles and research from various authors in relation to death and grief. Also included in this collection is analysis and commentary by this author. This webpage is to serve as a guide. It does not address every situation nor does it address all possibilities when it comes to the experience and expression of such a personal and individual concept such as grief. The following information can often be applied to related concepts such as trauma and loss which do not always include the death of someone close to the individual. Please use this collection/commentary with that in mind. One size does not fit all, and when in doubt - stop, take a step back, and breathe.

Introduction

To quote a cliché, "Rome was not built in a day." This concept is also very fitting when dealing with or experiencing grief. Grief is a process...not a destination. No one has everything all figured out. No one has all of the answers. During a time when emotions are running high, shock is ever-present, and immediate action is expected, it becomes imperative that one takes a step back to look at the "big picture." The notion that one can and should have everything under control is self-defeating. Being impossible to reach, such an idea only sets one up for failure. The return to a sense of normalcy takes time. Thousands of small steps make up the journey called

life which includes joy and pain, elation and grief. Each is needed in order to know the other. So during a time when everything is overwhelming and nothing seems to make sense - stop, take a step back, and breathe.

A Parable

To begin this exploration of grief as it relates to children, a parable proves helpful. Please visit the following webpage and read "The Child's Bereavement Caregiver as Gardener: A Parable."
http://griefwords.com/index.cgi?action=page&page=articles%2Fparable.html&site_id=202

The Who's, What's, When's, Where's, and Why's of Children and Grief

Such a parable can be used to illuminate the situation of a grieving child. Children do not always find themselves in ideal circumstances and we cannot and should not always work to protect them from these natural life events. Children do have innate resilience and we need to encourage and nurture this resilience. Children function in a time and way that is unique to them and we should not push them to live up to the notions and timeframes of adults. Children deserve a chance to grow into their new situation and we have the responsibility to support their transformation.

Grief is something that is as individual as a fingerprint, as personal as the soul. One must take into consideration the needs of the individual. A human being needs to know that someone cares. He wants to know that he is not alone. He wants to know that his basic needs will be met. He wants to feel safe and secure.

The parable of the columbine seedling illustrates this point. The seedling did not ask for those around it to "rescue" the seedling from its

environment. The seedling did not ask to be cloistered from the elements. It merely continued to grow despite its hardships and was grateful for and thankful to the gardener for assisting the seedling in its growth. This is all that children ask - to be cared for, to be nurtured, and to be loved. Hardship is a part of life. If a child is "rescued" from these hardships, that child will not grow toward maturity. That child will become dependent, vulnerable, and insecure. Children need to experience life and all that it has to offer for it is only through hardship that one learns what joy truly is.

Due to their tender years and dependent status, children are often viewed as somewhat less than full-fledged members of society. It is a popular myth that children do not and cannot grieve or that we should "...help children get over their grief" (Wolfelt, 1996, p. 287). It is widely held that the reality of death merely "goes over their heads" or that we should protect them from it. It is the practicing of these "truths," however, that interferes with the child's ability to cope with loss and to develop into a functional adult. "Healthy mourning necessarily takes a long time - months, years and even lifetimes. In fact, children never overcome grief; they live with it and work to reconcile themselves to it" (Wolfelt, 1996, p. 287). "Those who think the goal is to 'resolve' bereaved children's grief become destructive to the healing process" (Wolfelt, 1996, p. 287).

In the book Memories Live Forever, Sharon Rugg further explains this concept:

Their [children's] grief happens in spurts over long periods of time, and they alternately approach and then avoid their feelings. At each developmental level, the child may need to revisit the loss and once again come to terms with the meaning of the loss at that particular time in his/her life. (on inside back cover)

A ten-year-old child will not be able to grasp all that his/her father's death will impact. At the age of ten, he/she loses a father. At the age of 18, he/she loses the father of a high school graduate. At the age of twenty-five, he/she loses the father of the groom/bride. At the age of thirty, he/she loses the grandfather of his/her first child. At each stage, he/she "reworks" his/her grief. This does not mean that he/she is "stuck" in his/her grief. It means that he/she must reconcile himself/herself to these "new" facets of his/her "old" loss. Over time, he/she will learn how to reinvest his/her energy and feelings for his/her father into activities,

rituals, and relationships that pay homage to his memory. Although his/her father is no longer alive, he will never be forgotten and his memory will live on in other aspects of his/her life. This man/woman learns to incorporate the loss of his/her father into his/her life. He/she does not, however, return to his/her pre-grief state.

While death is a simple fact of life, it is not a simple concept. Adults have had a lifetime to experience loss and to "practice" grief work whether it is the loss of a pet, a job, or a significant person. Adults have the maturity to "make sense of" a loss. Many children do not have these abilities. Adults often use terms such as "kick the bucket" or will speak in vague terms like "passed away." Children need more concrete terminology. Adults need to be clear and concise. To facilitate understanding and comfort level, working definitions of some key terms are needed. Death 101: A workbook for educating and healing by Sandra Helene Straub (p. 226, 227, 229, and 231) provides some simple and helpful definitions:

Bereavement -- the general state of being that results from having experienced a significant loss

Death -- death is when a person's body stops working...

Grief -- the thoughts and feelings that are experienced within oneself upon the death of someone loved; the emotions we feel following the loss of a significant person, thing, or event in our lives

Mourning -- act of expressing grief...public expression or sharing of the feelings of grief; taking the internal experience of grief and expressing it outside of oneself

She further defines mourning as "...the process of incorporating that loss into our lives" (p. 69).

Speaking to children in clear, concise language as to a death is so important that Donna O'Toole and Jerre Cory place this first on their list of guidelines for talking with children about death. The list in its entirety is as follows:

1. In clear words tell that the death has happened.
2. Tell how the death happened.
3. Reassure children that a wide range of reactions is acceptable and normal.
4. Explain that sometimes people don't feel much at all.

5. Tell where the body has been taken, and what will be done with the body.
 6. Give information about who will provide care and intimacy.
 7. Share that life has meaning and will not be forgotten.
 8. Tell how they can be involved in remembrance or burial ceremonies.
 9. Give ongoing information as requested and repeat the information above.
 10. Empower children with choice and control.
 11. Recognize and support a child's need for both solitude and support.
- (p. 8)

Words, however, are not always necessary when dealing with a hurting child. A person does not always need to know exactly what to say. Often a grieving child needs that which words cannot provide. Physical closeness, availability, and a listening ear are often in short supply for the grieving child. They need to feel that they are heard. Often people are afraid to speak of the deceased in the presence of the bereaved for fear of provoking sadness. This, however, can lead the grieving person to believe that no one cares about the deceased and that their loved one is not important.

Reactions to grief are numerous and varied. Most do not need to promote concern. Anger, Sadness, happiness, frustration, distractibility can all be normal. Problems arise when anger results in consistent physical aggression or when sadness results in emotional paralysis. Children need adults to use their best, calm judgment to guide them. They need information, reassurance, and direction. Children need an outlet for their energies. Adults must work to fulfill the needs of the young while they tend to themselves. Children will interpret and misinterpret, act and react as they see fit. It is imperative that adults acknowledge this reality and respond accordingly.

In trying to fulfill these needs, a maxim from the medical profession can prove useful. Doctors work under the premise "First, do no harm." This can also be applied to reactions to death. In the wake of death, there is pain. People work to minimize this pain. This often takes the form of rituals, memorials, and tributes. Such actions can have both positive and negative results. Rituals, memorials, and tributes can help those left in the wake of death to regain a sense of power and control. The mourner now has something on which to focus their energies and to give substance to their

intense emotions. The person who has died is important and deserves some action to commemorate his life.

However, the tribute or memorial proposed needs to be looked at from various angles. What are the likely short-term effects? What could be the likely long-term effects? Could this ultimately bring more pain to the family? Could this prolong the healing of the community? Tributes and memorials are ultimately for those who have been left to deal with the aftermath of grief. Such actions do not bring back the deceased. Such actions may serve individual needs but may not fulfill the needs of others or of the whole. Tributes and memorials do have a place and time but their implications need to be considered carefully. Remember - first, do no harm.

People often speak of grief in terms of waves, steps, or even stages. Such metaphors can be useful at times. However, life is not a metaphor. Life comes with reality, pain, joy, and sadness. Grief is all of these things and more. There is no easy 1,2,3 step guide on how to address grief. Grief is something that can only be experienced to the level of development of the griever. Grief often needs to be worked and reworked throughout life. This is not pathological. What can prompt pathological reaction is ignorance. By reading what this webpage has to offer, you have taken the first step toward enlightenment. You are on your way toward a better understanding. The journey, however, does not end here. It continues throughout life. It continues as we each strive toward the goal of making a difference in the life of a child.

And when in doubt...stop, take a step back, and breathe.

References

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About this author and undertaking

This webpage was compiled by and written by Belinda Z. Foreman as part of a professional development project. Mrs. Foreman is a Licensed Social Worker with Intermediate Unit 1. Comments and feedback are welcome. She can be contacted at foremanb@iu1.k12.pa.us.