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Necessary Steps: A bereavement support program for children and their families

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VNA Foundation of Orange County
2003

Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
whispers the o'er-fraught heart
and bids it break."
Macbeth

The Work of Grief				
Acknowledging the reality of the loss	Recognizing and expressing emotions	Integrating and completing the past	Rebuilding the present	Revising the future
Shock, numbness and denial. Allows the bereaved time to regroup and gather the inner psychological strength and outer social support necessary to face grief.	The protective numbness passes and the bereaved are faced with feelings of sadness, fear, anger and guilt.	By exploring the life of the deceased and his or her place in the life of the bereaved the ability to let go and move on can be more easily developed.	Reorganization of arrangements, jobs and roles. The day-to-day coping with a changed world.	Attention of the bereaved begins to turn toward the future and the identification of new goals and plans. The recreation of one's life story.
Acknowledging the reality of the loss and beginning to move toward rather than away from feelings.	Identifying and giving words to the chaos of emotions and sharing them with others.	Discovering what the relationship meant to those left behind.	New tasks and roles are acknowledged and discussed.	The focus begins to turn toward hopes, fears and plans for the future.

Listen, children: Your father is dead
From his old coats I'll make you little jackets;
I'll make you little trousers from his old pants
There'll be in his pockets things he used to put there
Keys and pennies covered with tobacco;
Dan shall have the pennies to save in his bank;
Anne shall have the keys to make a pretty noise with.
Life must go on, and the dead must be forgotten;
Through good men die;
Anne, eat your breakfast;
Dan, take your medicine;
Life must go on;
I forgot just why.
Lament
Edna St. Vincent Millay

Primary Age Children (Preschool through third grade)

Developmental Issues: What to watch for

- Children may react to loss by reverting to an earlier stage of development. Preschoolers may begin sucking their thumb again or regress to bed-wetting. These behaviors are usually temporary and are not necessarily signs of serious problems.
- The age between 3-6 years old is sometimes called the "magic years." At this age, children believe their thoughts have a direct and powerful influence on the external world. Thus, angry thoughts about friends, siblings or parents can "cause" them to become sick or even die.

How they try to cope

- Young children will attempt to gain a sense of control over their feelings and the external world by repeating the same story or play scenario. The play of seriously traumatized children can be very literal and concrete and lack the usual imaginative quality seen in normal children's play.

What they need

- Security - Because of their dependency on adults, concerns about security play a prominent role in children's reaction to loss. Reassurance that they will continue to be cared for and kept safe can go a long way toward relieving many of a preschool child's anxieties.
- Feelings - Simply learning to apply labels to their inner experiences can help young children to gain some sense of control over what is otherwise a chaotic inner world.
- Guilt - Young children need to understand clearly that they did not "cause" a death or loss.

They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.
He that goeth forth and weepeth,
bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing
bringing his sheaves with him.
Book of Psalms (126:5-6)

Upper Elementary Age Children (Fourth through sixth grade)

Developmental Issues: What to watch for

- School age children begin to develop a greater sense of group identification. They began to want not to be different.
- School age children will continue to retain elements of “magical thinking” and even older pre-teens will overestimate the power of their thoughts to influence the external world. With this age group this may mean an overblown sense of responsibility for the loss or wishing they had done something different.

How they try to cope

- Upper elementary age children often personify death. It has a distinct personality such as a ghost, a skeleton man or other scary figure. Because death is personified, the child can cope by imagining they can avoid or outsmart death. Children of this age often have scary notions about death and may have nightmares or other fearful experiences related to their personifications of death. Perhaps in an attempt to deal with their fears symbolically, school age children are often attracted to scary stories, movies and games.
- They are often concerned about not upsetting significant others and may postpone grief until those around them seem more prepared to deal with their feelings.
- Although children of school age have a more mature understanding of death and loss, they often still lack the skills to deal with intense feelings. Because of this, they can sometimes appear indifferent to others' pain and disconnected from their own feelings.
- School age children often withdraw from others as a way of dealing with overwhelmingly painful feelings.

What they need

- Reassurance that you can deal with their feelings.
- Routine and familiar things.
- Appropriate models – stories of others that have had similar experiences.

One gives people in grief their own way.
Cranford
Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

Adolescents

Developmental Issues: What to watch for

- Adolescence is a time of tremendous change. Becoming more independent does not simply mean more independence and freedom. It also means having to take responsibility for oneself and separation from a lifetime source of security. This feeling of aloneness can leave adolescents feeling isolated and vulnerable.
- The loss of a family member can undermine their developing sense of autonomy. Adolescents need something firm to bounce off. When a parent dies or otherwise leaves, this structure is shaken and their quest for identity is interrupted.
- Because they are going through a period when they devalue their mothers and fathers, adolescents can be tough on their parents. If a parent dies or leaves in the middle of this angry and conflicted period, adolescents can feel tremendous guilt. They may also have residual resentments or anger toward the parent that left or died. These ambivalent feelings make grief more difficult.

How they try to cope

- Adolescents want strongly to fit in with their peers and rarely grieve openly if this is going to set them apart from others.
- Adolescents also fear lack of control over their feelings and actions. Because of this, their tolerance for painful feelings is limited and their natural tendency is to avoid them whenever possible.
- Silence, distraction, over achievement, drugs and alcohol, and over reliance on romantic relationships can all be ways to avoid painful feelings.

What they need

- Knowledge - Adolescents are capable of abstract thought. Giving them information normalizes their experiences and provides them a map of what to expect.
- Social support - Adolescents need to know they are not alone and there are others who have had (and overcome) similar experiences. They are often resistant to joining support groups but strongly bond once they begin to participate.
- Acknowledgement - Acknowledge and normalize ambivalent feelings.

Buffers and Safety Nets

One of three children who were exposed to multiple risk factors adjusted well despite these problems. Three things distinguished these children:

- Active and social temperament.
- Affectionate ties with grandparents, older siblings, or other parent substitute.
- Participation in school, church, youth groups or other social groups where their talents or strengths were recognized.

Self-expression – Telling the Story

- Fifteen college students wrote about a traumatic experience for 15 minutes a day for four consecutive days. Six months later this group had reduced their visits to the health center by 50% (Pennebaker 1990, 1997)
- One study paid juvenile delinquents to talk into a tape recorder about their experiences. This led to significant improvements in their behavior, including fewer arrests (Schwitzgabel 1961).

Re-storying – There is always an alternative story. Suffering and life struggles can victimize us but also can make us stronger and more compassionate. Children can learn to see themselves as strong and courageous rather than victims.

- Questions - How did you do that? What do you think that tells us about you?
- Learning about others who have overcome similar adversities.

Manage and express emotions.

Mentors and “one special person.”

Required helpfulness – The opportunity to contribute something meaningful to the community and the world.

THE FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP

INTRODUCTION

Loss is a universal human experience and grief is the natural response to loss. Despite this universality grief is, in modern American society, one of the most misunderstood of human experiences. James and Cherry in their book "The Grief Recovery Handbook" (1988), argue that we are ill equipped to deal with grief in others or ourselves because we are socialized to not express our feelings when we grieve, that we should grieve alone and that the passage of time alone will heal us. We are poorly served by these myths when faced with a significant loss and the result is that our recovery from grief is often hindered if not blocked completely.

To recover from grief, it is vital that mourners of all ages learn to express their thoughts and feelings to people that they trust. Although good friends are important and at times indispensable in the grief process they are frequently as poorly prepared to deal with it as the persons grieving. Even among family members, it is difficult to listen and support one another. Parents are in pain and feel themselves to be so needy that they cannot effectively reach out to their children and provide the support that is needed. Children are then left cut off from their most important source of support at a time when it is needed the most. The stress on the family system can be tremendous and the end result is that family members can become fragmented from one another, each alone in his or her pain.

The purpose of the Family Bereavement Support Group is to prevent this fragmentation by providing support to the whole family. By addressing the family as a unit and providing services to both adults and children simultaneously the process of recovery from grief is assisted far more effectively than if, the focus was on one group exclusive of the other.

Although each person and each family will have their own unique response to a loss, research has shown that there are several experiences, which many people have in common. Although researchers have often presented these experiences in the format of "stages" this does not mean that they are experienced in a sequential one-by-one manner, rather, they provide a general map of the territory with only the major landmarks filled in. The model used here focuses on four "tasks" of grief. The first is accepting the reality of the loss, the second recognizing and coping with feelings, the third integrating the relationship, and the last is revising a new life. Each of these tasks as well as support group activities will be described in the following sections.

I. THE REALITY OF THE LOSS

The initial phase of grief is characterized by shock, numbness, and denial. This shutting down of intellectual, emotional, and even physical awareness seems to serve a protective function and prevents us from being completely overwhelmed by the initial impact of the loss. It is a natural reaction to an event that we feel unable to cope with. The loss of someone we love compels us to change and to leave behind the world, as we knew it. It profoundly disturbs our perception of our world and ourselves. During the phase of denial, we are not yet ready to face the changes that have been forced upon us. We are not yet ready to deal with the intense feelings brought on by the loss. Denial allows us time to regroup and gather our energy to face our grief. Although

denial and numbness serve a useful and important purpose, the initial work of mourning involves accepting the reality of the loss and moving towards rather than away from our feelings. In the safety of the support group, we can begin to examine the loss and its implications for our lives.

A. Telling the story of the loss

In the beginning, sessions of the group members share the story of the loss in their own words with little or no questioning from the leader or other members. By simply sharing one's story, the process of accepting the loss and making sense out of one's new life can begin. In addition, this begins the process of building group trust and acceptance.

B. Telling the story of when you first heard of the loss

Try to include as much detail as possible. Appropriate questions include: Where were you? Who told you? Who else was there? What do you remember thinking and feeling?

Supplementary activities include:

1. Draw or paint a picture of the scene.
2. Role play the scene (have the protagonist play the role of other people involved with the scene in order to model their parts for group members)

C. Discuss how your life has changed since the loss

What roles or tasks do you have to perform that are new to you? How do other people, at home, school, or work treat you? Differently? if so, how?

1. Before and after family drawings (these can be shared between parents and children as a whole group activity if it seems appropriate)
2. Have each family draw a picture of them together. Allow no talking during this exercise. Afterwards use the picture to facilitate discussion among family members.

II. RECOGNIZING AND COPING WITH FEELINGS

Once the protective numbness of denial has passed, for better or worse it is usually short lived, we are faced with what has been called the phase of "erupting emotions" or "emotional chaos" (Kast, 1988). Chief among these emotions are sadness, fear, anger and guilt. These feelings are often overwhelming, even to the point of our doubting our ability to live through them. When faced with such painful and intense emotions it is often difficult to admit them to ourselves let alone speak about them to others. At this point in the group, a feeling vocabulary is introduced in order to encourage the recognition and expression of feelings among group members as well as between parents and children. The feeling words sad, mad, glad, scared, mixed-up, and guilty are useful because they are simple and straight forward enough to be used by both adults and children. Among the following activities the ones marked by an * have been shown to be especially useful with children.

A. Feeling graph

Have group members create a simple bar graph showing each of the above feelings and their rating of how intensely or frequently they experience that emotion. Then have members do a graph for other family members showing their perception of how these family members appear to experiencing the same feelings. These graphs can then be shared in family groups.

A. *Feeling charades

Group members act out various feelings without talking. Other members attempt to guess which feeling is being demonstrated and then take their turn acting out another. Provides practice at recognizing feelings.

C. *Feelings board game

Group members create a simple board game. When someone lands on a space corresponding to a certain feeling, she must share a time when she felt that particular feeling. Provides more practice at recognizing feelings as well as recognizing the link between external events and feelings.

D. *Story telling

The group leader introduces a character and a situation. At a certain point, he has the character say "I feel so.....because....." Group members then fill in the blanks.

E. Feelings and our bodies

Discuss how we experience emotions in our bodies. Group members are given or draw a picture of a person with a front and back profile. Using different colors they shade in places on their bodies where they experience tension, pain etc associated with a particular emotion.

F. Feelings and action

Discuss the relationship between feelings and actions. What do you do when you feel? Is that a helpful response? What could you do instead?

III. INTEGRATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

After the loss of someone important to us, we often experience a sense of restless searching for the deceased. We expect them to show up at their usual time for dinner or out of the corner of our eye, we see them step out of a shop. We often maintain an internal dialogue with the deceased. We seek advice from him remembering his strength and wisdom or we rage against him because it was so stupid to have left us just now in our lives.

This search is of course fruitless if we aim to regain the external concrete presence of our loved one but dialogue can assist us in resolving our grief and separating from the deceased. We must discover what the deceased brought into our lives, both positive and negative, and finally extract

from the relationship those qualities, which will assist us in our new lives. We do this by first examining the life of the deceased. By doing this we not only develop greater empathy for the deceased but also develop a greater understanding of ourselves and facilitate the "letting go" which is necessary before we move on in our lives.

A. Creating the life story of the deceased

This activity consists of two parts. In the first group members list what Ira Progoff (1975) has called "stepping stones." We list, using key words or phrases, the ten to 15 most important events in the life of the deceased. It is not necessary to list them in chronological order at this point and we should not overly labor over deciding between events. Simply list what comes intuitively as most important. Once we have created this list we then write the life story of the deceased using first person. Prompts such as "I was someone who..." or "the things that were most important to me were..." might be helpful.

B. Writing yourself a letter

After writing the life story of the deceased, we then write a letter to ourselves as if we were the deceased. We say all the things that we imagine that the deceased might say to us if given the opportunity.

C. Writing a letter in response

Now we respond in writing to the deceased. Here the concept of "unfinished business" is important. We want to try to express feelings and thoughts left unsaid when the deceased was alive. A supplementary activity might be to act out a two-chair dialogue a la Gestalt Therapy. Group members take turns speaking for themselves and the deceased, switching chairs with each role shift.

D. The gift

Discuss the idea that each important person who enters our lives leaves us with something. A quality, habit, or lesson that they taught us. This is their parting "gift" to us. Drawing or painting a picture of the gift can be a useful supplement here, especially with children.

IV. REVISIONING THE FUTURE

The last phase of grief involves moving back in the world. Bowlby (1980) conceptualized this as the withdrawal of emotional energy from the deceased and preparation for new relationships. At this point, we must begin to identify goals and plan for our future.

We are in a sense recreating the story of our lives. There will be much of our old lives that we might keep but we also have the opportunity to add new elements and seek new directions.

A. Resources collage

Using a supply of magazines or photographs from home each group member creates a collage of resources they have available. In the middle go inner resources. Qualities that we see as strengths and we can call upon in time of need. Examples might include patience, sensitivity, or creativity. We represent these qualities using pictures or parts of pictures pasting them in the middle of our collage. Going out from the center of the collage, we place social resources. People who support us in some way providing outer support when needed.

B. Four areas graph

Group members create a bar graph similar to the one done with emotions. Instead of feelings we chart the time and energy we spent in four areas of our lives: Body, Work, Relationships, and Spiritual. Afterwards group members share their graphs and discuss which areas they feel comfortable and satisfied with and which they wish to make changes.

C. Goals

Using the above two activities as springboards begin to identify possible goals. It is usually most helpful to begin small, perhaps with small actions that begin the process of movement towards a more comprehensive change. A variety of techniques such as imagery or using a journal to reflect and give oneself feedback on progress towards a goal can be used.