



Alberta Home Visitation
Network Association

Vol. 5 Issue 1 Spring 2010

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Grief and Loss - Loss and Grief

By Lavonne Roloff

Grief and loss. Are they interchangeable? I was discussing this with someone a while ago and it seems that we experience a loss and then grief. We can get focused on the grief or the grief process and bury the fact that there has been a loss. We may not be able to move beyond our feelings of grief for a long time. So why make the differentiation? When we can be concrete about the loss by naming it—whether it be the loss of a parent, a friendship, a marriage, a job or a child - it is much easier to work through the grief (and the accompanying feelings) we experience.

When my father died a few years ago, I found it helpful to reflect on something that Dr. Alan Wolfelt, a psychologist who specializes in loss and grief, said about the death of a dear one. He said the relationship hadn't ended but rather it had changed. It was comforting to put my loss in a different

perspective. Certainly I wouldn't be able to hug my Dad again or hold his hand, but I would always be able to hold the memories that I had experienced with him. I would be able to look at pictures and smell the clothes that he had worn. The relationship would not be the same, but it didn't have to end.

This issue of *Connections* discusses some concrete strategies that we can use when working with families and children. By increasing our understanding of loss and the impact that it has on the lives of those we work with, we are able to lend a listening ear, a caring heart and an opportunity to be present with someone who is working through a loss. ■

Lavonne Roloff is the Provincial Director of the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association.



Good Grief

By Dianna Souveny, BA

Factors affecting grieving children

Each child's grief journey is unique. Numerous factors influence how a child experiences and expresses grief due to loss: age, gender, personality, coping style and adjustment capacity, family attitudes about loss, cultural background, general life experiences and previous experience with loss. Other factors include the availability of support, the length of time since the loss/death, relationship with the person that died, whether the loss was sudden or anticipated, and if any preparation or information was provided about the death.

The grieving style of the adults around a child will also dictate response to loss. If an adult models a healthy coping style and openly talks about feelings of loss, then a child will begin to acknowledge, experience and work through the pain of grief.

Behaviours and characteristics of grieving children

A child who has experienced a loss and is expressing grief may display any number of behaviours and characteristics: crying, taking risks, or being absent minded/preoccupied, disorientated, anxious, hyperactive, impulsive, destructive, loud, aggressive, quiet, depressed, dependent, unmotivated, defensive and socially withdrawn.

This can be a time of chaos for children who may be experiencing a loss of security, nurturing, protection, guidance and stability. They may feel vulnerable and have a fear of abandonment or separation. Infants may experience failure to thrive and attachment issues.



What grieving children need

Grieving children need continuity and organization to maintain consistency in their lives. They require support and assurance that someone will be there for them "for the long run." Before children can safely grieve, they need to find someone who is responsible, available and who will listen as they share their story.

Helping children understand death

Here are some suggestions for helping children understand death, loss and good grief.

DO

- talk and listen carefully to their words and their behaviour
- communicate openly and honestly about the loss
- give accurate information – communicate briefly, clearly and honestly
- help children reintegrate with peers and routines
- be aware of secondary losses the children are experiencing
- encourage journaling, art, sculpting and drawing
- help them write a "goodbye" letter or poem
- use simple concrete language
- use metaphors to explain death

- use humour, music, songs and puppets
- use the death of an animal or pet to discuss death and loss
- use every opportunity that deals with loss at home and school to validate feelings and to assist in understanding how different losses feel (loss of a toy, a friend moving away or a pet dying).

DON'T

- pretend that nothing has happened
- force them to talk
- give advice or analyze their artwork
- allow them to avoid situations long term
- use euphemisms when explaining death, such as "Daddy's gone on a long trip", "We lost grandpa" and "Mommy is sleeping"
- deceive children – it will undermine your credibility and trust with them
- leave misconceptions about death uncorrected – children may create their own reality, which could be wrong

The goal as a supportive adult in the life of grieving children is to be present, listen to them, help them reintegrate into their world and most notably, to impart a sense of "hope" for the future and the reassurance that life will not always feel this sad. ■

Dianna Souveny, BA, is the co-ordinator of Central Parkland Parent Link Network, Lacombe FCSS.

Bringing Support and Hope to Grieving Families

By Dianne Petersen, BEd, MA

As home visitors, we bring individual strengths and talents to every family. Families will often exhibit openness to a visitor who demonstrates ease and apparent expertise gained from real-life learning. My personal experience with grief includes the loss of a husband and son from acquired brain injuries and loss of my home, chosen career path and second income. As I listen to other families' stories of loss, I can use my personal experience to help progress the relationship, providing support and hope.

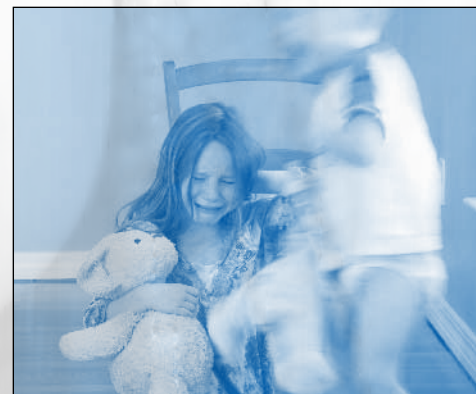
As professionals, we respect organizational policy and procedure, and act accordingly. Yet, it is inevitable that our personal understanding of, and experience with, coping strategies will impact our practice. An understanding of resiliency can contribute to nurturing growth and resiliency in others. In our home visitation practice, we can implement strategies for resiliency during grieving with positive effect.

Strategies for resiliency

- **Allow a person to express feelings or vent at an early stage of grief or loss.** This helps decrease depression and increase emotional control. Having personal control and self-restraint to cope with stresses can lead to a healthy sense of well-being.
- **Explore the transition from being problem focused to being able to solve, cope with and seek information about grief.** For me, the first and biggest step was learning to 'let go' of the life

I thought I was going to have. It is important to learn about the experiences of the grieving family and have a natural and genuine empathy for them. Listen for both what **is** and **is not** being said. Then, reframe the discussion to explore the reality of the current situation and determine a desirable outcome. Include supports, assets and information resources that can move the person forward and help them resolve stress and anxiety. Focused planning and taking direct action will have positive effects on mental health.

- **Recognize that all individuals and families wish to have a sense of restored normality in their lives.** With some level of fighting spirit, I, like other families, had to confront the cause of my grief and loss. The challenge is how to tackle the change and move on. As home visitors, our perceptions and resources may be very different from those of the grieving family. We need to explore their strengths and self-perceptions and provide resources that will help them overcome their hurt. Use a non-judgemental approach, focus on the positives and, where appropriate, use humour to lower emotional distress.
- **Seek expanded social support in the latter stage of the growth process.** This leads to decreased emotional and psychological distress, better psychological adaptation and improved perceptions of personal and family well-being. Whether spirituality is important to the family or not, their having a sense of hopefulness will result in increased cooperative relationships between individuals and professionals. And, it will help them find new meaning in a changed life. ■



Dianne Petersen is the follow-up worker at Kids Kottage Foundation in Edmonton.

What is Grief? How Can We Help?

By Joy Johnson

Everyone in the world experiences losses. Everyone in the world grieves. There is no escaping it. The question is how we grieve.

Grief is the package of emotions we experience after a loss. Mourning is how we express those emotions. Bereavement defines the entire experience. This is an all-encompassing word that originally meant "something stolen." When we have a loss, whether it is a death, our own approaching death or loss of a job, or home or future, we feel bereaved.

How we grieve

We grieve in four ways:

- 1. Physically.** Our hearts ache, our eyes shed tears, we are exhausted. Our stomachs ache, our heads hurt. We are more likely to catch a cold because our immune system hurts, just as we do.
- 2. Emotionally.** We cry, we become angry, we feel helpless and hopeless, we're lonely, we're afraid and very sad. Our sorrow can overpower us. We're confused, irritated and anxious.
- 3. Spiritually.** We lose faith or we cling to faith. Our soul grieves. We feel emotions to our very core. We search for meaning in what has happened. Our spirits wilt.
- 4. Mentally.** We ask, "Why?" We read and search for answers on the Internet. We become obsessed or we can't think at all. Our brains have turned to mush.

Tasks of grieving

Dr. William Worden wrote about the tasks of grieving children. But in reality, these are the tasks of all of us. When we grieve, it is the child inside us who weeps, who wonders and worries.



The tasks of grieving include the following:

- **Recognize the reality of the death.** This can be difficult in children under age seven because permanence is not part of their reality yet. Young children need their questions answered, and may need death explained repeatedly.
- **Grieve the death.** Children grieve, play, ask questions, grieve, play and ask more questions. They are like little puddle jumpers, except they jump over the puddle and play for awhile; we adults tend to sit in our grief puddle and wallow in it.
- **Commemorate the death.** This is where centres for grieving children, such as The Dougy Center in Portland, Oregon, or Ted E. Bear Hollow in Omaha, Nebraska, assist with the grief process. To remember their person, children can make memory boxes or comfort pillows, keep journals and visit cemeteries.
- **Move on to new relationships including those with the deceased.** If you are asked about people you love who have died, you would immediately remember their name, details of the death, things you loved about them and what made you angry about them.

Now you think of them and perhaps talk to them and will develop a new relationship with the deceased. You will also develop new relationships with the living.

- **Adjust to an environment without the deceased.** This might include walking into an empty house and having no one there to greet you; having the first holidays alone; going to familiar places alone. If a spouse has died, you will have things to give away and may sleep differently in a bed. As one widow said, "Learning to sleep in the middle of the bed is a human impossibility."

When we grieve, we need support. We may need to talk to someone or write in a journal to record our feelings and keep track of our emotions. Grief lasts a lifetime. It changes, it becomes less painful, but it's always there. Read. Talk. Know you can make it. Know you are resilient and most of all, know you are not alone. ■

Joy Johnson is a co-founder of Centering Corporation, a bereavement resource centre in Omaha, NE. Her website is www.centering.org.

Online resource

Centering Corporation at www.centering.org.

Buckle Children in for the Ride of Grief

By Barb Hinger, MSW, RSW

The emotions of grief are a bit like riding on a rollercoaster. Children on this ride are affected emotionally, physically, cognitively, spiritually and behaviourally. Here's how to understand and help buckle children in for the ride when they have experienced the death of a family member.

Children's reactions to death

When experiencing death, children may

- be forgetful and unable to concentrate or pay attention
- feel panic and guilt
- have difficulty breathing
- have no appetite
- be unable to sleep, and feel fatigued or hyperenergetic
- worry excessively about the safety of other family members
- have intense fear of being left alone
- suffer with nightmares
- be socially withdrawn, aggressive, overly-sensitive or seem not to care at all
- have endless questions or have no desire to discuss their loss.

These experiences do not occur in a set sequence, nor are all experienced by everyone. Children can move in and out of various emotions and cycle through many in a short time.

Alan Wolfelt says, "Grief is a process, not an event." We cannot assume that children will grieve in an orderly and predictable way. Wolfelt speaks of children's "grief-bursts." The grief-bursts happen between laughter, play and everyday life events.

Buckle them in

- **Give children facts and honesty.** Use plain language and answer their questions as best you can with age-appropriate responses. Offer reassurance and let them know that it's okay to talk about it.
- **Be prepared to respond to questions** asked by grieving children. Why did he die? Did I cause this to happen? Will it happen to me? Who will take care of me? Where is Mommy now?
- **Be alert to magical thinking.** Children may believe they caused the death through something they said, did or thought.
- **Keep change minimal.** Allow children to keep to their usual routines as much as possible, as they find security in what they know. Grieving takes a lot of energy so rest and sleep are very important.
- **Inform school teachers.** When teachers know of the loss, they can be sensitive to the needs of the child and inform other students. Children are usually eager to help and have good ideas about the support they could offer the student.
- **Let children go back to school.** If children seem ready, let them carry on with what may be the only part of their lives that feels "normal."

Paths to healing are as individual as grief responses. Healing activities may include talking, drawing or painting, listening to music, dancing, making scrapbooks and memory boxes, playing sports, baking, watching television, sleeping, journaling and being with a pet or friends.

We can try to understand the grieving journey of children by answering their questions, listening to their concerns, sharing our stories, reassuring them that they are safe in the world and by "being with" them. ■

Barb Hinger is a social worker with a counselling practice in Airdrie, AB. She specializes in grief and trauma. Her website is www.barbhinger.com.

Grief Resources

Alan Wolfelt, Center for Loss at www.centerforloss.com.

USA National Center for Grieving Children at www.dougy.org.

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention at www.afsp.org.

Suicide Information and Education Centre, Calgary, AB at www.suicideinfo.ca.

Hospice Calgary Society. (2004). *Good Grief, Supporting the Bereaved Student: A Resource Guide for Teachers*. Copies can be ordered by phone at 403-263-4525, fax at 403-263-4524 or email at info@hospicecalgary.ca.

Mertick, E. (1991). *Yours, Mine and Our Children's Grief: A Parent's Guide*. Contact info@afsa.ab.ca to order.



A grief ignored does not disappear. It patiently waits for its next opportunity to materialize.

Baby Steps Through Loss

By Cindy Haugen, BSW

Online resources

A Place to Remember at www.APlaceToRemember.com

Angel Whispers at www.angelwhispers.ca

Canadian Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths at www.sidscanada.org

M.I.S.S. Foundation at www.missfoundation.org

Mommies Enduring Neonatal Death at www.mend.org

ParentCare at www.parent-care.ca

Perinatal Bereavement Services Ontario at www.pbso.ca

Share at www.nationalshare.org

August was to be their last summer holiday together as a threesome, since their baby was due in November. Amy enjoyed making sandcastles and splashing in the water with her husband, Dennis, and three-year old son at sunny Marten Beach. Heading to bed after a hectic afternoon of fun and play, Amy realized she hadn't felt her baby flutter in her tummy all day. To ease their worries, the couple stopped at a local clinic just to hear their baby's heartbeat and enjoy the rest of their holiday without worrying. But that moment never happened, and an ultrasound in Edmonton confirmed their sweet little one had died.

This is just one of many scenarios of baby loss in Alberta, where one in four pregnancies results in miscarriage—15,000 per year. Unlike losing a grandparent or sibling, parents grieving the loss of their baby are often encouraged to forget about their loss and move on with their lives. Others may not acknowledge the loss, afraid to bring it up or cause upset. This leaves parents feeling very isolated. And, this is why baby loss is considered a **silent sorrow**.

What you can say and do

It is hard to know what to say or do to help grieving families. Here are just a few suggestions to help parents through their grief journey.

- Recognize that the length of time a baby is carried in the womb does not determine the value of the child nor the impact the loss has on the parents. Everyone grieves differently and in their own time, sometimes not requiring support until months after their loss. Check in periodically to see how parents are doing.
- Invite families to talk about their baby. Avoid passing judgement or offering solutions. The more parents talk about their experience, the easier it will be to weave the fabric of their baby's memory into their lives. As Marcel Proust (1871–1922) wisely observed, "We are healed of a suffering only by expressing it to the full." Healing does not mean forgetting. Most parents love to have their baby's existence and name acknowledged.
- Refrain from using clichés such as, "At least you have other children," or "You can have another one" or "There was probably something wrong with the baby." Other children (existing or in the future) will never replace the baby who died, and parents grieve the loss of the hopes and dreams associated with this new life. As an alternative, say things like, "I am so sorry for your loss," or "I can't imagine what you are going through" or "Please let me know what I can do to help."
- Help with everyday living. Offer to do errands, or bake a casserole for the family to acknowledge the family's loss, and provide practical assistance. A card or gift (such as a book on baby loss) is usually appreciated.
- Let parents know about resources in their community. Angel Whispers is one support service in the province that sends out care packages all over the world with healing information on grieving. Support groups, one-on-one and email support are also available.

A grief ignored does not disappear. It patiently waits for its next opportunity to materialize. Community understanding and support help parents take the "baby steps" needed to weather the storm of their loss, feel understood and proudly whisper their baby's name in times of longing. ■

Cindy Haugen has a bachelor's degree in social work. She is co-founder and program coordinator for Angel Whispers, a program for families who have lost a baby during pregnancy or shortly after birth. This operates under the Fort Saskatchewan Families First Society.

Respect for Diversity: Healing from traumatic loss in First Nations families

By Barb Hinger, MSW, RSW

First Nations communities continue to be devastated by suicide loss. In Canada, suicide occurs about five to six times more often among First Nations youth than non-Aboriginal youth (Health Canada, 2003). In 2000, the First Nations suicide rate was twice that of the general Canadian rate.

Within the Aboriginal population, there is much diversity in culture and tradition, yet there is a common core belief in living in harmony with nature. Being aware of the cultural elements that affirm and celebrate life are helpful in healing communities. In some communities elders have a relationship with the family and with the culture. They can be a wonderful support. Many First Nations people do not live in Aboriginal communities and may not have access to elders and traditional healing ceremonies. For some families, the church and religious faith may be an important resource for support.

Traditional healing ceremonies

Traditional ceremonies are seen to be healing:

- smudging
- drumming
- praying
- singing in their native language
- funerals
- face painting
- sharing of food, tea and tobacco
- burning sweet grass
- pipe ceremonies
- wakes and sweat lodges
- healing circle

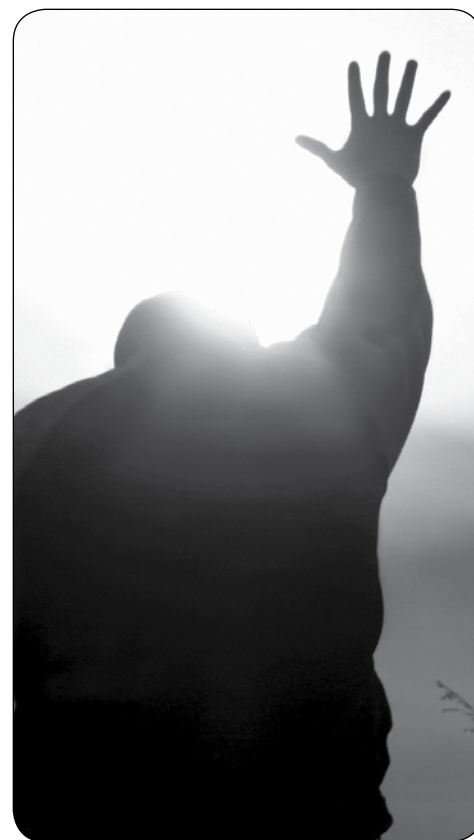
Healing circles

A healing circle is a self-support group for grieving families or individuals. Grief groups and healing circles can provide a healing venue for those who have suffered the loss of a family member through suicide or homicide. These meetings promote healing by reconnecting grieving individuals with cultural identity and belonging. An important healing ritual is a closing prayer led by an elder followed by moments of silence for individual prayers. Helpful support can include providing a listening ear, providing child care so the individual can have a rest, bringing food, informing of resources available and telling stories.

Traditional beliefs

Traditional beliefs about death and healing vary, yet the journey for balance with respect to the emotional, spiritual, mental and physical well-being of the individual is at the core of wholeness and healing the spirit. Both the Plains Cree and the Ojibway speak of the soul leaving the body at death and taking a four-day journey to the land of the dead where all live a carefree life. Some Stoney and Cree bands believe that crying and tears slow the spirit down on its journey. The Stoney believe that souls of the dead enter another life beyond in the beautiful land of spirits. Elders will "say a prayer so he goes up nice." Reconnecting with one's culture can nurture a sense of belonging and meaning.

Overall, in respecting diversity, we should aim to accept a broad range of expressions of grief and respect each individual's path to healing. Healing is a move toward meaning, wholeness, connectedness and balance. ■



Resources

Healing Your Spirit, Surviving after the Suicide of a Loved One. (2006). Calgary Health Region.

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McLuhan, T. C. (compiler). (1972). *Touch the Earth.* Simon & Shuster, N.Y.

Strengthening the Circle. (Tape). (1995). Taken from 130 meetings with Alberta First Nations, Métis, urban and rural.

Barb Hinger is a social worker with a counselling practice in Airdrie, AB. She specializes in grief and trauma. Her website is www.barbhinger.com.

Coming up

The next issue of Connections will focus on Working with Teen Parents. If you would like to submit an article or resource for this topic, please contact the AHVNA office by May 15, 2010.

Hearing from you

Connections is published three times per year by the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association. We welcome comments, questions, and feedback on this newsletter. Please direct any comments to Lavonne Roloff, AHVNA Provincial Director, by phone at (780) 429-4784 or by email to info@ahvna.org.

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Photography: istock, photos.com, Shutterstock

Design and production:

Don Myhre

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Publications Mail Agreement No. 41387565

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Cultural Sensitivity to Grieving Beliefs

By Shannon Mitchell

Customs and Traditions in Times of Death and Bereavement is a free resource from Parkland Memorial. It summarizes funeral and death beliefs practised by several religious and ethnic groups in Edmonton and area: funeral rites, special considerations and suitable expressions of condolence. The resource cautions, however, that individuals within any group may differ in their beliefs and practices. It has been useful in our practice as home visitors.

In one case, a grandfather, who lived in the home where the visits took place, passed away. My colleague felt acknowledging the family's loss would be important in maintaining and cementing a relationship with this multigenerational family who practised the Jehovah's Witness faith. We were only superficially familiar with their religious practices, aware that gifts and cards are not acceptable for events such as birthdays. This resource indicates that cards are usually considered an acceptable means of expressing sympathy to a family. On behalf of the agency, my co-worker wrote a card to acknowledge their loss. The client and her family were pleased to receive this.



In other cases, this resource assists us in approaching families we are working with in culturally-sensitive ways. In some traditions, it is customary not to discuss the death of a loved one openly. Clients may not be comfortable discussing death with their home visitor, but may feel the need to talk about their grief even though the topic may

be taboo among family and friends. Letting the client know that you are aware they may not want to talk, but you are available if they need to, may enable the family to cope more effectively with issues surrounding grief.

Finally, as a home visitor, you would like to attend a funeral service in a tradition in

which you are unfamiliar, this resource provides basic information about what to expect. You can make an educated choice about whether your presence would be appropriate and whether you are comfortable with the role you may be expected to play. The information will help you understand how to

respect the family's beliefs and be prepared for expectations before, during and after the service.

This resource has been invaluable for me, as a home visitor, in navigating the sometimes tricky subjects of death and loss in a family. Multiple copies are available to agencies. ■

Shannon Mitchell is a home visitor with the Family Enrichment program at the Mill Woods Family Resource Centre Society in Edmonton.

Resources

Customs and Traditions in Times of Death and Bereavement.

Contact Parkland Memorial at (780) 426-0050 or at www.parkmemorial.com, under "religious and cultural expertise."