



Grief - a journey from storm to rainbow

Except from BUZOLOGY – Powering Hope in Children © Steve Heron 2011

“Grief is the tossed salad of feelings one gets when one loses something they love.”

I feel irritated when I hear an adult or parent say, in relation to a death in the family, “They are too young to understand.”

The mother of a five-year-old was telling me that her mother had passed away. In front of the five-year-old she said, “Josh doesn’t understand what has happened.” I looked at Josh and said, “What do you know about what happened?” He said, “Nanny has died.” I asked him, “How do you feel?” With a quivering lip, he said, “Sad.” “Would you like to come and talk about that with me?” Knowingly he nodded his head and said, “Yes.”

I think an assumption made by adults is that, because in their mind, a child doesn’t understand what has happened, they come to an unrealistic conclusion that children don’t feel grief.

Children experience grief substantially. They may not experience it in the same way as an adult, but their grief is very real.

Some of the circumstances where children will experience grief:

- Parents breaking up
- Moving house
- Death of a family member
- Death of a pet
- Parent working away (e.g. fly in, fly out)
- Friend moving away
- Break up with a friend
- Breaking or losing a favourite toy
- Experiencing domestic violence, abuse, an accident, war or crime

Grief has a big effect on how children see themselves. It can mess with their self esteem, and it can have a huge affect on their behaviour. Grief can take children on an emotional journey they have never experienced before.

Rather than a grief cycle, I would rather view the grief experience as a potpourri of grief feelings. The grief experienced will depend on so many factors, including the nature of the loss, the closeness of the loss and previous experiences with grief issues in a person’s life.

There are various experiences, aspects and feelings associated with grief. Not everyone goes through all the experiences and people can have these experiences in different order. Grief is a journey where people can take different paths. Grief can include many of these feelings and experiences:

Disbelief

This is often the starting point on the grief journey. It is hard to cry because it is hard to believe it has happened. This can bring about denial or feeling surreal. With children, it can seem like they are not affected by the grief, but this is usually because the reality hasn't settled in yet.

Shock - numbness

This is an apparently neutral, yet uncomfortable feeling that prevents crying or release. It is nature's way to help us cope. This is where the reality of the grief starts to be absorbed.

Sadness

As the realisation of the loss takes hold, it can lead to sobbing that allows deep feelings to escape. Some people cry a lot, some try to push the tears down. It is good to cry. Crying is nature's safety valve that lets the pressure of pent up emotion escape. When children talk to me about any sort of grief, I am relieved when they cry, because I know they are dealing with the grief. Somehow, some people think that when someone is crying or sobbing, they are not dealing with the loss very well. On the contrary, they are dealing with it. I remember when I was twelve years of age, I saw my father cry for the first time when my oldest brother died suddenly. It was seeing the grief that my father experienced, that helped me to understand the depth of feeling behind loss.

Questioning

The experience of loss will challenge our values and beliefs. We will find ourselves trying to make sense of it all, and may ask, 'why?' It is okay to ask this question, which is really a cry of hurt. If a child asks 'why?' it is not helpful if we create condescending answers. If we genuinely don't know why, it is okay to be honest.

Getting worse

As the reality of the grief takes hold, we may feel we are getting worse.

*'The darkest part of the night
is the moment before dawn.'*

Confusion

This is about not knowing or truly understanding what has happened or is happening. The grief can affect our thinking and our sleep patterns. We can become weary and lose our concentration because we have used most of our energy emotionally. Opportunities to rest and eat well are important to help a child to regain their composure.

Loneliness

Loneliness comes when someone feels that they are the only person this is happening to, and they believe no one understands what they are going through. Sometimes they think they may be going crazy and they don't tell anyone in fear that others may think they are unable to cope.

Anger

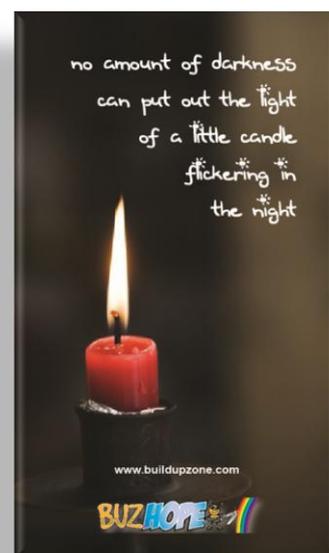
Feeling disturbed can lead to anger about what has happened, sometimes looking to blame someone or something. It is important to allow an acceptable outlet for the pent up anger associated with grief and not push it down or deny it.

Wishing

This is about wanting to turn back time and wishing that the loss didn't happen, wanting the person to be back again.

Deep sadness or despair

This can cause the person to be motionless. They become so emotionally drained, and do not want to face the world, almost not caring anymore.



Guilt

Feeling that somehow they either caused the incident or feeling that they weren't as nice to the person/s can lead a person to feel guilty or blame themselves. This is where the 'if onlys' come to play. These feelings are normal, but often unrealistic. For example, most children will blame themselves for their parents separating. It is never a child's fault. It is important that they are invited to talk about their guilt and are helped to realise that it is not their fault.

Accepting and remembering

There is a sense of relief as one begins to come out of the harshness of deep grief. The remembering will sometimes bring a smile or even laughter. I love the part of the funeral during the eulogy where something funny from the person's life is spoken about. You can see the tears change to an amazing release of laughter, the mood amongst the people changes. It is almost like a key that unlocks a part of the heart that has been locked away for a while.

Hope

It is a feeling of hope and 'I can cope' that I liken to the first sign of a rainbow after a storm. The smile begins to come back, one feels encouraged and can now do normal tasks. The 'good' days outnumber the 'bad' days. One realises that they are moving forward.

Missing and remembering

As time goes on various events and memories bring back thoughts for the loved one. There is a feeling of yearning. Sometimes I use the metaphor of a physical cut that is received. The wound creates a pain. When the wound is stitched, an anesthetic is used, deadening the pain. When the wound is healing, the pain can often be stronger. After the stitches are removed, the pain often subsides, but becomes irritable or itchy as it heals. Finally the wound is healed. It doesn't hurt anymore, but one has the scar to remind you of the pain that once was. One doesn't feel the pain anymore, but remembers the pain that once was. Strength returns and the experience makes one stronger.

Accepting change

It is the ongoing change associated with grief that many people struggle with. For children, this can mean moving house or dealing with their parent's new partner and step siblings. Each significant developmental stage or event in a child's life can be a challenge for a child who has lost a parent or sibling. Grief is ongoing and helping a child through grief may still be important, years after the event.

Happiness and peace

One appreciates life more, remembering the lost one with a sense of joy and peace. Because of the experience one can grow stronger and wiser.

Other experiences and feelings can include:

Helplessness, envy, fear, frustration, depression, preoccupation or denial.



Some hints and thoughts on helping kids through their grief

- All feelings in grief are quite normal and okay.
- Grief is a normal human response to loss.
- Complications in grief may lead to stuckness.
- Stuckness is the inability to move on in grief - when a child gets stuck in grief it can cause developmental and social problems.
- No feeling is permanent - sadness doesn't stay forever.
- Feelings can be managed - help kids with feelings associated with grief.
- Be a good listener - listen and listen some more - validate their feelings.
- Don't force kids to talk, find times when they are ready and gently invite them to talk about what happened and how they feel.
- Give appropriate information - a child's imagination will try to fill the void of what they don't know or understand.
- Answer questions they may have, honestly but not graphically - be age appropriate.
- Avoid myths and stories that may confuse the child.
- Help them to handle their feelings.
- You may be surprised by their resilience or even their interpretation of things.
- Grief is different for each person, don't assume that you know what they are going through.
- Grief affects behaviour big time. Inappropriate or sudden behaviour changes usually indicate a child struggling with grief.
- Model good grief. The way that you handle grief will have a great influence on your child's perception of grief.
- Let them know they are not alone in their grief. Share the experience, hug, cry together, celebrate together, and remember together.
- Get extra help or support if you need it for yourself or your child.
- Keep your child's teacher in the loop - encourage your child to talk with them about it.
- Play can be good a outlet for grief.
- If you see your child playing happily it doesn't mean that they are not suffering.
- Helping kids work through grief is a journey.

From unreal to heal

"The grief journey is a pathway to healing"

UNREAL or surreal - The experience often doesn't seem real at first

FEEL - Be aware of feelings - each person is affected, sometimes in different ways

REAL - Help find opportunities to realise the reality of the event

PEEL - Help peel back any layers of emotion and experience that may build up

DEAL - Talk, care, handle feelings

SEAL - Closure. Grief never ends, but the strong and painful feelings do subside.

HEAL - Restoration - ongoing

SOME useful metaphors that can help children through grief

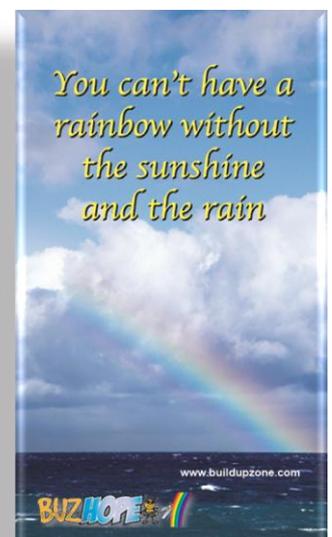
- The rainbow after a storm
- A butterfly (new life)
- Any part of nature that helps to understand the process of life, death and new life

*"Say goodbye to a loved one, when they pass away,
remember the promise, for another day.*

*A splash of brilliant colours, many shades and hues,
reds and greens and yellows, violets and blues.*

*It's a rainbow connection, right across the sky,
a rainbow connection, right before your eyes, it's a sign of hope."*

From Rainbow Connection - a song by Steve Heron (From the BUZ Music CD)



Empathy - feeling with another

“Empathy means being able to hear another person’s story and understand how they are feeling.”

Steve Heron

Empathy is the key that helps others feel validated. Empathy has three parts:

1. Listening and hearing how the other person is feeling
2. Understanding the situation that made them feel that way
3. Letting them know that you hear how they feel and that it’s okay to feel that way



I remember travelling to a conference, accompanied by a woman in an Anglican Order, affectionately known as Sr. Jenny. It was a difficult time in my life and I remember talking to her about some of the difficulties I was going through. As I was driving the car, I remember looking up at her and seeing tears streaming down her face. I asked her why she was crying. Her answer is still embedded in my heart. She said, “I feel your pain.”

If you want to connect with a child and give them empathy, they need to know that you feel part of their pain.

In one of my first encounters with a child crying I was lost for words. She couldn’t speak because she was so upset. I wanted her to know that I cared about her pain. The only thing I could think of doing was to catch a tear that I saw roll from her eye down her cheek. I held the tear in my fingers and looked into her eyes. Almost immediately I could see the pain ease, as she recognised that I had

entered the grief with her. I still have the image of the moment her unhappy face was transformed, as the power of the first inkling of a smile broke through.

When children come and talk with me about difficult things, I often see the tears welling in their eyes. As I reach for the tissues I say, “I’m just going to get a tissue.” Sometimes they say, “I don’t need one.” “It’s all right”, I say, “the tissues are for me.”

Empathy finds its home in the pre-frontal cortex of the brain. It is a natural, yet powerful human condition that connects us strongly with others. Empathy is the trigger that releases our caring nature.

Overcoming fear

*“If you haven’t been scared. You haven’t been brave.”
“Courage is what we need to overcome fear, not absence of fear.”*

I had the awful experience of comforting two young children at the scene of a fatal car accident. They were both trapped in the car and their mum and dad had died.

The four year old child said to me, “Mummy is dead.”

The only words I could muster were, “I want you to be brave. Can you be brave?”

He said, “Yes”.

He looked into my eyes with complete trust, poking holes through the intense darkness of the situation. I could see the horror in his eyes, but I could also see the trust and hope.

Some time later, after I had reminded him that he was being brave he said to me, “I’m not being brave, I’m scared.”

I searched again for the right response and these words came out of my mouth, “That’s how I know you are being brave.”

Fear is an immensely powerful emotion. Somehow I stumbled on the idea that you can’t be brave unless you are scared. I explain it to children like this, “Imagine a snake came slithering into the room. I guess nearly all of us would be scared. If I wasn’t scared I would probably go up to the snake and find a way of picking it up and taking it out of the room. Some people would think that I am brave, but if I am not scared, it is no big deal. If I was scared out of my socks and did the same, then I would be brave.”

Courage comes from an acknowledgement of the fear within, the decision to do something about it and the ability or strength to act. Helping children with their fear is not about telling them not to be scared, it is about inviting them to be brave in spite of their fear and supporting them in that choice.

“Do that which you fear to do and the fear will die”.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (American Poet, Lecturer and Essayist, 1803-1882)

“Perfect love casts out all fears.”

The Old Book.

