

Volunteer Leader Training Guide

The Face of Grieving

Steven A. Dennis, Ph.D., Family Life Specialist

Introduction

Life is full of joy, but it is also full of pain and sorrow. Some have suggested that it is by passing through life's valleys of sorrow that we grow to appreciate the mountains of joy. Certainly, the challenges of life do help us appreciate the good times. As one Dogon tribal elder put it, "death makes life precious." Today we will explore the many faces of grieving. Not only so we can better understand the pain of loss, but also so we can better understand the joy of living.

Objectives

- Identify significant losses in life resulting in grief.
- Identify common characteristics of grief.
- Suggest ways to support individuals who are grieving.

Target Audience

- EHC groups
- Caregivers
- Individuals experiencing a significant loss

Advanced Preparation

- Check out the book *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs* or *Now One Foot, Now the Other* by Tomie de Paola or *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch if you plan to read a book as part of your presentation.
- Bring enough paper and scissors to allow participants to make paper snowflakes [*For large groups, you may want to create several snowflakes yourself and use them as illustrations.*]

Opening Activity

Snowflakes, like people, are unique. No two snowflakes are alike. Not only are people unique, but the experiences we have in life and the way we respond to those experiences are unique. Think about some of the losses in your life.

[Ask the following questions and give the group a chance to respond and explore the differences in our responses to loss.]

- How did you respond?
- How did others respond to the same loss?
- Were you ever upset or confused by the response of others?
- Was the timetable of your grieving similar to others?
- Have you gotten over it? If so, what has helped you?

As we can see, like snowflakes, no two experiences of grief are exactly alike. People cope with loss in different ways. We feel sorrow in different ways. There are many faces to grieving. But while no two snowflakes are entirely alike – there are characteristics and attributes that are held in common. Let's explore some of the common characteristics of grief.

Teaching Outline

[Discuss the following six points with the group. Invite participation and sharing.]

1. Grief is the emotional response to loss. Most often we think of it as the pain and anguish resulting from death, illness or a significant change in life circumstances. Adults and children grieve over lost dreams and hopes. They grieve over the loss of what might have been. While the possibilities of loss are endless, some of the more common losses include:
 - Death of a loved one
 - Loss of health
 - Divorce or separation
 - Job loss or change
 - Lost opportunity
2. Grief is a process not easily acknowledged in our society, particularly the grief of experiences other than death. Yet grief is often a part of life. At one time or another, we all experience a loss and the resulting pain. Recognizing and acknowledging the pain help us to effectively cope with the loss. While we may never forget or fully eliminate the emotional pain resulting from the loss, we can adapt. We can move on. We can experience the joys of living. We can express our grief in healthy ways by:
 - Talking about it with others.
 - Writing about our loss in letters or our journal

- Participating in rituals that help us to outwardly acknowledge or mourn loss. While funerals help us mourn loss through death, there are few other established rituals in western society to help us mourn a loss. Grief experienced in connection with a loss that is not socially supported or acknowledged through rituals is called “disenfranchised grief.” Grief from a miscarriage may be an example.
 - Creating a memorial.
 - Not rushing to fill the void created by the loss.
3. Individuals who ignore their grief and refuse to acknowledge their feelings and pain in direct ways may find their grief being released in unhealthy ways. Unhealthy expressions of grief might include fits of anger, abuse and/or neglect of a loved one, substance abuse, illness, and sometimes by the sabotaging of another’s efforts to help. It is commonplace in the bereavement literature that unresolved grief can lead to difficulties coping with any losses throughout life. While immersing ourselves in diversions or activities that help us hide the pain may help us temporarily cope with grief, it is not an effective long-term strategy.
4. While there is much variation in the grief experience of individuals, four stages of grief often occur. Individuals may progress sequentially through the stages or they may bounce from stage to stage. The intensity of feelings will also vary by individual. The four stages are:
- **Shock and numbness:** Distress and anger, impaired judgment and concentration and feelings of panic are typical of this stage
 - **Yearning and searching:** Feelings of restlessness, impatience and uncertainty occur at this stage.
 - **Disorientation and disorganization:** Feelings of depression and guilt surface. The person may lose their appetite, sleep poorly and have a lack of interest in doing anything.
 - **Resolution and reorganization:** This stage is marked by feelings of being more in control, with more energy to cope and make effective decisions.
5. As individuals work through the pain of grief, they may experience feelings of shock (“It can’t be.”), denial (“Someone must have made a mistake.”), anger (“Why me?”), guilt (“If I just had been here sooner.”), fear (“How will I manage?”), exhaustion, depression, confusion and bargaining. Many of these emotions will occur in rollercoaster fashion – sometimes feeling up and sometimes feeling down. All at a moment’s notice. All of these emotions are a normal part of the grief and mourning process.
6. While we can’t eliminate the pain of loss, we can provide extra support to those in need to help them grieve in healthy and productive ways. The ARCH National Resource Center of Respite and Crisis Care Services (Factsheet Number 21) recommends the following strategies for helping loved ones grieve:

[Pass out Handout 1, “Strategies for Helping Individuals Grieve.”]

- **Become aware of your own personal issues around grief.** This means becoming aware of your own fears, attitudes and beliefs about grief. For example, if an individual were raised to believe that “we don’t air our dirty laundry in public,” then that individual may have difficulty helping a family who needs to vent and share their pain openly and/or with great emotion.
- **Acknowledge the family’s grief.** Label their experience as one of grief. Let them know they have a right to have their feelings.
- **Be there.** One’s presence can be the greatest gift given to a grieving individual. Sometimes holding someone’s hand, offering a hug or just acknowledging, “This must be so hard for you,” can be enough to support someone in their grief process.
- **Listen.** Grieving people need to share their pain with another person who will not judge them or give them advice and suggestions. Listening to someone tell their story over and over can often be an invaluable gift to them in helping sort through their feelings and release their pain.
- **Offer “permission to grieve.”** Teach grieving families that it is important to express the emotions of grief, but that there are ways to express pain that are more healing than others. For example, angry parents can learn to express their anger through physical activity such as yard work, tearing up old phone books, writing letters or screaming into a pillow. The key is to help grieving people find constructive ways to release their feelings of grief rather than to take it out on others or themselves.
- **Help families create a memory book.** This might include photos, drawings, funny things someone said or did, etc. This is especially helpful to families who have experienced a death.
- **Develop and encourage support groups.** Support groups give families a chance to share their pain with others experiencing loss.
- **Children love, therefore, they grieve.** Encourage children to participate in all of the above suggestions. By teaching children how to deal with the pain of loss early in life, we can teach them how to grieve the losses that are an inevitable part of their future lives, losses such as moving, divorce, the breakup of a relationship or the death of a friend, loved one or pet. Children can draw pictures or write letters to an ill sibling or grandparent as a way to express their love and concern.
- **Encourage families to write letters to someone who has died or is ill.** Frequently they can express many unresolved emotions in letters that need never be sent. Writing a letter or note to a family member who is in crisis respite may offer a caregiver a healing release of feelings of frustration and despair.

Remember, every grieving individual or family can teach us about what they need from us at this painful time in their lives. Grieving individuals can also remind us about what truly is important and meaningful in our own lives.

Conclusion

In life there are many seasons. There are hills and valleys. There is change. One of my favorite ways to explore new ideas and experiences is through children's books. In closing, let's read a book that will help us better understand both grief and joy.

[Read the book you have selected.]

Loss and grief are parts of life. But the pain of loss doesn't need to make life forever dreary. Time does heal old wounds. And while we may never forget or eliminate all the emotional pain, we can adapt and move on. We can experience the joy of life. In our grief, we can discover the preciousness of life.

References

Cyr, Louise Franck (2004). "Caregiver: Coping with the Death of a Loved One." (Bulletin Number 4212). University of Maine Cooperative Extension.

Braza, Kathleen (2002). "Families and the Grief Process." (Fact Sheet Number 21). ARCH National Resource Center for Respite and Crisis Care Services.
(See <http://www.archrespite.org/archfs21.htm>)