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Electa C. Willander
Gettysburg College

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Grief and its Implications in Childhood and Adolescence

Abstract

Death has always been a taboo subject. However, it is impossible for anyone to avoid death in terms of their loved ones or their own mortality. Therefore it is impossible to avoid the at times overbearing emotion of grief. Grief can be exposed in the light of someone passing, loss of a relationship, diminishing health, loss of a job, and even loss in athletic ability. There is no singular reason for grief to be present, nor are there simple and straightforward ways to cope and move forward. Grief on the individual and universal scale has no time frame. It is helpful to try to understand the emotions that are linked with grief, specifically the ones demonstrated in the Kübler-Ross Model and the lack of complete control in the mourning process. Children compared to adults respond differently to grief and their comprehension of the end of life is not always the same. Therefore, grief in childhood and adolescence has a multitude of differentiating factors in comparison to grief in adulthood.

Keywords

Grief, Childhood, Adolescence, Coping, Bereavement, Death, Loss

Disciplines

Child Psychology | Psychology | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Comments

Written for FYS 150: Death and the Meaning of Life and presented at the 2019 Celebration of Academic First-Year Engagement Symposium.

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Gettysburg College

Grief and its Implications in Childhood and Adolescence

Electa Willander

Death and the Meaning of Life: FYS 150

Professor Myers

November 29, 2018

Death has always been a taboo subject. However, it is impossible for anyone to avoid death in terms of their loved ones or their own mortality. Therefore it is impossible to avoid the at times overbearing emotion of grief. Grief can be exposed in the light of someone passing, loss of a relationship, diminishing health, loss of a job, and even loss in athletic ability. There is no singular reason for grief to be present, nor are there simple and straightforward ways to cope and move forward. Grief on the individual and universal scale has no time frame. It is helpful to try to understand the emotions that are linked with grief, specifically the ones demonstrated in the Kübler-Ross Model and the lack of complete control in the mourning process. Children compared to adults respond differently to grief and their comprehension of the end of life is not always the same. Therefore, grief in childhood and adolescence has a multitude of differentiating factors in comparison to grief in adulthood.

Grief is a biological process and one that does not have a clear and definite response. Grief can be defined as “ the conflicting feelings caused by the end of or change in a familiar pattern of behavior” (“The Best Grief Definition...”). A common misconception is that grief only stems from the loss of life, as in the loss of a loved one, but “we grieve over the loss of status, a job, friend or anything important to us” (Bradley). The act of grieving comes in a multitude of variances. It’s a fluctuating and inconsistent process. This process, which is most often intertwined with the Kübler-Ross Model, was established by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. It depicts five key stages that many people progress through as they begin to learn to live with their loss. These five key stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Elisabeth Kubler-Ross). These stages are not sequential, nor are they all imperative to experience. Some individuals may skip a stage or experience others. The bereavement process is

individualized to one's own experience, therefore the emotions one goes through are unique to themselves and their situation.

For adults, the topic of loss is more comprehensible compared to children and adolescents. Compared to adults “young children perceive and react to the concept of death both specifically and literally”(Kroen 11). Infants will not be able to verbally communicate their fears or concerns about death. For them, the death of someone close to them, as in a mother, is described as an “absence” (Kroen 12). The unfamiliarity that they will experience in their environment will be discomforting and confusing. They will not understand why their mother is not with them. As children grow up their understanding of death as a whole develops and this assists in recognizing that someone who has died will not return. When children reach pre-school and elementary school ages “they seem to modulate their emotions by moving into distraction-mode more readily than older people” (Walter 89). This is why kids may experience moments of sadness and then continue on with an activity or ask to go outside or play with a friend. Older children, close to adolescence, in the age ranges of nine and eleven “seem to have a stronger need for factual information and tend to avoid direct expression of emotions, preferring to compartmentalize emotion or experience it very briefly or in private” (Christ, as cited in Walter, 89). Here there needs to be more adult intervention to help the children process more of their concrete memories of the deceased that they may be trying to tuck away. As children mature into adolescence or also known as pre-teens,

“they often feel compelled to hide their emotional reactions to loss, yet they are deprived of support for processing their loss because they refrain from letting others know about their thoughts and feelings” (Walter 117).

Young adolescents have this vision of wanting to be more mature and respected, but they correlate this desire with suppressing their raw emotions, which results in denying themselves the ability to grieve openly and to receive the necessary support. In each developmental period children gain a deeper understanding of death and loss, but then other factors emerge that cause other implications in the bereavement process that will be discussed more thoroughly.

Throughout life, everyone experiences their own pain. As we age we learn more about ourselves and how we cope. Children and adolescents have only lived a blink of the time they have to live, therefore, they are just beginning to be themselves and to understand the world around them. When death occurs at such a developmental stage of life for young people it is an incredibly impactful experience. When a death is sudden and tragic there is no time for preparation, nor goodbyes. The grieving process is now beckoning for every last minute of your attention. The “why’s?” do not end, just as regrets, questions, and memories rampage your thoughts demanding answers that may never be answered. One of the hardest parts of loss is the helplessness you feel, the realization that there is absolutely nothing you can do. Throughout the days, weeks, months, and even years that follow the passing of someone, the fear of forgetting becomes apparent as we try to move forward with our lives. In children, the harsh reality isn’t as earth-shattering at the moment as it is for many adults. It is important that the honest truth is told to a child when someone has died. Comfort, support, and reassurance at those moments are crucial for the child to not be afraid to ask questions or voice their concerns about themselves or other loved ones.

There are many coping methods that assist in these fears and uncertainties. Support groups and therapy are methods that may bring reassurance and even peace to those who have

experienced loss. As for children they do not express their feelings as explicitly as adults. Therapy is still a valid method and provides children with a safe and open environment. There are many programs that have hired professionals who are trained in dealing with grieving children and offer activities that encourage openness, and fosters an environment that gives children the chance to share what they are feeling without fearing they will hurt the feelings of their own parents or caregiver.

Imagination is an innate characteristic of children and although they may not be able to verbalize precisely what they are feeling, through art they are able to create something that helps encapsulate it. Along with programs for the bereaved children, there are programs that assist others on how to respond and help those who are grieving. Many people who have lost someone feel even more outcast when people avoid talking and being around them because they simply don't know what to say, or what to do. Lisa Liebetrau, founder and director of Camp Koala describes her own experience of going back to high school after suffering a loss and states that she felt contagious because everyone, even her closest friends avoided her. Not that this situation is an anomaly, because many people do not know what to say to someone who has recently been struck with a loss, but Lisa explains that "you don't have to say anything if you can't. Sometimes just a touch or a hug can make the difference" ("Q&A from I'm Here with You.." 00:1:40-00:2:55).

Many times when a child experiences death, it is, unfortunately, one of their parents, siblings or a close relative. Therefore their parents may also be grieving one of their sons or daughters or their spouse. The parents alone have to manage their own grief while worrying about their own child or spouse's own grief. According to the *National Alliance for Grieving Children*, "Parents

who have difficulty coping with their own grief following a loss often have children who report much higher levels of depression, anxiety and problems in school than children whose parent or caregiver is able to cope more effectively” (Nationwide Poll.). Notably, this is draining, and focusing on both their own grief and their child’s compromises their own bereavement time. However evaluating, understanding, and taking control of one's own loss is imperative for the sake of their child(ren).

Some parents believe that when a death occurs they shouldn’t even try to explain the concept of someone dying for it would worry or confuse their child. They sometimes believe that their child is far too young to understand and so they avoid the subject as a whole. Parents and other adults distract young children and keep them busy in pursuit of avoiding the difficulties following a conversation about a loved one dying. These reasons are only excuses and result in long-term problems. When a child is misinformed by one of their loved ones passing it will result in even greater confusion in the years to come. A parent needs to recognize that their child is more capable than they believe them to be. They deserve the time and respect of knowing that one of their loved ones has died. This part is relatively easy compared to the emotional turmoil that will follow. There are many myths that come with the topic of grief in children. Some of these include: children grieve in the same way that adults do or that they move on quickly and even the belief that children don’t grieve at all. All of these are false. As previously mentioned grief is a unique journey for everyone. Children due to a lesser intellectual level aren’t able to deeply process the permanence and significance of death. Therefore it may seem to parents and other adults that children overcome grief more quickly and with little difficulty but “for many children they’re going to re-grieve for the rest of their life, as they hit different developmental

stages, they will re-grieve the loss” (“I’m Here with You..” 00:28:15-00:28:24). Young children absorb the emotions and characteristics that their family members present. So when a parent tries to protect their child by not crying in front of them they are not showing the reality or the validity behind crying and allowing emotions to show. In order for a child to mourn, they must feel comfortable enough to reveal and process their own emotions.

The reactions to death from children are not always as expected. When news is shared with a child of someone dying or someone that has passed away, “some protest loudly: they shout and cry and want to strike out in anger against the parent who is relating what has happened”(Dyregrov 17), while others may absorb the information like normal news and continue on with their daily activities. Parents and adults in these situations need to recognize that these children may be too young to grasp the severity of this shared information. Following the news of death there are several common reactions that children within a wide range of ages experience, including

“anxiety and fear, sleep disturbances, anger, and attention-demanding behavior, withdrawal, and isolation, sadness, longing and loss, guilt and self-condemnation, play connected to what has happened, thoughts about meaning, more childish behavior, distressing reliving of events and disturbing fantasies” (Dyregrov 19).

As a child begins to ask more questions and gains a better understanding of permanence, underlying effects may begin to show. Distance from parents may become stressful and scary for children, as would sleeping when their thoughts have a chance to settle and may formulate into unnerving nightmares. Some children may be more aggressive and physical in handling their grief. They may lash out in efforts to place blame on someone. Others, in most cases older children, may seek solitude by themselves. A common reaction from children is placing blame on

themselves. Some children think when a parent, sibling or grandparent dies it's their fault because they didn't do something they had asked them to do or they weren't nice to them one day. Sadness is shown more in adults through crying and for a longer span of time, but children still mourn the loss. They may not cry as often, but they do miss their loved one and they may experience moments where they begin to cry and they aren't sure why. In these cases, adults and older individuals need to reassure these kids that they are in no way to blame and that they could not have done something differently. Parents and caregivers are a key in helping children cope and communicate what they may be feeling.

Although children and adolescents may over time understand the fact that someone is gone forever, there will be moments of struggle when the truth that someone they deeply loved will never again be present in their life. Yes, they will figuratively live on in their hearts and memories, but when the reality sinks in that the future no longer holds possibilities for them and the deceased is devastating. A commonality amongst grievers is that they describe their grief as "coming in waves" and fluctuating over time (Pearlman 167). A part of the healing process is to allow these moments of sorrow, and to begin to cope with them. To help acknowledge and encourage progression of the emotions in these abrupt waves comes in many different coping methods. The value of attending and being a part of visitations, viewings, funerals, and other rituals are essential parts of the healing and grieving process. For many of these events, there is a beginning and an end. The linkage between a start and an end and the feelings that coincide help bring clarification. Funerals "generate social support and offer opportunities to find meaning, as spiritual and philosophical understandings are applied to the loss" (Kenneth 154). In many events, the children are prepped before they are shown the dead body or before they are a part of

a ceremony. Details such as room temperature, the appearance of the deceased, the reactions of others, and how he or she may respond help prepare a child for such a monumental event. The curiosity, impatience, and unpredictability of children can be uneasy for many, but understanding that kids are going to be kids and their gestures and responses may seem inappropriate or out of context are all a part of their grieving process. However, these events may be frightening to young children, and they may be hesitant about attending or possibly even refuse. In these cases, encouragement and reassurance will help ease the child into participating. Parents, on the other hand, may not want their child(ren) to attend due to their own fears and hesitations. At that point in time, it is important to remember that this will be the last time a child may see one of their parents, siblings, or loved one. They will not get another opportunity to say goodbye or be a part of this family event. Being in an environment with others mourning a shared loved one is a very moving experience. Not only does it validate your own emotions and reassures you that you are not alone in your grieve, but helps bring some peace that the deceased was loved deeply.

For many adolescents and even myself, the hardest reality to come to terms with is time. Time is our greatest friend and our absolute worst enemy. You never know how much you have left and that is something many are grateful for, but also fearful of. When losing a loved one the anguish that comes with it is debilitating. Your focus is gone, and your body begs for sleep. The majority of young individuals are students, performers, volunteers, activists, and a handful of others. In short, they are involved and

“although adolescents often are exposed to deaths, they also often have few opportunities to process that grief because of their own reluctance to expose their feelings and thoughts, and also because they work hard to maintain a facade of normalcy” (Walter 121).

The world doesn't stop moving in sympathy for your pain. The survivors still have a life to live and that sometimes stops us dead in our tracks. We still have plans, responsibilities, and opportunities. We think we have so much to focus on that everything is more important than the grief we are feeling. In today's world "1 out of 7 U.S. children aged 2 to 8 years had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder (MBDD)" (CDC). It is imperative for children to feel accepted and loved at all times, but is even more significant during times of great sadness, because if the necessary precautions and appropriate actions are not taken, they could be left in a worst condition, which will make recovery even more difficult.

As children continue on in their lives they are going to need help in processing their emotions, along with being reminded of the person(s) they lost. It is important to remember that "death ends a life, not a relationship" (Albom 174), Children shouldn't feel as if they need to forget about the deceased individual and to completely ignore what happened. As their young minds begin to absorb more and recognize the absence, they are bound to ask questions and be more curious in the event. This is normal and healthy. They may want to visit the grave or look at pictures frequently. Playing and acting out scenes that pertain to death is another way of children learning to understand death as a whole. Children in most cases will not be the only ones in the family mourning the loss, which makes it more challenging to provide the care and attention they are going to need. For families "young children need closeness and physical contact to feel secure" (Dyregrov 65). They are going to pick up changes in voice, behaviors, and a change in home life quickly if they feel like they are in an insecure and disruptive environment. Although the previously known normal will never be the same again, children need the reassurance that they are supported.

Grief in any aged individual is a personalized course of emotions. In children their ability to understand death and the role it plays in life is a sensitive and arduous task. Since their minds are in such a crucial developmental stage they are absorbing massive amounts of information from their peers, family, and environment. The reality and permanence of death doesn't always come across to children as this overwhelming devastation. It may seem as if the news of someone dying doesn't effect them at all in their immediate response, but as time goes on their curiosity and experience with someone being absent will evoke more understanding to the passing of the loved one. Some children may be very revealing in their sadness, confusion, anger, and a wealth of other emotions; others may express what they are feeling through illustrations, play, and questions. Coping methods are going to be encapsulated in the themes of reassurance, support, security, and love. Children need to be reminded that the dead may no longer be with them physically, but through the love shared and the memories created they will be with them always. Grief and the bereavement process holistically is a never-ending cycle. There will be relapses that may be unexplainable in the moment, but the heart never forgets an expression of love and grief is simply the culmination of an important relationship that was entwined with love. Children might not understand all the why's and how's of someone's passing, but they do understand more than most adults give them credit for, especially in terms of knowing the importance of caring for those near and dear to them.

As the world keeps moving, we as a society need to build upon the momentum striving for better awareness and availability of help for emotional and mental well-being. As a society that is being be monopolized by calamitous events it is our responsibility to be more assiduous towards those that may not seem to be physically in pain, but as shown in children grief can be hidden

due to fear, confusion, or utter disbelief. Grief may be individualistic, but a commonality across all ages and walks of life is the clear loss of possibilities, relationships, and the ruthless lesson of learning to embrace the gift of life with the unforgiving pain of loss.

Honor Code

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

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