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The grieving adolescent

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Abstract

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THE GRIEVING ADOLESCENT

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Counselors in the school setting are called upon to deal with a number of issues. Among those issues is death. People "pass on," "pass away," "buy the farm," "kick the bucket," "get taken by angels," "go to their eternal resting place," and become the "dearly departed." But people never "die." "Death" has become a four-letter word (Sacharow-Nayowith, 1991). Loss due to death is rarely thought of as a problem that adolescents face, but in reality, death has become a daily for adolescents. Research shows that 90% of junior and senior high school students in the United States have experienced a loss associated with death (Kandt, 1994). This statistic indicates that the issues of grief are important for school counselors to understand and that the effects of the grieving process do impact adolescents.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the developmental issues of adolescents related to their conception of death, as well as the stages of the grieving process. Intervention strategies for school counselors to use with adolescents will also be examined.

Adolescent Reactions to Grief

Grief is the response to a loss. The term grief encompasses a broad range of feelings and behaviors that are common to loss (Kandt, 1994). Grief is referred to as the process of "working through" the loss. This "working through" process is

broken down into stages and is affected by behavior and development.

Developmental Issues During the Grieving Process

Adolescents are caught between childhood and adulthood. Oftentimes, adolescents are placed into one of these two groups and are expected to act accordingly. After a significant loss, adolescents often feel frightened and helpless. They may want to retreat back to childhood, where they were sheltered from death, but they also feel forced by society to act like adults (Glass, 1991).

Since adolescence is a time of trying to become independent from parents and also a time when fitting in with peers is crucial, adolescents do not like being singled out. In the event of a death, adolescents may try to diminish it in any way possible to reach the goal of conformity (Kandt, 1994). Because adolescents are trying to pull away from parents, they may go to great lengths to hide their grief so they can maintain their image of control and independence (Kandt, 1994).

After a loss due to death, adolescents become overly sensitive to people looking at them or treating them differently. They become self-conscious and embarrassed, and may go to great lengths to avoid talking about the loss to their peers. Adolescents sometimes fear that if they express their

grief, they will be deemed unacceptable by their peers, even though they may want to talk about their grief. This may be why adolescents often delay their grief response, causing the grief to resurface in later years (Kandt, 1994).

Stages of Grief

Bereaved people of all ages pass through a series of stages in coming to grips with the death of someone close to them. They bring different experiences, needs, and concerns with them when they begin to confront their loss. The differences among adolescents at the beginning of the grieving process will have an influence on what the stages will be like (Gravelle & Haskins, 1989). Variables that may affect how an adolescent progresses through the stages might include the reaction of others to the death, the adolescent's prior grief experiences, the relationship to the deceased, and the adolescent's own concept of death (Kandt, 1994).

It was once thought that people moved through the grieving process one stage at a time and in a particular order. Now it is believed that people do not progress through the stages as sequentially as once was thought (Kandt, 1994). It is also possible for adolescents to be in more than one stage at a time. Researchers seem to have their own names for the stages or phases of grief, but they all typically fall into the

following categories: shock and denial, anger and rage, disorganization and despair, and acceptance and hope (Kandt, 1994).

1. Shock and denial. The griever refuses to accept the harsh reality of the death (Fitzgerald, 1994). A physical jolt followed by a state of numbness and disbelief characterize this stage. The adolescent may also feel guilty during this stage because he or she "feels" nothing. This is a normal reaction. Adolescents should not be forced to have feelings that are not natural or genuine. For example, a counselor should not force adolescents to cry. Grieving takes on many forms, and adolescents should not be made to feel that they are not grieving just because they are not crying or obviously sad. The counselor's goal should be to help the griever feel comfortable so that the adolescent will not hold back feelings if they start to surface (O'Connor, 1984).

2. Anger and rage. The griever continues to resist reality and asks, "Why me?" (Fitzgerald, 1994). The anger may be expressed either outwardly as rage or inwardly as depression. If the anger is expressed outwardly, it may be projected toward other people (O'Connor, 1984). If the anger is felt toward the parents of the adolescent, the anger may not be expressed because of the need to stay on good terms with them (Scherago, 1987).

3. Disorganization and despair. During this stage, the griever frequently turns the anger inward. Moderate depression is normal after someone dies. A decrease in appetite, difficulty in concentrating, problems in completing schoolwork, a lazy appearance, and a change in sleep patterns are normal during this stage (Scherago, 1987). Wanting to be alone and trying to make plans for the future are also characteristics of this stage (O'Connor, 1984). Physical symptoms may develop as a result of the despair. Headaches, restlessness, and repeated illnesses are a few examples of the physical symptoms (Scherago, 1987).

4. Acceptance and hope. The griever no longer denies reality, no longer feels angry about it, and no longer feels despair (Fitzgerald, 1994). Being able to live in the present, making plans for the future, and having fewer and fewer thoughts of the deceased are characteristic of the acceptance and hope stage (O'Connor, 1984).

Behavior

The concept of death is fascinating to adolescents. Death is often portrayed in a romantic fantasy, or a challenge to be answered. Adolescents spend time fantasizing about their own death, wondering who will come to their funeral, how will people feel, or what rituals will be performed.

Many of the behaviors of grieving adolescents can be seen as a challenge to death. Fast driving, taking drugs, taking unnecessary risks, or engaging in other potentially dangerous activities are examples of challenges to death (Fitzgerald, 1992).

Some behaviors noted by Jackson (1965) in recognizing adolescent grief were playing dead, anger expressed through breaking things, clinging to a surviving parent, and substituting feelings. Playing dead is an effort to try to understand what being dead is like, through role-play. Sometimes others are invited to play, sometimes the adolescent plays this out alone. It is important to remember that the adolescent is making an attempt to understand death and should not be criticized for this type of play.

Another behavior frequently exhibited by grieving adolescents is expressing anger by breaking things (Jackson, 1965). The anger that an adolescent may feel can often be displaced onto other objects. An adolescent may break a favorite possession, either consciously or unconsciously, because it reminds him or her of the deceased.

If the adolescent lost a parent, he or she may cling to the surviving parent. This is done because the adolescent has fears of being abandoned by the surviving parent. He or she may not want to go to school because the thought of coming

home and finding himself or herself all alone is too frightening.

Jackson (1965) also mentioned that adolescents frequently try to substitute other feelings for their sense of loss. As examples of substituting feelings, adolescents might become boisterous and noisy or laugh at things that were not funny. This substitution takes place because the real emotions are feelings are hard to handle.

There are also some specific types of grieving behaviors students reported using in an attempt to adjust to a loss (Swihart, Silliman, & McNeil, 1992). These grieving behaviors included attending school assemblies, attending the funeral, purchasing a plaque, playing excessively hard in sports, crying, talking with friends and family, writing down feelings, trying not to think, visiting the cemetery, and dedicating something to the deceased. Using a combination of these behaviors seems to help adolescents in their adjustment to a loss.

Adolescents have a difficult choice to make when trying to deal with grief. They can either choose the method of grieving that will allow them to adequately work through the grieving process or they can choose the method of grieving that they feel will leave them socially intact with their peers. Depending on which route they take, either a normal or abnormal process will follow.

Normal Grief Reactions of Adolescents

A clear understanding of the stages of grief and normal reactions of adolescents is important for the school counselor. Various circumstances will affect the grieving process for adolescents. What might be normal for one adolescent may not be for another. Those circumstances could include relationships with their families and friends, and their present level of independence. The degree of comfort the adolescent feels with these circumstances will affect the length of time in the different stages. A rocky relationship between an adolescent and a parent prior to the death of the parent could result in a longer grieving process (Kandt, 1994).

Counselors also need to understand that there will be a difference in how adults respond to grief and how adolescents respond to grief. One major difference between adolescents and adults is their state of dependency and the threat to their security (Rosen, 1986). By having their sense of security stripped, adolescents go through another transition. Trying to break away from family and beginning to become independent is extremely difficult to do when adolescents feel insecure (Gravelle & Haskins, 1989). This also follows Jackson's (1965) belief about an adolescent clinging to a surviving parent. The feeling of being abandoned may overcome an adolescent. He or

she may not want to go to school for fear that he or she may return to an empty house.

Abnormal Grief Reactions of Adolescents

It is important for the school counselor to be aware of the characteristics at each stages of grief in order to identify abnormal grief reactions. Abnormal grief is characterized by an unusual duration and lack of progression in a stage. Kandt (1994) noted four reactions to look for when suspecting abnormal grieving:

1. Chronic grief reactions - adolescent grief is prolonged, excessive in duration, and never comes to a satisfactory conclusion. This might be noted in adolescents as prolonged crying, day-after-day-after-day; excessive daydreaming; a significant drop in schoolwork; or depression, if none had existed earlier.

2. Delayed grief reactions - adolescents' reactions are inhibited, suppressed or postponed. This may be seen in the adolescent who is told to be strong for others and takes on the caretaker role. Adolescents may have a continuing belief that the deceased will return, a fixation on the dead, or no outwardly visible grief.

3. Exaggerated grief reactions - adolescents' reactions are exaggerated, excessive and disabling. An adolescent's continued references to the deceased in present tense or

overidentification with the dead person may signal unusual or extreme reactions.

4. Masked grief reactions - adolescents experience symptoms and behaviors that cause them difficulty, but do not understand that the behaviors are related to the loss. Masked reactions in adolescents might be seen as continued trouble at school, behaviorally and academically, to the extent that it causes disruption in their everyday lives.

Support for Grieving Adolescents

Support, whether individually from the school counselor, from the family, from friends, or from a support group, is important for the grieving adolescent. Letting adolescents know it is normal to grieve can give them the reassurance they need to begin the process.

Counselor Support

If a school counselor is working individually with students regarding a grief issue, there are certain points that the counselor needs to keep in mind. First and foremost, the counselor should listen in order to let adolescents know that support is there for them. Along with listening, the counselor needs to respect the adolescents' right to silence (Murphey, 1979). Pushing them into talking about the death does not allow adolescents to work through the grief in their own way.

Being sincere about an offer of help and not abandoning the adolescents as they work through their grief are also important. The counselor wants adolescents to feel comfortable in coming to him or her when they feel the need to express their grief. Allowing the adolescents to cry or show other expressions of grief without forcing the issue encourages them to develop a sense of security.

A counselor should not try to overprotect adolescents, which might keep them from moving through the stages of grief. If a counselor is overprotective, adolescents may feel as if the counselor is trying to be in control of the situation and not allow them to express their grief. This is an important issue because the grief needs to be expressed so that they can work through the stages. If adolescents have failed to express their grief, the grieving process may be lengthened or they may experience unresolved feelings that surface at a later time. It is also important for the counselor to understand that it takes most teens longer than adults to truly begin to mourn, typically between eight months and a year (Gravelle & Haskins, 1989). Since there are so many variables that can be factored in when dealing with a death, the relationship of the adolescent to the deceased being the biggest factor, the actual length of time it takes to work through the grieving process can range from a couple of months to several years.

Counselors can be the liaisons between students and teachers when grief is causing academic problems. Helping teachers understand the grieving process of adolescents can relieve some of the pressure on the students to keep up on their studies. Some students reported that they felt the counselor was only interested in them because of their grades (Gray, 1988). Therefore, it is important not only to assist adolescents with academic problems, but also to provide space to deal with the painful emotions.

Another way that counselors can help grieving adolescents is to provide a peer support group. This group should consist of other adolescents who have suffered a loss from death.

Group Support

In starting a grief support group, the counselor can get referrals from staff members or can open the group to self-referrals. Bereaved adolescents reported that the most helpful person in dealing with their loss was a peer, although many adolescents said that it was only one or two peers who had been helpful (Gray, 1988). In Gray's (1988) study, teens noted that they did not want to be treated in a special way by their peers and they wanted to be included in activities as usual. This reflects their concern about not wanting to be singled out by their peers. Nevertheless, the majority of adolescents go to peers first when they need help.

Offering a peer support group can provide a safe place the bereaved adolescents need to express their emotions, while at the same time, allowing them to do it in relative private. In respect to the peers, this can give the security of "saving face" to the grieving adolescent. Those same adolescents who reported a peer as the most helpful person, also reported that they felt the helpfulness of the counselor was higher when they participated in the support group (Gray, 1988).

As a school counselor, building on the findings of Gray's (1988) study appears to be appropriate. If the grieving adolescents perceive the school counselor as more helpful when working in a support group, then using small groups as a tool would be important in helping grieving adolescents. In setting up a support group, there are several factors to consider: the nature of the loss, the size of the group, the length, the duration, and the setting for the group (Gray, 1988; Kandt, 1994; Moore & Herlihy, 1993).

In a school setting, the counselor may encounter many different types of loss. The counselor needs to decide on the range or variety of losses to include in the group. In one study, 90% of the participants in one support group for grief from a death, thought it would be inappropriate to have members who had suffered a loss through divorce (Gray, 1988). The counselor can get even more specific with the relationship of

loss if there is a large student population. The focus of the group can be narrowed down to those who suffered the death of a sibling, a parent, a friend, or an extended family member. If the population is small, these can all be combined and during a pre-group interview the variety of losses included in the group could be explained.

The size of the group can vary depending on the amount of time each session will last. Gumaer (1986) felt that 6-8 members would be appropriate if the length of each session was at least one hour. Most of the research demonstrated that it was important to keep the size relatively small so each member had an adequate amount of time to talk (Gray, 1988; Moore & Herlihy, 1993; Zinner, 1987).

The range for the number of sessions went from 8 to 15, and might depend on the type of loss (Gray, 1988; Gumaer, 1986; Moore & Herlihy, 1993). Since loss can range from death to divorce to relocation, adolescents who have recently moved into a new school system may not need as many sessions as someone dealing with the loss of a parent. This might also depend on the size of the group; the larger the group, the more sessions the leader would want to schedule because this would allow adequate time for each member to speak. It is important to hold enough sessions for everyone to feel that they were able to say what they wanted. Another

possibility would be to schedule a certain number of sessions with the option of going longer. The advantage of this option would be that it would allow the group members to decide if they felt comfortable with ending the group. With that option in place, if the last session arrives and the members do not feel comfortable, then termination of the group can be delayed. This will allow the members to voice their opinions without added distress.

Kandt (1994) suggested having one more session about one month after the termination of the group to check up on how the members are doing. This also lets the members know that the counselor is still there for them if they feel the need. At this time the counselor can see how the members are doing individually and if they are in need of a referral for more counseling.

The setting for the group needs to be in a place where the students are going to feel comfortable. In the school setting, the options will be limited, but there are some important factors to keep in mind. Since the adolescents are concerned about the perceptions of their peers, the group should be held in a place where confidentiality can be maintained. The setting for the group needs to be somewhere that non-group members are not able to walk by and see who is in the group (Gumaer, 1986). The group should be held at the best time of

the day for the students. Trying to schedule around class time would seem important, especially if the students are already having some academic problems. It was noted by Gray (1988), however, that students tended to use whatever opportunity they had to discuss their loss.

Interventions

Helping adolescents through the process of grieving can take on several forms. Some suggested activities that might be used individually or with grief support groups to help aid in the process of grieving are journaling, making a memory book, drawing a family tree, doing a balloon lift, working with clay, writing letters to the person who died, and setting up a memorial for the deceased (Cooper & Martenz, 1991; Fitzgerald, 1992; Kandt, 1994).

Journaling

Journaling helps the adolescent to focus his or her thoughts and feelings. Certain themes can be chosen or the counselor can let clients write whatever they wish. Writing down favorite sayings of the person, good times, favorite memories, and keeping track of the ups and downs can be a therapeutic way of getting feelings out and working through them. Counselors should provide the option of sharing the adolescents' writing. This often times will stimulate discussion. Journaling can provide a guide for the adolescents

to see where they have been and the progress they are making (Cooper & Martenz, 1991; Kandt, 1994).

Family Tree

Making a family tree can help the adolescent to see the reality of death in the cycle of life. The counselor can assist in this process by asking several questions about the family. The members who have died would have an X placed over their names with the dates of the death beside them. This can also lead to discoveries of unresolved grief that need to be confronted. This activity can help the adolescents evaluate their family and think of the different roles each member has played in their lives (Kandt, 1994).

Memory Book

A memory book is a concrete way of connecting the adolescent to the deceased. The individual can include things such as photos, letters, poems, or other items given to them by the deceased. This scrap book can also include items that remind the adolescent of the deceased. Sharing the scrap book can lead to discussions. When doing the memory book, the counselor needs to be prepared for emotions to arise and once again let the client know that a range of emotions are a normal part of the grieving process (Cooper & Martenz, 1991; Kandt, 1994).

Balloon Lift

The balloon lift is another way that can be used to help adolescents reach closure with their grief. This activity includes writing notes to the deceased expressing things they want to say to that person and letting the balloon go to give some finality to the grieving process. It is important to let the adolescents decide when to let their balloon go and not to do a mass ascension even if the intervention is part of a group. Adolescents need to feel comfortable in letting the balloon go. Processing after this activity with clients is necessary (Kandt, 1994). During the processing, the adolescents should have an opportunity to talk about how they felt when letting their balloon go and what it means to them.

Clay

Modeling clay is a wonderful medium to work with, especially when working with angry adolescents. As the clay is worked, the energy used can help to lessen the anger. The counselor should ask adolescents to construct something that angers them. After the object is constructed, clients should be encouraged to talk about what they have built and why. By doing so, the adolescents will be learning to articulate their anger. It should be up to the adolescents to decide what to do with their object. They could decide to smash it, throw it, or do nothing (Fitzgerald, 1992).

Letter Writing

Writing a letter to the person who died is a way for the adolescents to release emotions such as love, anger, confusion, guilt, longing, regret, or fear relating to the death. If they feel as if they never got the chance to say "good bye," this is an opportunity to do so. Letter writing is therapeutic regardless of whether the letter is destroyed or kept in a private place (Cooper & Martenz, 1991).

Memorials

Setting up a memorial for the deceased can give a sense of closeness to the adolescent. This can be simply planting a tree or plant in a special place to honor the deceased (Cooper & Martenz, 1991).

Conclusion

Death is a tragedy, and for adolescents the pain can last a long time. Counselors need to understand adolescent development and the unique characteristics brought to the grieving process. Knowledge of the stages of grief and an awareness of the abnormal reactions to grief are important for school counselors to possess. School counselors are in the position to affect the amount and kind of support grieving adolescents receive. There is a need for more research in the area of adolescent grief and interventions that help make the process of grieving easier for adolescents. The task of

supporting a grieving adolescent is a difficult one, but one worthy of continued attention.

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