

*Caring for families*

# *Along The Way*

*Helping you understand your journey through grief.*

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## For the Sake *of the Kids*

By Dr. Bill Webster

**M**ike lost his 39-year-old wife instantly in a vehicular accident. He had the incomprehensible task of breaking the news that mummy had been killed to their children, just eight and four. It is hard to imagine the pain of hearing children, through uncontrollable tears, say, "But mummy didn't even say goodbye."

Sometimes we are tempted to find ways to "spare the children the grief." That reaction is understandable, but possibly not helpful. Children, from the earliest age, know when something is wrong. They hear what is said, and are sensitive to disruptions in the household. They feel the distress of parents and others, and are deeply affected by it.

So it is essential to remember that any child who is old enough to love is old enough to grieve. Allowing children to express grief helps them to make sense of overwhelming fears and anxieties that may be aroused by a death or other significant loss. Having their grief validated gives them the assurance that they are not alone in their experience, and that they will be OK.

But to understand the complexity of how situations affect children, the following question is crucial: "What does this specific loss, mean to this particular child, at this precise time in their life and development?"

Children have varying abilities to comprehend death or loss, depending on their mental and emotional development. Understanding does not happen simply

according to fixed age categories. Each child has their own timetable as to their discernment of these things. The following "general guidelines" may be helpful.

Within the first year of life, infants feel separation and an awareness of loss. They have a sixth sense about when parents are going out, for example, and often protest the prospect of being left with a babysitter. Children as young as two are keenly aware of any disruption in the state of things around them, causing insecurity. Around two to five, children understand that people die, but death is regarded as temporary and reversible, something like "a round trip." No matter how hard you try to explain, children around five years old cannot comprehend that someone can be gone forever.

Creating a warm, safe environment by combining the physical expression of holding, hugging and rocking with reassurances of personal safety counteract the confusion and restore some sense of security.

Between ages five and nine, children begin to realize death is irreversible, but assume it cannot happen to anyone in their family. Death is something that can be controlled. By ages nine to 11, children understand the permanence of death, and will carry clearer memories of the experience.

Because they are no longer thinking of themselves as "little kids," children in this age group often adorn a facade of independence and coping. They want to comfort a surviving parent or family member, or even



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try to assume the roles of the person who died. This can be OK, but caution is required. Often younger children have a terrible burden placed on them by someone who says, "You're the father/mother of the family now." The child will try to assume the role, but it is unrealistic to expect a child to be anything other than a child.

Research clearly shows that teenagers often experience intense grief, but struggle desperately not to show it. The young person may fear that expressing deep sadness or grief may display a return to childhood vulnerability, which they resist stoically, and thus may find it difficult to express the feelings associated with the death.

Following are just a few observations about children and grief.

- A child may ask to hear the facts repeatedly. They may also want to share the story with many others – friends, teachers, strangers – all in an attempt to try to comprehend this unimaginable thing that has happened.
- Rather than assuming we know what the child is feeling, allow them to share what they are feeling and experiencing. As adults communicate respect, acceptance, warmth and understanding, the child will sense that they are being taken seriously and will be more open to their stabilizing presence and support.
- Children express themselves in a variety of ways after a loss, including: an apparent lack of feelings; acting out behaviour, due to feelings of insecurity and abandonment often expressed by behaviours which provoke punishment (for children would rather be punished than ignored); regressive behaviour; fear; guilt and self-blame; and explosive emotions.

- Watch the child at play. Observe how they act with dolls or toys, as this is often a clue to their feelings. Listen to the stories they make up in word or play. You can help by sharing stories and memories of the good times, and positive alternatives to any bad things they may remember.

- Children tend to mourn little by little, bit by bit, rather than in chunks. Sometimes they experience grief in other ways than sadness and tears. So a child may be upset one minute, and playing happily the next. They might act as if the death has not occurred, because the thought of the loss is simply overwhelming. They need to process their grief in segments.

Some children may need reassurance that they are not responsible, mistakenly feeling this has happened because they were naughty, or did not keep quiet as instructed. Remember, children feel that death is controllable, so they may make the false assumption that if they had done more, or behaved better, this would not have happened.

The good news: children are resilient and can cope with most situations, provided they are given appropriate choices, are prepared for what to expect, given opportunity to talk it through, and receive loving reassurances and support. Making them a part of what is happening allows children to understand, cope with and integrate the experience of loss into their lives.

When caring adults guide children through difficult life transitions and make it a valuable part of the child's personal growth and development, they will know without a doubt they are not alone.

There is no greater gift we can give our children.





# Three Things

By Dr. Bill Webster

**M**y grandmother used to tell me that things happen in threes. She obviously didn't watch me play golf!! Threes in that department are a scarce commodity, unless you are talking about putts.

But it is amazing how many things happen in threes. There's the three-ring circus; three coins in the fountain (which one will the fountain choose?); the three little pigs; the three amigos; the Three Stooges; the Three Musketeers; Three Dog Night; to name but a few. How many other "threes" can you think of?

Put "three things" in your search engine and you will get 45, 810, 830 results. Our minister usually has three points to his sermon, which usually merits three candies per message. In the musical, Godspell, the song "Day by Day" prays for three things: "To see thee more clearly, to love thee more dearly, to follow thee more nearly"; and those sentiments could be applied to many relationships and situations.

If you are a grieving person, there are three things you really need.

## 1. Education

Because we live in a death-denying culture, people don't like to talk or even think about grief. Inevitably, it catches us by surprise. Because we haven't learned what to expect, the intensity of the emotions and the grief reaction leads people to wonder if they are "doing it right." This is especially aggravated by well-intentioned but misguided people who tell the griever to "pull themselves together" or to "be strong."

Most often the griever does not feel they are doing well. They wonder if they are losing their minds, because they can't concentrate, and are forgetful and confused. They question their sanity because of anxiety, vulnerability and a host of overwhelming emotions. It comes as a huge relief when they learn that grief is a natural albeit difficult response to a loss. Just knowing they are not crazy often frees people up to work through their grief issues to reconciliation.

Any good model of grief support should involve providing information about what grief is and how it can affect people. In a death-denying culture, where grief is often not validated, education as to what is normal and how grief affects us is vital. The simple sharing of experiences or feelings without understanding them is futile.

Where education and interaction is combined, such as in a support group, an environment is created in which grief is validated; it is where people can normalize their reactions they may have felt were abnormal. With that information and in that atmosphere, they are set free to express and work through their own grief process. People need to know the grief journey has a beginning and an end, and may require guidance to work through that complex process. Sometimes education is the best medicine.

## 2. Empathy

Hand in hand with education is understanding. Many people say to me, "You know what you are talking about because you have been there." Certainly I have



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had many losses in my own personal life, including parents, my wife, and most recently, my son. But that experience alone doesn't make me an expert in the field. It is understanding the experience and learning its lessons that make the difference.

Nonetheless, most grieving people can identify with someone who has "been there." The underlying question is always, "What do you know about this? Do you have any idea of what I am going through?"

Empathy means the ability to see the world, not as it is to us, but as it is to the grieving person. Their world has changed ... indeed it may seem like it is shattered. Empathetic response requires the ability to go beyond factual detail, and to become involved in the other person's "feeling world." To simply say, "I understand how you feel" is not enough, because you don't.

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## 3. Support

When a person is in crisis, they know they need help from outside themselves. The good news is, most of the time, they are usually open to receive help from people who offer to assist.

Losing someone you have loved often causes a fundamental loss of confidence. You wonder how you will manage, how you can survive, where you will find the strength and resources to do some of the simple

things you may have taken in stride before. Constant words of support, encouragement and patience from friends and family are vital in helping find the confidence to "go on."

So, how can we reach these three goals? I learned more about grief from my own experience and from grieving people themselves than from textbooks. Here are some suggestions from a few of these people:

- "Help me go through my grief, not just tell me to get over it."
- "When people were considerate of me, I appreciated it, as I felt so fragile."
- "Please listen to me when I want to talk about my loss - even though you may hear the same story many times."
- "Be there to listen, not to give suggestions or advice."
- "Ask me what I want; don't tell me what you think is best for me."
- "Do find out when my difficult times are, and call me, or let me call you during such times."
- "Don't say 'we must get together sometime.' If you mean it, be definite. Let's decide on something or invite me to join you in your plans."

The greatest gift you can give yourself is simply validating the significance of your loss, acknowledging that your world has changed, and holding on to hope that life can have meaning again, even though we recognize that it will be vastly different.

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