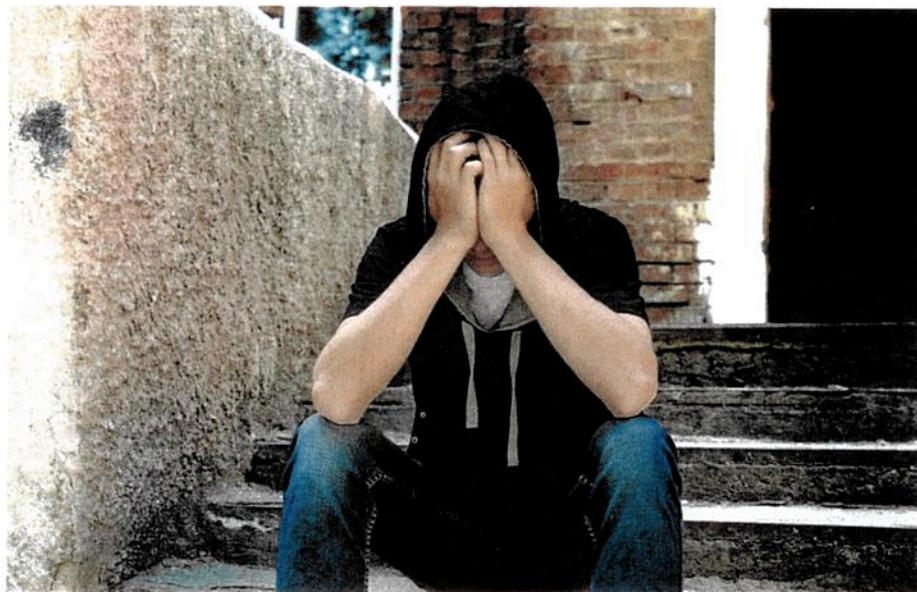


# The Forgotten Mourners

## How Children Deal with the Loss of a Loved One

(Part II)

By Terry Parrish



*In Part I of this article, we talked about the process of mourning and grief in younger children. Now we will discuss the needs and responses of teenagers to the death of a parent and some of the models counselors use to help all children deal with their grief and mourning.*

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the death of a loved one. As teenagers transition from childhood to adulthood, they undergo numerous emotional, physical and social changes. Inability to deal with emotions accompanying loss of a parent may result in severe consequences for them, including clinical depression, suicidal attempts, delinquent behavior, and different addictions.

As outlined by Dr. Ben Garber, mourning is an essential, psychological task of adolescence. During teenage years, a young adult deals with mood changes and depressive states. Teenagers have the need to remove themselves from parents and to become more independent and self-reliant. Garber noted that parental loss in adolescence is an obstacle to normal development of a teenager. In particular, the death of a parent may trigger earlier conflicts that a teenager experienced and suppressed. For example, if a teenager had

problems with aggressive behavior, the death of a parent may intensify the scope and depth of this type of behavior.

Garber concluded that adolescents tend to isolate their thoughts about death of a parent, being more focused on their own depressive moods. In other words, teenagers frequently do not entirely accept the irreversible nature of the loss, similar to preschool-aged children. Among other reactions, a teenager may idealize the deceased parent and direct all the inner rage at the surviving parent. Unlike adults, teenagers are reluctant to express their feelings about the loss of a parent in an open way. At the same time, effective coping with bereavement during adolescent years results in greater maturity, which is a positive element. The key to maturity is effective coping.

Adolescents mourn in a way that is unpredictable and inconsistent. Their most common response to death of a parent is escape, which is frequently accompanied with anxiety and confusion. Being already overwhelmed with their new social roles, teenagers may fail to cope with loss of the loved one, unless they are provided with

proper assistance and support, particularly by a surviving parent.

Grieving and mourning are not unique processes. The loss of a parent is a stressful event. Studies carried out to explore the experiences of orphaned children showed that they are exposed to additional stressors compared to their non-orphaned parents. In particular, the need to care for a dying parent, relocation from home, unstable living conditions, and lack of protection of a biological parents are the side effects accompanying the loss of a parent. One study also revealed that children who experienced death of a parent are willing to discuss their feelings and other traumatic events during interviews and therapeutic sessions with human service professionals. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that mourning and grieving children have the potential to benefit greatly from protective interventions and evidence-based mental health care, helping them to cope with traumatic events as well as preparing them for future life challenges.

The primary objective of grief and mourning counseling is to help a person respond to the death of the loved one and associated stressors. The death of a parent is a stressful event not only for young children but for any adult of any age. One of the best models widely used in grief counseling is the transitional-events model, which says bereavement is a process consisting of several stages. This specifically focuses on children, risk factors, and resilience, and calls for targeted counseling for children who are at risk by reinforcing protective factors (presence of a surviving parent, specifically). In addition, this model also suggests that the success of a child's adjustment is shaped by the events that follow the death of a parent. Among protective factors, in addition to support provided by a surviving parent, it also emphasizes a child's self-esteem and coping skills. The primary goal of the transitional-events model is to decrease the impact of stressful events following the death of a parent on a child.

The death of a parent makes a child feel helpless and without control over the events that are happening. The adaptive-controls model is specifically useful in helping children who witness the deadly disease of a parent and were aware of the upcoming, tragic events. In other words, it helps prepare children for the death of a parent before the tragic event occurs. If a child is aware that a parent is terminally ill, a child is also aware that he/she cannot control events and may in return develop negative self-evaluations. The objective of this model is to empower grieving and mourning children and redirect their attention on events they can control. In particular, children who experience the death of a parent tend to assume that it is their job to take care and reduce the sadness of a surviving parent. This approach calls for collaboration between a parent and a child, where both of them are guided through the experience of the loss. A child is informed that a parent has the power to manage his distress, while a child is assisted with adjustment. The value of a child's adaptive controls models is to ensure that a surviving parent does not create additional emotional pressure on a child.

The accommodation model deals with an adaptive perspective as well. The emphasis is made on redistribution of family tasks and roles, including emotional ones, among surviving members. Similar to a child's adaptive-controls model, the accommodation model urges for age-appropriate reassignment of roles to support normal childhood development. In particular, children should be given a chance to live through their normal childhood experiences, while teenagers should be supported in resuming connection with peers. In other words, the purpose of grieving and mourning is to help surviving family members return to their normal life paths.

Finally, special attention should be devoted to the models that are entirely focused on needs and skills of grieving children. Counseling and therapy on grief and mourning among children is devoted to helping a child identify positive aspects of a tragic situation and reinforce cognitive and behavioral efforts targeting problem solving skills. In other words, a grieving child is helped with acquiring skills needed to cope with stressful situations. This is used by counselors working with children who are in the process of grieving following the death of a parent as well as with children who live with terminally-ill family member. Adolescents who are

prepared to deal with stressful events were more successful in going through mourning and less likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors compared to those teenagers who did not receive coping skills counseling.

In recent years the scientific community has started paying more attention to mourning and grieving children. In particular, the Mourning Child Grief Support Curriculum is updated annually for counselors working in schools and mental health professionals specializing in assisting surviving parents and grieving children. The Mourning Child Grief Support Curriculum targets children aged 4-15 years and contains specific age-appropriate lesson plans and sessions with diverse activities. The primary objective of the curriculum is to help children work through their feelings of loss through play activities. The Mourning Child Grief Support Curriculum is developed for children. One of the essential elements of this program is emphasis on play activities, where children who go through similar tragic events collaborate and interact, helping each other. In addition, a separate part of the program covers the training of parents who are taught how to interact with a mourning child and how to offer mutual support in such emotionally difficult period of time.

In conclusion, mourning and grief are normal reactions of a person to death of the loved one. Mourning and grieving have been widely analyzed and discussed by psychoanalysts, researchers, and counselors. However, while there is a broad range of information on

how to help adults go through mourning and grieving, reliable evidence on mourning children is rather limited. The death of a parent is a tragic event for a person of any age, whereas a child, whether a preschooler or a teenager, is particularly affected by the loss.

Adults tend to cope with the loss by redefining their family and social norms; teenagers may develop abnormal behavioral responses; whereas young children may blame themselves for the death of a parent and assume the role of the helper for a surviving parent. If left unnoticed, mourning and grieving among children may have life-long complications and adversely affect normal development of a child. Despite the gap in literature on mourning children, there are several effective models specifically targeting adjustment and coping skills of children who experience the death of a parent. ☆

*Editor's Note: For children coping with grief, The Wilbert Foundation provides crucial funds and resources for supporting them and their families as they deal with the trauma of grief, death, or preparation for surgery. When a family member dies, surviving children often struggle with the meaning of life and death. Without proper grief counseling, a child's wounded emotions can develop into lifelong problems. The Wilbert Foundation pledges grants to hospital Chaplaincy programs that are used for volunteers, counselors, ministers, and awareness initiatives that help guide children back to peace, hope, and comfort after their ordeals.*

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