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Parenting through Crisis: Helping Kids in Times of Loss, Grief, and Change

As a parent, I have suffered in ways that I never imagined. Others who have suffered inconsolable losses have shared their stories with me. In living through our losses and in sharing our stories, we all discovered that, although each one of us lives through a solitary grief that is our own, we are not alone in our suffering, nor are we the only ones to suffer such a grave loss. We all knew this to be true in our minds before we went through the chaos. Living through it, we now know it to be true in our hearts and our souls as well.

It is our wit and our wisdom that help our children, and us, through the passages of grief. It is in our grieving that we learn a new wholeness. It is in this wholeness that we are able to embrace our sadness, knowing that it shares space with a quiet joy and a gentle peace.

Life Is Not Fair, Life Hurts, Life Is Good

These three seemingly incompatible expressions are really three parts of the whole of living. They are threads woven through the tapestry each one of us creates as the visible expression of our being a part of humanity. To accept these three is not to abandon hope or optimism, or to deny our real grief. To accept them is to rid ourselves of the unnecessary suffering that comes from struggling against these three truths and trying to make them something they are not.

Whether we are dealing with a death, an illness, an accident, a divorce, or mayhem, we will need peace of mind, optimism, and resolve to handle the chaos, the loss, and the suffering that come hand in hand with each of these. How we handle our mourning will give our children tools to handle theirs. When we offer them our compassion and empathy, we give them, from our own tapestry, strong threads of hope and resolve to grab on to and eventually weave into their own rich tapestry of life.

Excerpts from Parenting Through Crisis

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TAO of Family

Tao is the Zen Buddhist word for “way” or “path.” It is not a source or an absolute. In and of itself, it yields no truth or answer. It is not the way or the path. Like an algebraic formula, Tao is both empty and useful; and like a formula, it can be used again and again in many different situations. Such is the TAO of Family. It is a path and a way.

TAO of Family is also an acronym for the three things we need when our lives are thrown into chaos: Time, Affection, and Optimism. These three form the foundation for all of the other TAOs in this book. TAO of Illness, TAO of Divorce, and TAO of Hope—each has its own unique formula, its own way or path. But they all start with time, affection, and optimism.

Time

When we are consumed with grief, it is often difficult to find time for anything except our own grieving. We hope our kids will see our grief and understand. Understand, maybe; accept, probably not. We need to find time for our kids, even if it is time to share in the grieving, lest they become the hidden mourners.

Spending time with our kids can help them handle their own mourning. We also need to give them time to get through their grieving. There is no way to rush grief, condense it, or eliminate it. If we don't give kids the time now, they will need to take the time later. Grief doesn't just go away.

We need to take time to be silent, to think, reflect, and just be. Our children also need that time. And we need some quiet time together, to be still in our grief: willing to be present and not act. In stillness we can be more aware of a bigger picture. Sometimes possibilities that didn't present themselves in the midst of a crisis come forward during the still moments. And sometimes possibilities that didn't exist at the moment of the crisis come together to create a better resolution than was even possible in the first hours, days, or weeks of a loss. In our stillness we can be open to those possibilities.

Affection

Our children need a smile, a hug, and humour every day. In times of grief, these three are often cast aside as a grey cold heaviness descends upon the house. But it is these three that can help all of us get through our mourning. A smile, even one we had to work hard to create, lifts our spirits. Hugs let us know we are in this together. A hearty laugh is contagious and can provide a respite from our grief. With these three simple gestures we give our children all three parts of the TAO of Family—our time, affection, a sense of optimism—and we do it with little thought or effort. Which is a good thing, because thought and effort are usually in short supply when we are grieving.

Triangle of Influence

In times of chaos, if we are going to respond to our own suffering and our children's grief in an active, self-aware, compassionate way, we will need to use our minds, our hearts, and our intuition together. To rely exclusively on any one of these to get through the suffering is to narrow our perspective, limit our options, and hamper our grieving.

When either mind or heart works independently of the other, the denial, repression, hatred, blame, and worry created rob us of peace of mind, our sense of optimism, and the resolve we need to face our suffering and heal our pain, and help our children do the same.

It is our intuition that can bridge the two seemingly disparate perspectives. Being able to acknowledge, trust, and act on our intuition is particularly useful when we are faced with complex difficulties, major chaos, and profound loss. It can point a way out of an impasse that thinking and emotions have created by doing battle with one another. It often provides options that aren't immediately obvious to our mind or our heart. When we connect our head and our heart to our intuition, we are no longer just logical or just emotional. We no longer merely react. We become mindful with a wise heart.

Our intuition helps us to know when to reach out and when to refrain from reaching out; when to speak and when to be silent; when to hold on and when to let go. In a small or large crisis, we are able to respond with a generous spirit, wisdom, discernment, empathy, abundant kindness, mercy, and compassion.

Optimism

Optimism is a grateful attitude, a willingness to view even adversity and adversaries from a fresh perspective.

Optimism doesn't deny anger, frustration, sadness, or intense sorrow. It is willing to give each one its due, but only its due. We cannot always control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond to it and how we use it.

To accept realities for what they are, to look at ways to use those realities for good, and to get busy solving the problems created by those realities help us reaffirm our optimism.

Every time we reaffirm our optimism, we give our children a good way to approach their own adversity. They can take an active part in determining what they will do with what life has handed them. They will be less likely to be passive recipients of whatever comes their way. They know how to view change, be it welcome or unbidden, as a challenge and an opportunity to grow.

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When Grieving Is No Longer Good Mourning

Sometimes grief is blocked, diverted, or buried. The following is a checklist of warning signs that your child might be stuck in grief and need professional help to get through mourning. All children will exhibit some of these signs as they grieve. It is the frequency, intensity, and persistence of these behaviours that indicate a need for concern.

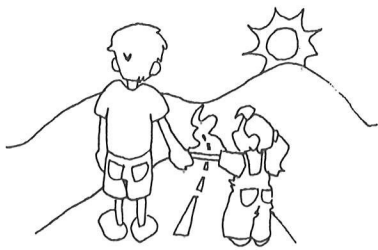
- ___ 1. Acting much younger for an extended period of time.
- ___ 2. Excessive and prolonged crying bouts.
- ___ 3. Inability to sleep or need for excessive sleep.
- ___ 4. Nightmares or night terrors.
- ___ 5. Loss of appetite.
- ___ 6. Extended period of depression in which child loses interest in friends, daily activities, and events; putting a negative spin on events.
- ___ 7. Truancy or a sharp drop in school performance and grades.
- ___ 8. Prolonged fear of being alone.
- ___ 9. Persistent idealization of the dead person.
- ___ 10. Excessively imitating the dead person.
- ___ 11. Repeatedly stating the wish to be with the dead person.
- ___ 12. Clinging to the past and refusing to think positively about the future.
- ___ 13. Talking about the dead person in the present tense.
- ___ 14. Overvaluing or clinging to possessions of the dead person.
- ___ 15. Frequent physical complaints, illness, headaches, stomach aches.
- ___ 16. Detachment and pulling away from efforts at consolation.
- ___ 17. Avoidance of any activities that might be a reminder of the dead person.

Life Lessons

In this time of great chaos and suffering, can each casualty be given a human face? Can we reach out to others with compassion and empathy, honouring our deep bonds and common humanity?

Can a deep passion to alleviate another's pain and sorrow become a part of our everyday life? Can we reach out to our neighbours who are suffering their own personal tragedies and ask: "What are you going through?" "What do you need?" "What can I do?" Can we be there for them as they name their loss, honour their grief, confront their pain, and tell their story?

When we respond with a generous spirit, wisdom, discernment, abundant kindness, and mercy, when we help alleviate the suffering of others and we offer them our compassion and empathy, we create caring communities and safe harbour for our children.



Path Through Grief

There is no destination, no arrival, no ending place in the journey of grief. There is no road map to follow, no formula, and no way to hurry the journey or bypass the pain. There are passages to live through, not stages that we move past in a lockstep, hierarchical order. To force ourselves or our children into a linear grieving “process,” evaluating where we are on the ladder of grief, is a vain attempt to control and manipulate a “journey of the heart.” This journey cannot be controlled, it can only be lived through by each one of us in our own time and in our own way.

The path we each will crawl, walk, run, stumble through, sit down on, and at times try to run from will be our own. Others can tell us of their own journey, where the potholes were, the ruts, and the resting places, what they carried and what they discarded, wished they had brought along, or found in hidden stashes along the way. In the end it is up to each one of us to travel our own path, naming our loss, honouring our grief, confronting our pain, and telling our story.

THE PASSAGES

As we journey through our many losses in life, there are three passages that we experience over and over again:

1. The piercing grief of goodbye
2. Intense sorrow
3. Sadness that shares space with a quiet joy and a gentle peace

When someone dies, we and our children, all in our own time and in our own way, need to go through these passages if we are to choose “an acceptance of death and a commitment to living.” There is no one way, no right way, no only way, no singular journey. We can share our path with others, but in the end it is up to each one of us (our children included) to create our own path.

It is important to remember that these passages are fluid and overlapping. All three can, one by one, barge into our lives unbidden and without notice. They don't always take place in a set order and all can be present in the same day.

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I. THE PIERCING GRIEF OF GOODBYE

This first passage is marked by numbness and shock. The body mercifully provides us with these two to help us slowly face the impact of our loss. We might feel as if we are walking in a dream state, appear to others as being stoic or robot-like. We are often in denial, hoping to wake up from a nightmare, searching the papers or listening to the news, fighting, against all odds, to learn that it isn't true. The first words out of our mouth—“Oh no”—are a frantic attempt to change what is.

During this time it is important to give shelter to one another as each of us individually, but also as part of a family and a community, slowly continues the circle journey from the depths of piercing grief to intense sorrow, a passage that has its own elixirs and its own dragons to slay.

2. INTENSE SORROW AS WE REORGANIZE OUR LIFE

The mind is no longer on hold, the reality of the death is seeping into the very marrow of the bones, the numbness is wearing off, a dull, constant pain taking its place. The sorrow envelops your mornings, evenings, and nights, allowing no respite.

The nightmares of the first passage give way to the logistics of everyday routines, routines that are the same and yet irrevocably changed, now coloured stone-cold grey. Even happy times bring you sorrow. You can't reason the pain away. Nor can you rush through this passage or deny it its due. The sorrow needs to be expressed.

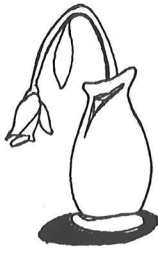
You and your children need to speak of the loss, tell your stories over and over again. Be as patient with your children's stories as you wish your friends and relatives would be with yours.

It takes courage to get through this passage, to not deny it, inhibit it, or rush it. You will find if you confront the pain honestly and directly and you are open to its lessons, you will increasingly feel the desire to let go of the intensity of your grief and get on with your own future.

3. SADNESS THAT SHARES SPACE WITH A QUIET JOY AND A GENTLE PEACE AS WE RECOMMIT TO LIFE OURSELVES, TEMPERED BY THE LOSS AND WISER

Not feeling bad for feeling good is a sign you are moving into the third passage of grief. Tired of being tired, ready to get on with your life, and no longer preoccupied with despair, you laugh more and are able to concentrate better. No longer plagued with the “Why?” that has no decent answer, you move on to “What will I do now?” You've said your goodbyes, you've restored yourself, and now you are ready to reinvest in your own life. The sadness is there, but it shares space with the quiet joy and the gentle peace.

Your children might move into this third passage before you or after you. They need your support and reassurance that it is good to get on with their lives. Let them know that getting on does not mean forgetting, trivializing, or getting over a major loss. It means always remembering, honouring the relationship that is there, and knowing that one does not get over a major loss, but gets on with life.



Death: Helping Kids Mourn

Confronting the reality of death honestly and directly with children is difficult at best. In a death-denying, fix-it-fast, cure-it-now society, with so many rituals and customs of our ancestors abandoned or never experienced, the task is even more painful and necessary. Our own feelings, belief systems, faith traditions, questions about mortality and the meaning of suffering, as well as our understanding of the abilities of children to handle loss and grief, can help or hinder us in helping our children mourn. We can try to hide the loss from them, try to shield them from the anguish, convince ourselves they are too young to understand—they will still grieve, but without the comfort, support, knowledge, and tools they need.

There are things you can do in advance of a death and during the passages of grief that can help both you and your children journey the uncharted waters of your loss.

The Circle of Life

Before they face the death of a family member or friend, children are helped if they first learn about death from everyday events such as the changing of the seasons, a dead bird in the yard, the death of a family pet. Observing life cycles in everyday living, and talking about them matter-of-factly, can be one kind of preparation for the inevitable deaths of loved ones.

It is easier to explain the basic attributes of death and answer the inevitable questions calmly and forthrightly when we are ceremoniously burying the dead robin than when we are grieving at Grandpa's grave.

All children who experience the death of a family member feel helpless and lost. At all ages and stages of development, children have ways of coping with loss. Even when they are too young to understand the concept of death or speak what they are feeling, they are able to grieve.

Four Attributes of Death

Children as young as five can begin to understand what Elliot Kranzler describes as the four attributes of death (text in parentheses added by author):

1. It has a specific cause (nobody just "drops dead").
2. It involves the cessation of body functions (the body can't move, can't feel, can't breathe, can't grow—it's not just sleeping).
3. It is irreversible (it can't be undone, there are no "overs").
4. It is universal (it happens to all living things).

Breaking the News

When faced with the death of a loved one, and confronted with your own grief, there is no easy way of getting through breaking the news. Use simple, honest words: Daddy died; your sister was killed in a plane crash; Grandpa died last night; your aunt killed herself. Honesty doesn't have to be cold and harsh and unfeeling. Your tone of voice, what you say, and how you say it can speak warmth, caring, and sadness.

Often parents feel they have to soften the blow by beating around the bush before they get to the fact of the death. No amount of talking, theologizing, rationalizing, or confronting will ease the pain. Your children need gentle honesty and caring silence. Stick with the headlines and facts, then be present to hold your children, cry with them, and answer any questions they might have. They might be shocked and unable to do anything but cry, or too shocked to even cry. They probably won't be interested in lots of details; just let them know you will be there for them if they have any questions. Assure them that together you will make it through this.

Factors That Influence Children's Grieving

Since a family has members of different ages, at different stages of physical, emotional, and intellectual development, who have different relationships within and outside of the family, no death the family faces together will have the same effect on everyone. Five factors greatly influence children's grieving:

1. Who died and what relationship that person had to the child
2. Manner or cause of the death
3. Communication skills of the family
4. The history of loss and death
5. The developmental level of the child

Humour

Humour is potent medicine for the heart, the body, and the soul. It releases tension and provides us with energy to deal with feelings that could easily overwhelm us. It is life-affirming. We are all grateful for people whose humour in a time of loss can give us a jump start at reconnecting with life.

The wit that helps us through a funeral—that same wit that helps us get through our two-year-old's artwork on the newly wallpapered wall, the sandwich in the VCR, and the strangely tinted laundry—might take a turn toward the humourously absurd when we are face to face with death and its aftermath. Those around us who haven't yet found their own funny bone, or who wish us to handle grief in a solemn, prescribed, or at least dignified manner, will be stunned, shocked, and aghast at our gallows humour.