

How to understand and help in grief?

Pastor Arnoud Vergunst

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Sorrow is unavoidable in any life

Rom. 5:12 "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned ... death reigned ... even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression."

B. God uses crisis situations to teach and shape us ... *they are His tools!*

Lam. 3:33 For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men.

1. Some positive outcomes: *strengthening of a person*
 - a. spiritually profitable if it leads to closer life with God and deeper knowledge of self
 - b. better equipped to face realities of life
 - c. more realistic expectation about life: sober
 - d. more compassionate and thoughtful attitude towards others
 - e. teaches one the need of dependence on God and others
2. Some negative outcomes: *weakening of a person*
 - a. withdrawal from society: clamping up into own world
 - b. over-dependence
 - c. denial of reality of grief
 - d. indulgence (eating, drinking, buying, addiction...)

C. Parents need to grasp *each opportunity* to prepare their children for the reality of life

1. Shielding them from the pain of grief/loss is poor preparation for reality
2. Children need and learn from 'modeling' in how to deal with the painful realities

D. Purpose of this topic: *First-Aid Course to help Grieving Adults and Children*

1. Greatest hurdle to be an effective *grief-sharer* is ignorance
2. This topic is to boost your confidence to approach grievers as well as to prepare your for future times of need

E. Children and grief ... *often the forgotten mourners!*

1. A child old enough to love is old enough to grieve

2. Children experience as most stressful the following losses
 - death of someone important to them
 - imprisonment of one/both parents
 - divorce or separation of parents
 - loss of siblings through marital break-up
 - loss of trust through various forms of abuse
 - accident, ill-health or disability in family
 - separation from family (foster children)
 - death of a favorite pet

F: Grief-sharing is to enter a school of learning

1. The first lesson is *un-learning* what we thought we knew

2. When a 'care-giver' becomes a 'grief-sharer.' you will change for the better!
 - a. it takes 'sacrificial love' to share someone else's cross

 - b. but the rewards are sweet

II. THE RIGHT PREPARATION IS VITAL!

A. Understanding a 'crisis'

1. The meaning of the Greek word "krisis"

2. The Chinese pictograph for crisis

3. The English *bereaved*

4. Each loss is a crisis: *no loss is greater than another – just different*

B. Important: The defining event of our life isn't the crisis we experience

C. Dealing with crisis situations with respect to children/young people

1. Who should tell the news?
 - a. If possible, the adult(s) to whom the child feels closest

 - b. If not possible, then someone with whom the child shares an intimate, close, ongoing, trustful relationship

2. When should we tell the news?
 - a. As soon as the crisis seems *definite*

3. What should we tell the child?
 - a. the “simple” reality as much as they ask

 - b. why the full reality?

4. Involve children as much as possible: they can handle for more than we imagine.

D. Understanding grief in general

1. The ‘new situation’ calls for *adjustment – re-prioritizing*
 - a. this process of adjustment is the actual *grieving*

 - b. this adjustment is very complex

 - c. grief initially grows bigger

2. Grief is the *natural and God created response to a loss*
 - a. The Lord Jesus grieved – wept – felt need for ‘withdrawing’

 - b. God created the emotions of sadness/grief with the ability to express them

 - c. expression of the emotions is good/necessary though not every form of expression is acceptable or helpful !

3. The various models of the grief-journey
 - a. the five stages model: denial, anger, bargaining, acceptance, growth

 - b. the four tasks *identifies 4 tasks in grieving process*
 - 1st task: to accept the reality of loss

 - 2nd task: work through the pain of grief

 - 3rd task: adjustment to brand-new reality

 - 4th task: emotional relocating and reinvestment into life

c. the *phase model*

1. Shock phase: *automatic pilot*
2. Conscious phase: *reality hits home*
3. Emptiness phase: *increased loneliness – avoidance social contact*
4. Adjustment phase: *rediscovery of joy and purpose; reinvestment*

4. Grief is not predictable or manageable

- a. everyone grieves at their own pace and in their own manner

5. Grievers cope with a host of different emotions

a. Sadness:

b. Fear:

c. Guilt:

d. Shame:

e. Jealousy:

f. Anger:

g. Depression:

h. Physical symptoms

6. Children grief and mourn as much as adults though in different ways

a. Baby age (0-1)

- little immediate impact because of unawareness of actual event
- yet are ‘sponges’ soaking up (drying out) surrounding emotions
- especially if ‘prolonged separation’ takes places, this effects emotionally

b. Toddler – Kindergarten Age

- egocentric thinking (can’t consider or understand thoughts/feelings of others)
- will observe and absorb emotions and know ‘grievers need comfort’

- can't comprehend 'never'
- increased fear (insecurity)
- may react very 'matter of factly' on sharing news
- may be unwilling to listen; urgently trying to change subject
- be aware of their childish thinking ability
 - (1) Magical thinking:

 - (2) Literal thinking:

 - (3) Fantasy thinking:

c. School age Children (6-12)

- Consciously experience everything to do with the death
- Abstract reasoning begins to develop so can draw conclusions & show sensitivity
- May show regressive behavior at home and school
- Reaction to loss/grief can often be *noisy - loud - busy - chaotic*

d. Adolescent children (12-18)

- Often struggle with a guilt-reaction
- May avoid home situation and prefer to stay w/ a friend during acute family illness or after a death
- sense great need for neutral corner to recuperate from constant pain, resentment, helplessness, tension which may be stimulated at home
- must not be interpreted as being disloyalty – disrespect
- Common reactions
 - (1) Silence: *often out of fear for not accepted when express real feelings*
 - (2) Intellectualizing: *speak about it very factual without feelings*
 - (3) Denial: *indulge in friends – social contact – excessive attention to themselves*
 - (4) Mood swings: *aggressive – irritable often hides word of insecurity*
 - (5) Pondering... *quietly deep thinking in own room*

e. General comments on grieving children:

- they react to the loss as they feel it affects them
- they grieve in snatches and can ‘appear switched off’
- they deal with grief slower than adults and often inappropriate
- remember that younger children commonly delayed grief till later
- red flags: *radical change in personality – withdrawing – deteriorating behavior – prolonged regression*
- be sensitive to their feelings and needs
- encourage sharing by sharing
- don’t publicly scold or embarrass a grieving child
- reassure you NEVER leave the child

f. Grieving child at school

- The way children react at home may be entirely opposite than school
- Grieving children feel that everyone *looks* at them differently
 - (1) teacher should prepare classroom for the return of griever
- Grievers experience loneliness because all other children life goes on as normal
- Generally you can expect ...
 - (1) children to hide their feelings
 - (2) children to react in rebellion/aggression/irritable temper
 - (3) children to show extreme energy or emotional melt-downs
 - (4) children to be absent-minded/dreamy

7. Grief is ‘never over, it erupts less often.’

a. the ‘white sheet’ illustration or the maze-journey

b. to ‘move on or go on’ is to *give grief, loss a permanent honor place in life*

8. Grieving is a journey everyone needs to make him/herself but cannot be done well ALONE!

a. ‘Grief-sharer’ is not *Mr. Rescuer or Mrs. Fix but “Mr or Mrs Walk along’*

b. ‘Grief-sharers’ need to learn to grow a thick skin