When Grief is Like an Ocean: Helping Students Navigate Grief Reactions

By Kathy Journigan-Douglas, LCSW, Grief Counselor

We’ve all heard it said, “Kids are so resilient, he or she will pull through this loss just fine.” And, in many ways our children are stronger and cope better than we often give them credit for or expect. It is important to remember, however, that children grieve differently than adults. Their grief is often based on their age, maturity level, previous experiences with loss, and available support systems. With love, attention and care, like adults, most children weather the difficulties of loss well. They actually learn valuable lessons and coping skills for later inevitable losses in their lives.

Here are a few key signs adults need to pay attention to when deciding whether or not to seek grief counseling for children (Source: Black (2005)).

1. Severe depression that results in little interest in daily activities.
2. Inability to eat and sleep normally.
3. Fear of being alone.
4. Imitation of the deceased.
5.Repeatedly wishing to join the deceased.
7. Refusal to attend school.
8. Steady drop in school achievement.
9. Physical complaints (repeated headaches, stomach aches, fatigue, and low energy).
10. Acting out or behavior not typical for the child.
11. Increase in behavioral issues.

It is important to note that these behaviors often occur soon after a loved one’s death. It is when they are present over a prolonged period (more than a few months) that families may want to consider professional counseling assistance.
The Unwelcomed Denominator
By Travis Smith, M. Div, Grief Counselor

I will never forget my first experience with hospice bereavement. I had just started working with a hospice in the western part of North Carolina when the bereavement department asked if I would help facilitate a grief group. My training was in pastoral care and I certainly had a lot of experience in providing grief care in the hospital and hospice setting but I had not led a group at this point. I thought this would be a great learning experience for me and hopefully it would provide a needed service. I saw people from extremely different walks of life come together and support each other in astounding ways. The unwelcomed denominator of grief united this motley group and despite the diversity, they invested in one another!

As the weeks passed by in that grief group I was amazed at what I was able to witness. The relationships deepened and by the end of the 6 weeks I noticed smiles where there had only been tears. I saw relief in the faces of women and men who were convinced prior to the group that “they were alone in this journey.” I was privileged to witness sacred tears, hugs, laughter, and yes, even hope. My introduction to “grief groups” was not my last and for the past 10 years I have been able to witness how this unwelcomed denominator is revealed and transforms over and over again.

Perhaps you have felt alone; perhaps you have been one of the many people who have wondered, “is there anyone who understands me?” Joining a grief group is a way to feel accepted, supported, and cared for during the most difficult time in your life. I would like to invite you to come experience this for yourself. Please consider one of our many groups. We have lunch and coffee groups which meet monthly. We also have our “Grief the Reluctant Journey” group that meets for a minimum of 6 consecutive weeks. Grief the Reluctant Journey groups start a new session about once a quarter and they can fill up fast. If you would like to know more about our groups please call 704.335.4334 or email cummingsg@hpccr.org.

Don’t forget... to complete and return the Family Evaluation of Bereavement Services Survey.
Neither the caregiver nor your child should think that there is something “wrong” with them if grief counseling is sought. Framed in a loving, caring manner, assuring the child that even adults have difficulty and need help when someone dies, often takes the fear out of the counseling experience. Being in a safe, non-judgmental and caring (and often fun) space with a trained grief counselor can be very beneficial for both the child and family. The goal of grief counseling is to assist children in expression of feelings about the death and the person who died, to learn healthy ways to cope with loss and to help families learn ways to help children navigate and heal through the grief journey.

This article would not be complete without mentioning the benefits of groups for children and teens. Often our children feel like they must be the only one in this school that feels so sad. The support and care children and teens give to one another in a group setting is invaluable. There are also grief camps, like Chameleon’s Journey, that bring children and teens together over a weekend to spend time with counselors, learning coping skills and gaining confidence to manage the challenges of grief. As stated earlier, loss is an inevitable part of life. It is how we present death and dying to our children that often determines their grief journey. Understand, children will be naturally curious about death, so answer their questions with honesty and factual information that is age appropriate. There are many good resources available for families to use when explaining death and dying to children. Please feel free to contact one of our grief counselors or visit our website for more information.

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**In Good Company**

**Event Calendar**

*(All are welcome!)*

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<td><strong>Homestead Grill</strong>&lt;br&gt;1st Tuesday of each month&lt;br&gt;357 North Generals Blvd.&lt;br&gt;Lincolnton, NC&lt;br&gt;5:30 pm&lt;br&gt;Contact: Kathy Douglas&lt;br&gt;704.887.6437</td>
<td><strong>Rippington’s</strong>&lt;br&gt;2nd Tuesday of each month&lt;br&gt;109 W. South Street&lt;br&gt;Waxhaw, NC 28173&lt;br&gt;11 am&lt;br&gt;Contact: Travis Smith&lt;br&gt;980.297.9430</td>
<td><strong>Panera Bread</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Whitehall Commons Shopping Center)&lt;br&gt;1st Thursday of each month&lt;br&gt;8152 South Tryon Street&lt;br&gt;Charlotte, NC 28273&lt;br&gt;10 am&lt;br&gt;Contact: Marge Brokaw&lt;br&gt;704.335.4308</td>
<td><strong>Bob Evans Restaurant</strong>&lt;br&gt;2nd Thursday of each month&lt;br&gt;16707 Northcross Drive&lt;br&gt;Huntersville, NC  28078&lt;br&gt;6 pm&lt;br&gt;Contact: Amy Thomas&lt;br&gt;704.602.0930</td>
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<td><strong>Bob Evans Restaurant</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Arboretum Shopping Center)&lt;br&gt;3rd Tuesday of each month&lt;br&gt;Pineville Matthews Road&lt;br&gt;Charlotte, NC 28277&lt;br&gt;10 am&lt;br&gt;Contact: Marge Brokaw&lt;br&gt;704.335.4308</td>
<td><strong>Julia’s Coffee</strong>&lt;br&gt;4th Tuesday of each month&lt;br&gt;1133 North Wendover Road&lt;br&gt;Charlotte, NC 28211&lt;br&gt;10 am&lt;br&gt;Contact: Travis Smith&lt;br&gt;980.297.9430</td>
<td><strong>Bob Evans Restaurant</strong>&lt;br&gt;4th Thursday of each month&lt;br&gt;16707 Northcross Drive&lt;br&gt;Huntersville, NC  28078&lt;br&gt;11:30 am&lt;br&gt;Contact: Amy Thomas&lt;br&gt;704.602.0930</td>
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Support Groups

Registration has begun for upcoming “Grief: The Reluctant Journey” support groups. The meetings start in early summer 2014 at our various HPCCR locations. A pre-group interview with one of our grief counselors is required before registration. To find out more, and to schedule an interview, please email cummingsg@hpccr.org, or call 704.335.4334. For our Lincolnton support groups, email journigan-douglask@hpccr.org, or call 704.887.6437.

CHAMELEON’S JOURNEY OVERNIGHT GRIEF CAMP
BRINGS HELP, HOPE AND HEALING TO HURTING CHILDREN

October 11-12, 2014

Applications are now being accepted for the 15th annual Chameleon’s Journey overnight grief camp for children and teens. The camp is October 11-12, 2014 and will take place at Camp Thunderbird in Lake Wylie, SC.

At Chameleon’s Journey campers learn that it’s okay and natural to still want to have fun, even while grieving. Through activities like canoeing, zip-lining, rock wall climbing, games, music, drama and a memorial service, campers come away with new skills and confidence to cope with grief in an appropriate and healthy way.

Sponsored by Hospice & Palliative Care Charlotte Region and with contributions from organizations and individuals, the camp continues to be free of charge and has given help and hope to thousands of children ages 7 – 16 since it began in 2000. To receive an application for the grief camp call 704.335.4334 or visit hpccr.org

The mission of Hospice & Palliative Care Charlotte Region is to relieve suffering and improve the quality and dignity of life through compassionate hospice care for those of all ages, palliative care for those with advanced illness, and through community education.