

# Khululeka

## **grief support for children and youth**

### Information about Complicated Grief

#### What is **Complicated** Grief?

When life issues are unexpressed or un-acknowledged, they become locked in “*frozen blocks of time*”.

These *frozen blocks of time* stop the normal grief process denying the child the ability to grieve. It can feel as if life stops and time stands still. The natural flow of feelings is inhibited. There is no movement forward until the issues are resolved and the feelings released. Suicide, homicide, AIDS, abuse, and violence are familiar examples of situations that lead to complicated grief.

The grief process is normal and natural after a loss. When children become stuck in this *frozen block of time*, they are denied access to this normal and natural flowing process. Overwhelmed by frozen feelings, the grief process seems to be “on hold” or nonexistent. The child is not in touch with his or her feelings of grief, or those feelings are ambivalent and in conflict with each other.

In complicated grief, it is as if an unexpressed or unresolved important life issue - a *frozen block of time* - has created a wall of ice between the child and his or her grief. Our job is to help melt that wall.

*Breaking the Silence (1996)*

#### **What may contribute to Complicated Grief**

##### **Sudden or traumatic death**

Sudden or traumatic death can include murder, suicide, fatal accidents, or a sudden fatal illness. Immediately an unstable environment is created in the child's home. Children feel confusion over these kinds of death. Desire for revenge is often experienced after a murder or fatal accident. Rage and/or guilt emerges against the person who has committed suicide. Terror of violence and death unfolds, and the child feels shock and disbelief that suddenly this death has occurred.

##### **Social stigma of death**

Social stigma and shame frequently accompany deaths related to AIDS, suicide, and homicide. Children as well as adults often feel too embarrassed to speak of these issues. They remain silent out of fear of being ridiculed or ostracized. These suppressed feelings get inwardly projected towards themselves in the form of self-hatred. Often times these children feel lonely and isolated. They cannot grieve normally because they have not separated the loss of the deceased.

##### **Multiple losses**

Multiple losses can produce a deep fear of abandonment and self-doubt in children. The death of a single parent is a good example of a multiple loss. When the only remaining parent of a child dies, the death can cause this child to be forced to move from the home, the rest of his or her family and friends, the school, and the community. The child is shocked at this sudden and complete change of lifestyle and surroundings, and may withdraw or become terrified of future abandonment. Nightmares and/or bedwetting could appear.

### **Past relationship to the deceased**

When a child has been abused, neglected, or abandoned by a loved one, there are often ambivalent feelings when the loved one's death occurs. A five-year-old girl whose alcoholic father sexually abused her may feel great conflict when that parent dies. Part of her may have felt relieved, even glad, to be rid of the abuse yet ashamed to say those feelings out loud. She may carry the secret of the abuse and become locked into that memory and be unable to grieve. Children often feel guilt, fear, abandonment, or depression if grief of a loved one is complicated by an unresolved past relationship.

### **Grief process of the surviving parent or caretaker**

If the surviving parent is not able to mourn, there is no role model for the child. A closed environment stops the grief process. Many times the surviving parent finds it too difficult to watch his or her child grieve. They may be unable to grieve themselves, or unwilling to recognize their child's pain. Feelings become denied and expression of these feelings withheld. The surviving parent might well become an absentee parent because of his or her own overwhelming grief, producing feelings of abandonment and isolation in the child. Children often fear something will happen to this parent or to themselves and as a result become overprotective of the parent and other loved ones.

*Source: Breaking the Silence (1996)*

At the same time child may feel nervous about talking about the loss to the grieving parent, because it saddens the parent and then the child feels responsible for the pain of the adult. If you become aware of that, reassure the child. Some families have found it helpful if a adult good friend, that the child feels safe to talk with builds up a special relationship with the child.

### **Healing the trauma in the body and the mind**

We have been made in the image of our creator with the capacity to heal ourselves. Children and adults can do certain practices to re-learn the language of the body so as to ease the trauma of loss:

- ❖ Take deep breaths, relax and feel where in the body you are hurting
- ❖ Hold energy points in the body eg. thumb for sadness, pointer finger for scared, middle finger for anger, ring finger for worry and smallest finger when you feel small.
- ❖ Exercise your energy system to open up the channels to healing: stand with knees slightly bent and step forward with the left foot. Bring the hands forward and make circles pushing away the negative feelings and bringing back love and healing. Do the same for a couple of minutes and then again with the right foot forward.
- ❖ Showers of light: put left foot forward, bring hands up over the head gathering light and let the light shower all the way down the body. Do this a few times and then again with the right foot forward.

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