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ASSISTING THE GRIEVING IN A "GRIEF-LITE" CULTURE

▸ Pastor David Verzyl served heroically as a chaplain at the Morgue Unit at Ground Zero following the September 11 disaster. Months after many people had "moved on," Pastor Verzyl was still on the scene making a difference in the lives of workers at Ground Zero and in the lives of his own congregation, the Kingston Church of the Nazarene. Ministry takes place, unfortunately, in a society that is impatient with mourning. But Pastor Verzyl could never have made an impact had he believed he was to "hurry along" grievers. He gave the grievers with whom he came in close contact generous chunks of time; he built bridges into their grief.

The enormity of David's work is overwhelming—especially in this "grief-lite" culture we live in. "Get over it." "Go on with your life." For the sensitive pastor, grief ministry is more than platitudes and pats on the back. It's a meaningful opportunity to share the person of Christ with the walking wounded among us.

There's a lot of grief theory pastors use. Perhaps the most widely used, but no longer endorsed by grief educators and therapists, is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's "five stages" and its many variations. Admittedly, Dr. Kübler-Ross got people more comfortable talking about grief with her descriptions of the stages: denial, anger, bargaining, acceptance, and growth. However, these stages are too limiting and too passive to capture the grief experience of most individuals.

When Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, some ministers, counselors, and facilitators presume he had the "five stages of grief" tucked under the other arm. Whatever the loss, these caregivers dish out a generous helping of the stages of grief—anger, denial, bargaining, acceptance, and growth. Like elixirs once sold at county fairs, these stages are touted as being good for whatever grief ails you.

Yet the grief-stages concept is only a theory. Look at the inside of

your right thumb. Six and a half billion people occupy planet Earth. No one has a thumbprint like yours. God went to a lot of trouble to make your thumbprint unique. Your "griefprint" is unique too. No two people grieve exactly the same way.

Victoria Alexander has identified three needs of individuals grappling with loss.[1]

1. Grievers need to find words for the loss. Many times people who grieve are at a loss for words, especially early in the grief experience. They say they were flabbergasted, speechless, or numb. Some will never forget those first "O God, no!" moments when death invaded their lives. Many will never forget their first faltering attempts to respond to the question, "What happened?" or "How are you holding up?" Nor will some ever forget the wounds inflicted by worn clichés and insensitivity.

John Dasburg, CEO of Burger King, lost his six-year-old daughter in 1988 as a result of a school-van accident. When others ask him "When will the pain go away?" Dasburg stuns many with his answer, "Never."

"No one can stand it, the pain is so intense. It has never gone away from me. You learn to live with it, you get accustomed to it, you accommodate it."[2]

Unfortunately, in our quick-fix culture, too many expect grievers to move on and get over it. We live in a "grief-lite" culture.

If you love someone and you "lose" him or her—you will grieve. The question is, Can you grieve openly? Can you talk about the grief? How can you acknowledge loss until you try out words?

One of the greatest gifts ministers, counselors, and facilitators can offer is patience as someone sorts words. Some individuals struggle. They don't know how to say what they are thinking. In the grief groups I lead, I ask, "Have you ever played Scrabble? You shake the lettered tiles in a little container, then spill them out. You sort through the letters and make up a word." Grief is a shaking experience that thoroughly scrambles our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

Following a death, one of the kindest things a pastor can do is to string together a coherent sentence, then, perhaps, a paragraph. Narratives get constructed a word at a time.

2. Grievers need to say the words aloud. You've heard, "What good is talking about it going to do?" The answer is, "A lot." Some people experience a word logjam. One of the great gifts of a sovereign God is support groups and counselors. In the not too distant past, grievers got through a loss the best way they could. What would some lives be like if the bereaving could have found a caring mutual-help group where they could have talked out the devastation they had experienced and have learned from the experiences of others?

3. Grievers need to know that the words have been heard. Remember the question, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it—was there any sound?" If a person is grieving and no one hears—or "receives" that grief—is it really grief? God invented tears. When tears run down our face, we need someone who notices and asks, "What's wrong?" Grievers' laments contain words that can be raw and caustic. Paraphrasing the prophet Jeremiah's experience, words are "in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (Jer. 20:9).

The power of words is illustrated in Jesus' caring for Martha and Mary following the death of their brother, Lazarus. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21, 32), the sisters exclaimed as they confronted Jesus. The words stung Jesus, who was grieving (v. 33).

Sometimes words erupt. Sometimes they won't come. Sometimes it takes years.

Four hundred and fifty years ago a caring minister penned an invitation that is pertinent today: "Then let him come to me . . . or some other discreet and learned minister of God's word and open his grief that he may receive counsel, and advice, and comfort" (*Book of Common Prayer* [1552]).

Grief sharers are called to "receive the narratives" of the broken, lost, confused, bewildered, and wounded.[3] Too often, in these days of time-framed ministry, with more demands than a human can meet, pastors serve like physicians who allot seven minutes to "see" a pa-

tient. One remarkable moment in the New Testament is when Jesus chided Simon the Pharisee, "Do you see this woman?" (Luke 7:44). I think he actually asked, "Do you see *this* woman?" Jesus might ask you as a pastor or facilitator, "Do you see *this* griever?" You may have heard lots of loss stories—but you have not heard *this* individual's lament.

To this griever or family it will not matter how "good" you were with previous grievers. How available are you in *this* loss?

As you listen to a griever's description of loss, consider the possibility that underneath the rubble of this loss—or this latest sorrow—is a smoldering unhealed, unfinished loss. Remember the fires that burned for months in the ruins of the World Trade Center rubble? All it took was a little wind to stir the embers into a fire. Many grievers have accumulated thick layers of ash and tons of emotional rubble over their souls. Jesus invites us to lead the bereaving toward a clearing away of the layers of wounds.

THE TASKS OF GRIEF

J. William Worden, the leading American authority on grief therapy, identifies four "tasks" or "to dos" for grievers. His proactive approach contrasts with the more passive "get through it the best way you can" stages of grief. This approach may be useful for some persons you counsel.

One of the wildest adventures of my life was rafting a portion of the Chattooga River in South Carolina (the river Burt Reynolds made famous in the movie *Deliverance*). Some persons step into rafts and let the river take charge. It's no surprise that a few of these drown! On its own the Chattooga will take rafters over perilous rapids (rather than through them or along the bank) where enormous tree branches can do serious damage to the head. Wise adventurers rely on a navigator to guide them down the dangerous course of this powerful river. It's the same river but a different experience.

Worden identifies these tasks to help grievers navigate their loss:

1. Accept the reality of the loss.
2. Work through to the pain of the loss.
3. Adjust to environments in which the person is missing.

4. Relocate emotionally, and memorialize the loved one.[4]

For people used to Day-Timers and PalmPilots or old-fashioned to-do lists scribbled on the back of envelopes, this task-oriented approach makes more sense than the more passive approach that just lets grief happen. It gives a sense of empowerment and some degree of control. Consider Worden's task list:

1. To accept the reality of the loss

Accepting that this loss has happened can be draining emotional and spiritual work. For example, many people are reluctant to acknowledge the finality of death.

Leaving a bedroom or office intact, some cling to the fantasy of the deceased coming back. A few construct elaborate alternative expectations to deny the painful reality. After her mother's death, one 10-year-old told friends that her mother had gotten tired of raising five children and had gone to live in California but someday would come back, and all would be well. Some grievers, who spent long hours and shouldered great responsibility as caregivers, find it difficult to reorganize their lives following the death of a loved one. To fully recognize a loss requires acknowledging that the loss is permanent. Sometimes a pastor or counselor must help grievers confront the pain created by the realities.

2. To work through to the pain of the loss

As we've mentioned, we live in a "grief-lite" culture. We pop pills to dodge or diffuse pain. What happens when you get a headache? Rather than asking "What is causing this?" you reach for an aspirin (or something stronger). Unfortunately, some misquote Worden, "To work through the pain of the loss." They skip the "to" before "the pain."

An old southern gospel song offers an insight: "No way around it, no way over it, no way under it." We go or grow through this loss. It's our decision.

3. To adjust to environments in which the person is missing

"I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places . . ." We can't forget that place is an essential element in our memories. One widower described his difficulty attending worship services. "My wife sang in the choir for years, always on the front row. When the choir came in,

she would always look for me, then smile. Every Sunday when the service starts and the choir comes in, I miss her smile. . . . some Sundays, I go late to avoid the memories."

4. To relocate emotionally and memorialize the loved one

Where is the person I have loved?

A griever with a confident concept of heaven can find comfort in the blessed hope of reunion, someday. This is undergirded with the clear testimony to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Some, however, do not have this confidence because of circumstances in the deceased's life.

Many grievers find it troublesome to "move on." Many feel powerless to accept the secondary losses (see page 13). Sometimes funeral directors find it necessary to say to a widow at her husband's grave, or parents at a child's grave, "It's time to leave the cemetery." A widow or widower or a parent cannot stay in the cemetery. How many have stayed behind in "emotional" cemeteries, deep in the crevices of the heart?

For me, one of the most moving passages in the Old Testament is the Genesis account of the death of Sarah: "Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her" (Gen. 23:2). What was it like for Abraham those first nights after having slept with Sarah for more than a century? Yet Abraham did not pitch a tent over Sarah's grave. Rather, the Scriptures report, "And Abraham *stood up"* (v. 3, KJV, emphasis added).

After years of working with grieving persons, I am convinced that no one "gets over it." This loss is a permanent fixture in the typography of the landscape of the soul. Over time, with the support of people in a community of faith, individuals can rise up and with God's help integrate the loss into their life narratives. The loss becomes one theme but not the dominant theme in their life story. They are no longer paralyzed by the loss.

Some pastors and leaders use the word "recover" when talking about grief. This is ill advised because in too many minds "recovery" = "get over." Grievers will never "get over" their loss. They can, in time, with God's gracious, compassionate kindness—and the help of family, friends, and neighbors—integrate that loss into the "batter" of

life. As a child I loved to watch my mother bake cakes (I got to lick the bowl). One thing that fascinated me was when she made red velvet cake on Saturdays. My mother often handed me the small bottle of red dye and said, "Shake in a few drops." After I did, my mother thoroughly "beat" those tiny drops into the batter until the batter became "red velvet."

Healthy grievers blend a loss into the batter of their lives, and they find ways to continue to cherish the memory of their loved one.

ADVICE FOR LEADER CARE FOR THE GRIEVING

1. Be a companion. Grieving persons need companions for the path and trail guides.[5] I have a friend who is taking off work for six months to hike the Appalachian Trail. He is reading every account and talking to as many Appalachians as possible. I am trying to be supportive by clipping articles I read about the trail. However, there is a one difference—I do not have Appalachian Trail dirt or mud on my boots. I have not "been there, done that." I like the Spanish word *compañero* or *acompaña*—"one who accompanies." The effectiveness of grief sharing is rarely the teaching but rather the supportive interaction of the path sharers.

2. Acknowledge the secondary losses. Secondary losses include the loss of a sexual partner, a second income, the one who knew how to "fix" the leaking faucet, the one who encouraged, the one who kept up the social connections with other persons, and so on. Coming home to an empty house, cooking for one, eating alone, and praying alone are secondary losses that can be spiritually troubling.

3. Help the griever refocus the horizon. "How can I live without him or her for the rest of my life?" "The rest of my life" can be a significant portion of time. Help the griever focus on one day's portion of the horizon. The future comes one day at a time (sometimes in one hour segments).

4. Listen all the way to the end of the griever's sentences. Although you are busy and this narrative sounds like ones you've heard before, give this griever your attention. It's tempting to assume you know where the sentences are going. Jesus' experience with the woman at the well is significant insight into Jesus' interruptibility. John

reports, "Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman" (John 4:27). Jesus was not simply talking but also listening. Because Jesus listened, it became a life-changing moment, not only for the woman but for the villagers as well.

5. Warn about numbing behaviors. Many grievers want something to numb or diffuse the pain. Many pastors and facilitators are alert to the dangers of alcohol or drugs. But what about the person who dodges his or her pain by overworking or overeating? An addictive behavior can be anything that helps us escape the pain. It's no surprise that sex or pornography is increasingly used to take the edge off grief discomforts.

6. Ask, "Who is offering you advice?" Grievers may be overwhelmed sorting through conflicting advice. Some grievers feel an obligation to accept advice. That's why there is wisdom in urging grievers not to make any major decisions for a year.

7. Pray for/pray with this griever. Don't just use the cliché, "I will pray for you." Ask, "How can I pray for you?" Pray for the griever now in his or her presence.

8. Know resources for referral. Remember that for some widows or widowers, joint bank accounts can be frozen, credit cards discontinued, and so on. Remember that the cost of counseling care may be prohibitive. Where in your community of faith or your social community can an individual find help through your referral?

9. Take seriously any threat to harm anyone. You may want to make a covenant with the individual: While you are counseling with me or in this mutual-care grief group, you will not do anything violent to anyone—including yourself.

10. Anoint. James says, "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. . . . Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:13-14). While grief is not an illness, it can trigger illness. The Early Church did not have our sophisticated medical system, but it was never stingy with anointing oil.

11. Believe in a future for this individual. In the Old Testament, the man who rescued the prophet Jeremiah from sure death in a cistern was concerned about his own future. "The word of the LORD

came to [Jeremiah]: 'Go and tell Ebed-Melech the Cushite'" that despite the chaos that would be the fate of Jerusalem at the hand of the Babylonians, "I will rescue you on that day . . . ; you will not be handed over to those you fear. I will save you" (Jer. 39:16-18). In the early days of loss, many grievers are overwhelmed by fears.

Your experience as a trail scout with others will put you in a place to companion this individual. You are in the unique position to take a sliver of hope in the future and place it in the palm of the hand of this griever. As pastor, counselor, or group facilitator you may have to squeeze the fingers of the griever around that sliver. The God who rescued a eunuch four millennia ago will rescue this individual. The words of Jeremiah come to mind, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (29:11).

Consider Linda's story. Life dumped on Linda. Her son died with AIDS. Her husband left her. Because she had been absent so much from work to care for her son, Linda lost her job. Because she lost her job, she soon lost her home. Those around Linda marveled, as she seemed to maintain a positive attitude and outlook on life.

"How can you manage to be so positive?" Linda's pastor asked.

"O pastor, every morning I vote."

"What?"

"Every morning when I wake up, I take a vote. 'All in favor of getting out of bed say, "Aye." Those opposed, "Nay." The motion carries. Get out of bed!' Then in the bathroom I take a second vote. 'All in favor of this being a good day say, "Aye." Those opposed, "Nay." The motion carries again. This will be a good day.'"

Linda could have pulled the covers over her head and lamented the unfairness of life. Rather, by partnering with God, she lived with her loses.

The great promise was seen by Isaiah: "The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame" (Isa. 58:11).

Sometimes a pastor, counselor, or facilitator must initially believe that promise for the griever.

Let God use you to make a difference in a griever's life.

NOTES

1. Victoria Alexander, *Words I Never Thought to Speak: Stories of Life in the Wake of Suicide* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 9.

2. Del Jones, "Burger King CEO Hopes to Help by Sharing His Grief," *USA Today,* 14 November 2001, 1B.

3. Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 111.

4. William J. Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner,* 3d ed. (New York: Springer, 2002), 47.

5. Alan D. Wolfelt, "Companioning Versus Treating: Beyond the Medical Model of Bereavement Caregiving: Part 3," *The Forum* 24, no. 6 (November/December 1998): 3, 15.

A. Essentials for Grievers

The following touch points are designed as an overview of concepts that will help pastors build bridges with the bereaving. Most of these things you already know, but it may be a helpful resource for reviewing.

Pastors may also find these touch points helpful in doing "grief education" in a local congregation. Sometimes conflicts arise because members of a congregation do not understand a pastor's philosophy on grief care. The touch points might provide a wonderful resource for a prolonged conversation with a church board about how grief is shared in a local church. To be honest it may take time for a group of laity to "warm up" to the topic, but such a discussion could be valuable to the life of a congregation that, sooner or later, will be touched by grief.

Periodically, a pastor should spend some time reviewing these touch points and auditing his or her own servant care. What is it that I do well? What are some areas in which I could be more effective and more compassionate? These days there are lots of demands on a pastor's time, but few are more important than "being present" to the bereaving.

A pastor should, from time to time, preach about the ministry of grief sharing. Some of these touch points would be helpful in developing such a message, whether in a sermon format or perhaps a teaching format in a prayer meeting or workshop.

These touch points could be used to guide discussions as new staff members join the staff of a church, especially those with little previous exposure to dying, death, and bereavement.

Three essential things to remember

- Find words for the loss.
- Say the words aloud.
- Know that the words have been heard.

—Victoria Alexander[1]

"As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10).

"Grieving is a journey that teaches us how to love in a new way now that our loved one is no longer with us.

"Consciously remembering those who have died is the key that opens our hearts, that allows us to love them in new ways."

—Thomas Attig[2]

Steps toward grief resolution

- Helping the bereaved to admit that the loss has taken place and is final
- Helping the bereaved to experience and express all range of emotions, deep feelings, and private thoughts, including the pleasant and the unpleasant ones, as related to loss
- Helping the bereaved to release the lost object or deceased person by letting go, setting free, and saying good-bye
- Helping the bereaved to reinvest the mental and emotional energy consumed earlier in unsuccessful resolution of grief in new relationships, endeavors, people, and projects

—Naji Abi-Hashem[3]

The goal of grief counseling

To help the bereaved

- accommodate the loss
- complete the mourning process
- receive adequate nurture and support
- make necessary adjustments
- return to a certain degree of normal functioning

"The goal is to help the bereaved transform, reshape, reframe, and reinterpret the former relationship by giving loss a new value, place, and meaning.

"The purpose of grief counseling is not to bring the bereaved to a *griefless* state. That is not actually possible.

"Grieflessness is not a human condition.

"It is essential to allow the bereaved to move through the mourning process at their own pace and in their own style."

—Naji Abi-Hashem[4]

Four roles of grief for a congregation

- To accept the reality of the loss
- To give expression to the pain of the separation
- To begin to build a cherishable memory
- To experience the support of a community of persons gathered together to affirm the worth of the deceased and to assure the bereaved of available support

—Denman Dewey[5]

Obstacles that block grief resolution

- Persistent longing for the lost object/person
- Overidentification with the deceased
- Inability to cry or rage at the loss
- Misdirected anger or ambivalence toward the deceased
- Interlocking grief reactions due to previous losses
- Covert contacts with the deceased
- Unrevealed secrets and unfinished business
- Lack of social support
- Reinforcement from others to remain grief stricken

—F. T. Melges and D. DeMaso[6]

Factors in complicated mourning

- Recognize the loss.
  Acknowledge the death.
  Understand the death.
- React to the separation.
  Experience the pain.
  Feel, identify, accept, and give some form of expression to all the psychological reactions to the loss.
- Recollect and reexperience the deceased and the relationship.
  Review and remember realistically.
  Revive and reexperience the feelings.
- Relinquish the old attachments to the deceased and the old assumptive world.

- Readjust to move adaptively into the new world without forgetting the old.
  - Revise the old assumptive world.
  - Develop a new relationship with the deceased.
  - Adopt new ways of being in the world.
  - Form a new identity.
- Reinvest.

—Therese A. Rando[7]

Four primary tasks for bereaving

- To satisfy bodily needs and minimize physical distress in ways that are consistent with other values
- To maximize psychological security, autonomy, and richness in living
- To sustain and enhance those interpersonal attachments significant to the person concerned and to address the social implications of bereaving
- To identify, develop, or reaffirm social sources of spiritual energy and in so doing to foster hope

—adapted from Charles A. Corr[8]

NOTES

1. Victoria Alexander, *Words I Never Thought to Speak: Stories of Life in the Wake of Suicide* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 9.

2. Thomas Attig, *The Heart of Grief: Death and Search for Lasting Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27.

3. Naji Abi-Hashem, "Grief, Loss, and Bereavement: An Overview," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 18, no. 4 (1999): 321.

4. Ibid.

5. Denman Dewey, "When a Congregation Cares: Organizing Ministry to the Bereaved," *Death Studies* 12 (1988): 123-35.

6. F. T. Melges and D. DeMaso, "Grief-resolution Therapy: Re-living, Revising, and Revisiting," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 34 (1980): 51-61.

7. Therese A. Rando, "The Increasing Prevalence of Complicated Mourning: The Onslaught Is Just Beginning," *Omega* 26 (1992-93): 45.

8. Charles A. Corr, "A Task-based Approach to Coping with Dying," in *The Path Ahead,* ed. Lynne Ann DeSpelder and Albert Lee Strickland (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing, 1995), 306.

B. Essentials for Grief Ministry to Children

Pastors and families face special challenges when helping young persons work through grief. Following are some tips and insights for guiding children and adolescents in the grieving process.

WHEN IT COMES TO GRIEF, CHILDREN SHOULD BE SEEN AND HEARD

"Children of all ages, alert to the world around them, know much more than we realize about death and dying. They respond to and understand their knowledge in unique ways." —Phyllis Silverman[1]

"Children have minds. They have imaginations. If they are told the truth in a loving and caring way, and if they are allowed to express their grief, they are capable of accepting even the most painful and devastating losses that life has to offer." —Helen Fitzgerald[2]

A developmental framework for children in grief

Under age 2	Have little understanding of death but do sense change in environment and security.
Ages 2-6	Display magical thinking: "When will they come home?"
Ages 6-9	Begin to comprehend the finality of death but often regress to magical thinking.
Ages 9-10	Acquire a more mature understanding of death and begin to appreciate its irreversibility.
Ages 11-14	Experience a budding sense of invincibility, which filters death.

Primary goals for a child griever

- Allow the child to put the event(s) into perspective.
- Allow the child to make sense of the confusion.

- Help the child begin to develop an understanding about death in general.

—Krietemeyer and Heiney[3]

Tasks facing a child in grief

- Understanding that someone has died
- Protecting the self and significant others
- Accepting and emotionally acknowledging the loss
- Bearing the pain
- Exploring and reevaluating the relationship with the deceased
- Coping with the future

—Baker, Sedney, and Gross[4]

Three issues for grieving children

- Did I cause it (death or some other loss)?
- Is it going to happen to me?
- Who is going to take care of me?

—J. William Worden[5]

Ways to be present to a grieving child

- Stop what you are doing.
- Look at the child, and listen with your eyes and ears.
- Honor the child's questions.
- Answer accurately.
- Assure the child that an adult will protect him or her.
- Avoid euphemisms: "She's asleep . . ."

"Ask your child if she is hearing any words she doesn't understand." —Helen Fitzgerald[6]

- Let a child's curiosity guide the discussion.

"No one procedure or formula will fit all children, either at the time of death or during the months that follow. Be patient, flexible and adjust to individual needs." —Alan D. Wolfelt[7]

- Ask: How much does this child want/need to know?
- Pay special attention to a child juggling multiple traumas and losses.
- Value the child's faith wonderings.
- Be alert to the sensitive child.
- Be alert to the child "taking care" of a grieving adult.
- Remember that children grieve intermittently.
- Acknowledge gaps in a child's memory.

"Children sometimes cope with loss by selectively remembering, or by reconstructing a reality in a more desirable and comfortable way." —Lynn DeSpelder and Albert Lee Strickland[8]

- Remember that children may "play" their way through bereaving.
- As much as possible maintain routines.
- Find a way creatively to commemorate the loss.

"Ask your child how she wants to remember her loved one who has died, and then help her to find ways to do this."

—Theresa Huntley[9]

- Include the child in rituals.

Ways to help a child commemorate a death

- Making a memory or treasure box
- Drawing pictures
- Having the child write a story or poem
- Planting a tree or bush
- Donating a book to the library
- Wearing an item of clothing or jewelry
- Creating a scrapbook
- Making a favorite meal
- Visiting the grave or scattering area

NOTES

1. Phyllis Rolfe Silverman, *Never Too Young to Know: Death in Children's Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 234.

2. Helen Fitzgerald, *The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide* (New York: Fireside Books, 1992), 193-94.

3. B. Krietemeyer and S. P. Heiney, "Storytelling As a Therapeutic Technique in Group for School-Age Oncology Patients," *Children's Health Care* 21 (1992): 14-20.

4. John E. Baker, Mary Ann Sedney, and Esther Gross, "Psychological Tasks for Bereaved Children," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 62, no. 1 (1992): 105-16.

5. J. William Worden, "Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies" (presentation at concurrent session, Fifth International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society, Washington, D.C., 26 June 1997).

6. Fitzgerald, *The Grieving Child,* 44.

7. Alan D. Wolfelt, *Helping Children Cope with Grief* (Batesville, Ind.: Batesville Management Company, 1992), 5.

8. Lynn DeSpelder and Albert Lee Strickland, *The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002), 361.

9. Theresa Huntley, *When Your Child Loses a Loved One* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001), 49.

C. Essentials for Grief Ministry to Adolescents

An adolescent's first encounter with grief can be a life-shaping event. Sooner or later a teen will die in your church or community and teens in your congregation will be impacted. Or the teens will be impacted by the death of a youth leader or parent. I have prepared these notes to help you. How can you use them?

1. You can use this material to create a sermon addressing the death.
2. You can use this material for leading discussions with a youth minister or with those individuals who work with your teens. Do not assume that a youth minister has any preparation for dealing with an adolescent's death or grief. After a new youth minister or leader has come on board, spend some time with him or her talking about how your congregation can effectively minister to grieving teens.
3. Benjamin Franklin said, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Before that death happens, teach from this outline. Equip your congregation before the next school yard shooting or tragedy in your community.

WHEN IT COMES TO GRIEF, ADOLESCENTS SHOULD BE SEEN AND HEARD

"A special challenge for many bereaved adolescents is their need not to feel out of control and not to embarrass themselves in front of their peers." —Charles A. Corr[1]

"Adolescents who are unwilling to talk to parents, counselors, or other adults may find it more congenial to address their death-related concerns in the context of a support group populated by peers with similar experiences. By establishing a community of bereaved peers, groups of this sort dispel the stigma of being 'different' or marked by a death." —Charles A. Corr[2]

"Core issues" for adolescents

- The predictability of events
- Development of self-image
- Belonging
- A sense of fairness and justice
- Mastery and control

—J. William Worden[3]

Most common feelings discussed by grieving adolescents

- Sadness about having to cope with the actual loss of a relationship
- Feelings of excessive guilt regarding activities or deeds they wish they had or had not done with the deceased
- Anger at being left without the deceased
- Not having a chance to say good-bye
- Feeling of responsibility, that maybe if they had done something different, the person would still be with them
- Concern that the same thing may happen to them
- Overidentification with the deceased in order to maintain continuity of presence

—Beverly Raphael[4]

"Families do have a critical responsibility. But it is a responsibility shared with other individuals and organizations, such as hospices, schools, and faith communities, as well as the community at large. In times of significant loss, it is important to remember that the ability of family members to support one another can be limited."

—Kenneth Doka[5]

In assessing the impact of the death of a loved one on an adolescent

- Consider the adolescent's role in the family system or peer group before and after the death.
- Consider the nature of the relationship lost.
- Consider the remaining social and familial support network.

- Consider the adolescent's psychological maturity and coping skills at the time of the death.

—Mufson, Moreau, Weissman, and Klerman[6]

"Red flag" warning behaviors

- Suicidal thoughts or actions
- Chronic depression, sleeping difficulties, and low self-esteem
- Isolation from family and friends
- Academic failure or overachievement
- Dramatic change in personality or attitude
- Eating disorders
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Fighting or legal troubles
- Inappropriate sexual behaviors

—Alan D. Wolfelt[7]

Primary goals for an adolescent griever

- Allow the adolescent to put the event(s) into perspective.
- Allow the adolescent to make sense of the confusion.
- Help the adolescent begin to develop an understanding about death in general.

—Krietemeyer and Heiney[8]

Ask *to whom* is the adolescent listening?

- Parent
- Counselor
- Peers
- Other pastor or youth minister/leader
- Teacher at school
- Someone in an Internet chat room

"Teenagers are fascinated with death and often spend time fantasizing about their own deaths, often to the dismay of parents."

—Helen Fitzgerald[9]

Ways to be present to a grieving adolescent

- Be available.

- Listen; don't lecture.
- Know the dangers of the "Big Man/Big Woman" Syndrome.
- Learn how to be helpful as an adolescent defines "helpful."
- Watch what you say.
- Do something practical.
- Remember the adolescent on special days.
- Stay in touch.
- Be alert to warning signals that an adolescent needs help.

—Victor Parachin[10]

- Answer accurately.
- Recognize "delay" in grieving.
- Make a place for the memory of the deceased loved one/friend in celebrating special events.

Guidelines for adults communicating about death with adolescents

- Take the lead in heightened awareness of an adolescent's concerns about death and in openness in discussing whatever he or she wishes to explore.
- Listen actively and perceptively, with special attention to the feelings that appear to underlie what the adolescent is saying.
- Accept the adolescent's feelings as real, important, and normal.
- Use supportive responses that reflect acceptance and understanding of what the adolescent is trying to say.
- Project a belief in the worth of the adolescent by resisting the temptation to solve his or her problems and by summoning an effort to help the adolescent find his or her own solutions.
- Take time to enjoy the company of the adolescent and to provide frequent opportunities for talking together.

—J. N. McNeil[11]

- Pray for and pray with the adolescent.

- Remember the grieving adolescent may numb himself or herself sexually.
- Help the adolescent find ways to commemorate his or her friend or loved one.
- Remember, the adolescent may be grieving the loss of what he or she had hoped to share in the future with the deceased.

"Bereaved adolescents may face anew their grief as their development proceeds from one developmental level to the next. This is the 'recursive aspect' of grief." —David E. Balk[12]

Critical questions to ask an adolescent griever

- Has anyone in your family died before? Who was it?
- How was the deceased important to you?
- What did this person mean to your family?
- What did you like doing with this person?
- What did you *not* like about this person?

—Allen Levine and Amanda L. Sutton[13]

Religious concerns

"Spiritual manifestations take such forms as a crisis in faith, a search for meaning, and doubt about the importance of anything."

—David E. Balk[14]

- Do you believe in God?
- Where do you think your loved one/friend went when he or she died?
- If there is a heaven, what is it like?
- What happens when someone dies?
- Will you see your loved one again?
- What did your loved one teach you?
- What gifts/talents would you like to pursue in your loved one's honor?
- Is there anything you didn't get a chance to say?

—Allen Levine and Amanda L. Sutton[15]

Questions adolescents often ask

- Survivor's guilt: Why did my sibling die and not me?
- If I am like my sibling, will my parents love me more?
- Am I "good enough" to take away my parents' grief?

—Allen Levine[16]

Family factors affecting siblings during illness and grief

- Do parents feel/believe the "wrong" child died?
- Are relatives focusing on the parents and overlooking this teen?
- Do the parents fear that something could happen to this adolescent child?
- Are the parents available for this grieving teen?
- Is there tension in the parents' marriage?
- How is the stepparent (if applicable) helping the adolescent grieve?

—Allen Levine[17]

The deceased peer does not have to be personally known—to activate the reality within an adolescent. Death has struck too close for comfort. —Harold Ivan Smith

Building a bridge into an adolescent's grief

- Find practical ways to reach out to this adolescent.
- Give the teen a tape or favorite CD.
- Take the adolescent for pizza (to a restaurant that he or she chooses).
- Rent a movie or give the teen a gift certificate for a video store.

Remembering and honoring a friend's life

An adolescent can honor by

- visiting the cemetery
- reading the friend's favorite poem or listening to his or her favorite music

- planting a tree
- visiting the family or getting together with other friends
- attending the rituals
- wearing a keepsake, an article of clothing, or a piece of jewelry
- remembering the friend on his or her birthday or a special day

—Grollman and Malikow[18]

NOTES

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14. Balk, *Living with Grief: Children, Adolescents, and Loss,* 39.
15. Levine, "Breaking the Silence."
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Earl A. Grollman and Max Malikow, *Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 56.