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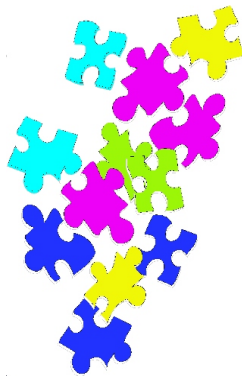


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On Loss

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Loss is defined as being deprived of, or being without, something one has had and valued, and includes the experiences of separation. Loss is universal and therefore affects everybody. Loss triggers off what has become known as the grief process. In this process, normality has a different meaning. Where we may normally be rational and go about systematically solving our problems, when we experience loss these patterns are disturbed.



If a person does not come to terms with a loss, this could influence his/her future development and mental health. It could affect one's ability to form meaningful relationships or to return to former work habits, etc..

When a grieving person is given the opportunity he will share some innermost fears and doubts. These have to be treated in a sensitive manner. If this does not happen, the person's adjustment could be slowed or damaged.

Children and young people grieve in a different manner to adults and their reactions

can be misinterpreted as misbehavior. This is likely to be punished and thereby causing more damage. For children to grieve, a secure environment and positive relationships are essential. For very young children, the mother figure is very important and when separation relates to her, as it does in foster care, special awareness of the loss is important.

Because children sometimes do not grasp the meaning of the event, due to their immaturity or the difficulties adults have with seeing children tussle with the pain, the grieving tasks may not be completed. This then has profound effects on their behavior as adults.

Finally, when one experiences loss, one grieves. In order to do this successfully it could involve pain. To be able to help people grieve, one has to be familiar with the stages of loss. In foster care work, loss occurs to everybody at some time.

The Stages Of Grieving

Four stages in the grieving process have been commonly identified in the literature. We relate this specifically to a child who is in foster care:

1. Shock and Denial:

At this early stage "the child shows little or no emotion and appears docile". The child may be "perfect", (conforming), with none of the earlier behavioral problems present. This has been described as the honeymoon period. Emotions are shallow and there is a false sense of happiness. The foster child denies anything is wrong and may say he is on a holiday and the parents will come and get him soon.

2. Anger and Protest:

When the child realizes that he is not returning home or to his previous placement, a range of angry reactions against the parents, foster parents, social workers and others associated with the placement become evident. The emotions could include feelings of: rejection, abandonment, anxiety, fear, hostility, worthlessness, humiliation, ..just to cite a few. The child may cry a lot and actually try to get to the lost person (running away). There could be a lot of fighting, doing damage in the foster home, insolence and attack on toys and other objects. When these behaviors are to no avail, the child enters a phase of despair and depression.

3. Despair and Depression:

While the child might still long for the lost person, he is no longer active in taking steps to find him. He begins to build a wall around himself and may not even talk about his



origins. This is the feeling of despair which leads to depression. Here the child will act as if the loss no longer matters. He may lose sleep, lose friends, and interests and may even regress in some behaviors, e.g., bed wetting, thumb-sucking, etc. At advanced stages of depression the child may even build a fantasy world around himself. The reality has become too painful so he creates a place where parents and children live happily.

4. Resolution:

The child finally realizes that the loss is real and perhaps understands the reasons for the placement and begins to cope with it. He seeks out new relationships with the foster parents and his biological parents or siblings. The child will return to more established behavior patterns, seek out old friends, create new friends, engage in hobbies and participate in family life activities.

A Word of Caution:

Remember: it is impossible to predict which sequence a child will actually pass through or indeed whether the will pass through all the stages.

Some stages will occur while others will be missed completely. Different children will move through the grieving process at very different paces. However, if the depression persists for over three months, it may signify some level of disturbance that might require professional help.

