WHAT COMPLICATES GRIEF FOR CHILDREN: A case study

by Linda Goldman

Many mental health professionals have identified unresolved mourning as a condition termed complicated grief: sometimes manifested in prolonged, intensified or unresolved grief that can overwhelm children and possibly produce depression and isolation. Dr. Teresa Rando (2015) clarifies that complicated grief can be manifested in many ways. The Mayo Clinic staff (2015) explains that for certain people, "feelings of loss are debilitating and don't improve even after time passes." When children experience a loss, they begin to work on and process the now well-identified tasks of "normal" grief: (1) understanding (2) grieving (3) commemorating and (4) going on (Sandra Fox, 1988, Worden, 2008).

In complicated grief, other emotional issues such as fear, shock or secrecy can dominate, acting like a wall of ice between the child and his or her grief process. Girls and boys may no longer have direct access to working on and processing these common tasks of grieving as fear may override the grief response. It is as if the traumatic emotional issues have become frozen in the psyche as an impenetrable wall that prevents some kids from accessing underlying grief. Caring adults can help children safely melt down that wall.

Tyler: A case study of issues complicating grief

Seven-year-old Tyler's dad, Joe, was murdered in a street fight while he was at school. Tyler's father had abandoned him at age 2. Joe's visits were infrequent and explosive, with Joe often going into an alcoholic rage of physical and emotional abuse that terrified Tyler and his mother. These outbursts of violence remained silently buried in Tyler after dad's sudden death.

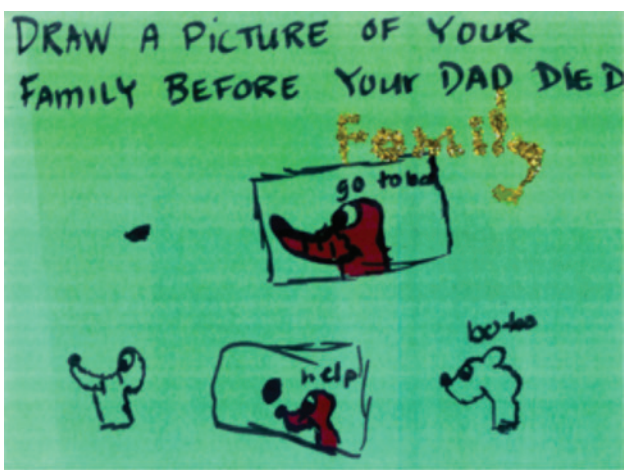
Tyler was referred to counseling because of a history of repeated emotional outbursts in school, inability to stay in the classroom and poor school performance and conduct. He had moved five times and lived with many relatives during his mom's frequent illnesses. Tyler's behaviors fluctuated from rage to helpfulness toward his teachers and friends.

Melting Down Frozen Feelings

Tyler was unable or unwilling to talk about his father's death or his life before that. Projective techniques were helpful in unlocking hidden feelings. Tyler shares his sadness through his picture of life with his family before his dad died with only animal figures; a large figure screaming, "Go to bed!" and a very small figure with a big tear saying, "Help me." His sadness and feelings of being overwhelmed by his dad were represented in the picture below (Goldman, 2002, p. 123).

Tyler was withdrawn in one grief therapy session. He drew a scribble picture and I asked him if he could see something inside and give it a name. He called it a tornado. "What would the tornado say?" I asked. He replied, "Help me!"

Tyler liked to create stories, reproduce them with toy figures and take photographs to share with others. By projecting his feelings onto drawings and written work, Tyler was beginning to safely place them outside of himself. (Goldman, 2002, p. 124)



The Tyler Contract

Specific single-goal behavioral contracts were made with Tyler. The following was one of our first contracts:

I agree to raise my hand in math class when I want to say something for one week. If I get frustrated I can tell . . .

- My teacher
- Linda
- The guidance counselor
- My journal

I will get the treat of my choice at the snack bar from Linda at the end of the week.

Children may need to repeat back in their own words the terms of the contract to be sure they understand what they are agreeing to. Tyler's math teacher reported that there was a significant improvement in his ability to raise his hand in class. When he did, she created a meaningful reward for this behavior.

Dissolving Anger

Tyler shared with me his frustration and anger at school. "I hate my coach. I'd like to sock him!" he shouted over and over. "I wish I was a superhero." Then he stopped talking, drew a big superhero, and wrote, "If I was a superhero I would use my power to make people be good - be nice - and hypnotize the bad people and make the sun stop." He said he felt better.

Tyler's angry outbursts toward children and adults, profanity and impulsivity when storming out of uncomfortable situations are examples of projected anger. Children can learn to vent anger safely without hurting themselves or others. They can create clay figures, dialogue their anger with them or even choose to destroy the figures. Tyler made clay figures of his dad and himself, explaining his father was yelling at him to go to bed. "GO AWAY!" he screamed as he battered the father figure until it was unrecognizable. "I wish you were dead!"

Tyler was furious at the school principal for suspending him because he had walked out of class. He knew it was safe to rip up magazines in my office, and soon felt a sense of release from some anger and calmed enough to talk about what happened. "I had to leave the classroom! My math was too hard. I couldn't do it and everyone knew." We picked up the paper, rounded the scraps into balls and tried to make baskets as we threw them away.

A punching bag can be a safe means to express anger. Tyler explained his teacher forced him to sit on the bench at recess because he was fighting with Malcolm. He was enraged; sure it was Malcolm's fault. He began hitting the punching bag in therapy as he screamed, "I hate your guts." Then he drew Malcolm's face and taped it to the punching bag. Tyler safely identified his anger and vented it without hurting anyone. He realized he could express anger by punching a pillow at home, shouting in the shower, talking into a tape recorder, writing in a journal or blowing up a paper bag and popping it.

Outcome of Tyler's Case

A team conference was held at Tyler's school to evaluate school performance, behavior and possible specialized placement to meet Tyler's specific needs. The team consisted of the principal, guidance counselor, teacher, school nurse, psychologist, Tyler's mom and me. Each person offered his or her assessment. This team's eventual decision was a special placement for Tyler. Other recommendations included evaluations to determine if medication or other resources were needed. Exercise and sports were advised. Resources were suggested such as "A Terrible Thing Happened" (Holmes, 2000), "After a Murder" (Dougy Center, 2002), "The Boy Who Didn't Want to Be Sad" (Goldblatt, 2004), "Worry Busters" (Weaver, 2011) and "Cool Down and Work Through Anger" (Meiners, 2010).

I remained a consultant to the new school personnel and a support for his mom, as the new school services provided Tyler with daily counseling, small classes and many academic and therapeutic resources. Six months later, Tyler was chosen as the "student of the month." His outbursts of rage had decreased, and he was more communicative with teachers and classmates.

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Recommendations for Grief Counseling

1. Common signs of complicated grief may become red flags indicating needed help, and are characterized by their increase in frequency, intensity and duration. In Tyler's case, the following signs were present:

- Outbursts of aggressiveness and rage
- Extreme feelings of unworthiness and despair
- Nightmares and bedwetting
- Conflicted relationship with father
- Poor grades, impulsivity and inability to concentrate

Other possible signs include poor eating habits, difficulties in relationships, isolation and acting as if nothing happened. Tyler's history of previous multiple losses and sudden, traumatic death are significant, related factors.

2. Memory work is a useful tool for grieving kids suffering with complex grief issues. It provides a creative outlet to help remember a person, release past memories and discharge pain. Memory books can be interactive story and workbooks that allow children to express feelings and thoughts (Goldman, "Children Also Grieve," 2005, "Lucy Lets Go," 2014). Examples of pages include:

• If you could see your loved one more time, what would you say?
• If you could change one thing or do one thing over, what would it be?
• Draw what your family was like before your loved one died and after.
• Write a letter to your loved one. Tell him or her how you feel.
• List or draw your top five worries.
(Adapted from Goldman, "Life and Loss," 3rd ed. 2014, p. 74)

Memory boxes and memory tables provide places to store treasured items of a loved one. Memory boxes can be made from painted shoeboxes decorated to house precious belongings. A special memory table can be displayed in bedrooms, classrooms or grief support groups with meaningful pictures and objects a child has chosen.

Photographs, videos and tape recordings are concrete ways to stimulate visual and auditory memories of a loved one. A photo album of pictures chosen by kids, "My Life," creates important times and events and motivates discussion.

3. Projective techniques such as storytelling, drawing, clay, anger props and toys offer ways to safely project difficult feelings and can help release frozen feelings.

4. Professional help may be needed when signs of complex issues become a red flag. Evaluations, therapy, school team conferences and possible referrals or placement can facilitate a child's grief process.

Summary

Tyler's case study illustrates several of the complexities involved with children's grief. His history includes challenging issues such as the sudden, traumatic murder of dad, social stigma of homicide, multiple losses from dad's abandonment and death, numerous residences, mom's frequent illnesses and a conflicted relationship with the deceased. His rage at his father was the beginning of the meltdown process. By identifying and separating his feelings through projective techniques and memory work, he was able to move forward with grieving.

Tyler's new academic environment provided daily services for multi-faceted, complex grief issues. Grief therapy served as a bridge to help discover, recognize and treat the severe underlying problems that needed to be acknowledged and addressed in a case like Tyler's, and to eventually seek out and establish the best possible environment to promote healing.

Categories contributing to complexities in grief

Life events such as suicide, homicide, terrorism, school shootings and abuse often create complex grief issues. "Inability to discuss these topics openly can create an atmosphere of fear, isolation and loneliness that can be far more damaging than the actual death of a loved one (Goldman, 2002, p. 13)." The following are categories that contribute to complicated grief:

• Sudden or traumatic death (murder, suicide, etc.) can create an unstable environment producing a frozen state of overwhelming feelings, as a child may think, "If my dad can be murdered walking down the street, so can I."

• Social stigma of death (AIDS, suicide, homicide, etc.) can possibly cause isolation, repressed feelings and prolonged grief. Isabella's family kept secret her brother's death by drug overdose. She felt unable to tell friends that her brother died without saying how he died.

• Multiple, recurring losses may produce fears of abandonment and self-doubt. Sara's dad abandoned her at age 4. At 8, mom was killed in a car accident. Sara was immediately sent to live with an aunt. She began experiencing excessive nightmares and fears.

• Past relationship to the deceased can impact a child, especially if abused or neglected. Secret feelings of relief or anger may emerge and feel shameful. Sophia could feel relieved that her uncle who sexually abused her died, yet too ashamed or afraid to share.

• The grief process of the caretaking adult serves as a model for children and may impact them. Matt has never seen his father cry over mom's death. He felt he must "act like a man" and not cry like Dad. If adults don't openly express feelings, children may not feel permitted to do so.(Adapted from Goldman, "Breaking the Silence," 2nd Ed., p. 8-9).

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