

Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.

We Mourn Endings At Any Age

Because things are always in the process of change, grief is inevitable. Proceeding through life creates a sense of loss, because something must be left behind. Consequently, grief arises whenever we move, change careers, or retire and leave the workforce altogether. We mourn endings such as when we grow up and leave home, when friendships cease, and when we experience life endings.

Marcie, a client of mine, is a good example: Her dog died six months ago. While telling me about it, she fought back the tears. At one point, she expressed disgust with herself, saying, "I should be over this by now. It's high time I moved on!"

Marcie's response is no surprise. She grew up being told to "tough it out," "be strong," "get over it." Understandably, suffering from grief seemed wrong to her. According to her thinking, life should go on as usual with her stamina intact. I assured Marcie that grieving isn't a sign of weakness, and it certainly can't be hurried. To heal, we must fully go through the grieving process—not around it.

Grieving is a natural and normal response to loss. We do ourselves and our children a disservice when we censor or discourage it. Many well-meaning parents seek to spare their children from grief by making light of their disappointments and losses. Therefore, when children express their suffering, parents may listen only halfheartedly, perhaps changing the subject or attempting to lighten the mood.

Some parents ban any discussion whatsoever. I counseled a mother who scolded her son whenever he would mention his father's death. Sad. Censoring or minimizing merely deepens the child's pain, driving it underground. Unexpressed grief cannot be processed or dealt with; therefore, it lingers on, festering in our subconscious and clouding our capacity to relish life.

Giving a child the green light to grieve is a key pathway to healing. Parents are vital to their children's ability to move through their grief. They need to listen each time their child brings up a painful topic. And because grief varies with each person, the grieving period cannot be rushed or controlled. Grief must simply run its course. Listening should entail tuning in to the child's pain while conveying, "Hey, I'm with you—you're not alone. I understand and I know it hurts." This brand of listening includes the heart, not just the ears.

I am reminded of the time my granddaughter, Olivia, was weaned from her bottle. As usual for her age group, she was very attached to it. One day, it broke, which left her utterly devastated. I recall her grieving several days over that loss. It would be easy to assume that Olivia was making

too much of it, feeling sad about her bottle for far too long. This just isn't so. We have to appreciate that weaning is a major transition that entails grief.

Hey, take away our TV, cell phone, cigarettes, plastic bags, and favorite food, and see what happens to our psychological well-being.

Children heal when they sense patience and understanding emanating from their parents. In Olivia's case, she received a comforting response every time she expressed her sadness. The message of empathy was expressed like this: "I know Olivia. That bottle was special to you, wasn't it?" Interestingly, whenever Olivia received such a response, she seemed satisfied and would go on about her business.

We parents often have the misguided notion that if we make light of a loss, our children will follow suit, believing they will get over it more quickly. Strangely, just the opposite occurs. Even as adults, when someone conveys that our pain matters, we feel consoled and it is then—at that point—that moving on becomes easier.

So how can we help children heal from loss? Give them all the time they need to put words to their pain. Remain patient as they grieve minor and major losses such as death, divorce and the loss of an object that carries special meaning.

Children need to be allowed to feel sad as they grieve life's disappointments, such as when things don't turn out as anticipated, when denied the opportunity to play on a team, when promises are broken, and when friends betray them. It's important to be sensitive to children's many transitions, such as puberty, starting a new class, changing schools, and graduating.

We improve our children's chances of being emotionally healthy when we appreciate, nurture and allow them to feel their pain.

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