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COMMON MYTHS ABOUT GRIEF

Myths often fill in the gaps where we find ourselves without answers or lack true understanding about a social phenomenon. Myths are rooted in folklore, culture, and breakdowns in communication and knowledge between generations. Death—the cessation of life that all living things will undergo—became abnormalized over the past 150 years in the USA. As a result, our response to death and grief is often ineffective, misguided, and makes this difficult time of life even harder. Unfortunately, children experience the brunt of this burden when looking to adults for help.

1 THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

Grief is not a linear process. The five stages of grief, popularized in the 70's by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, are often misunderstood and incorrectly applied. There are many aspects of grief, but there is no singular grief process. Each person grieves differently and uniquely depending on many internal (emotional and psychological) and external (support systems and community) variables. Grief is not a prescribed experience that can be contained to categories or types. Grief is a normal and natural coping response to loss. Grief serves a purpose through the process of making sense of a loss.

2 KIDS ATTENDING FUNERALS

While it is natural to want to “protect” children from the painful reality of death, end of life rituals are vital to a child's understanding of death and a key component of grief and mourning. Funerals are a communal tradition that serves the purpose of transitioning, memorializing, and making meaning after a person's death. Children who are excluded from funerals often are resentful of that decision because it was not their choice.

You can “protect” a child by including them in a funeral. Start by telling them what to expect. Walk them through what they will see, who might come, what people might say, and how people might feel. Children are wonderfully inquisitive and will be curious at the funeral. Answer questions honestly and confess when you don't know the answer.

Many parents find it helpful to have a point person during the funeral. Identify someone you and your child trust to be available if the child wants to take a break or stop participating in the ritual. The majority of children will want to participate. Give kids the facts they need, normalize the experience, and let them know the options available. If they decide they do not want to participate that's okay, too. Just be sure they are making the decision with unbiased facts.

3 TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDS

Grief does not have a timeline. That doesn't mean the intensity of the experience will last forever. It will evolve and reemerge throughout a person's development. Grief becomes more manageable and less intense with support systems and a caring community of family and friends.

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4 CLOSURE

We don't just get over it. We don't just move on. We can't compartmentalize grief by closing the door as if it didn't happen. Closure is a false idea that neglects the fact that grief is a lifelong process. Grief can appear in cycles and present itself again intensely many years after the death. The goal is not closure, but rather integration. Through strengthening our sense of connection to the person who died, having opportunities to share our story, processing the various feelings, and finding ways to continue to keep them in our lives, we are able to continue living a meaningful and healthy life. Compartmentalizing and "closing the door" doesn't work, and in the end will get us into trouble.

5 TELLING CHILDREN SECRETS IS HELPFUL TO PROTECT THEM

Some people die messy deaths. Death can be complicated. However, lies and secrets don't make the death or grief easier. In fact, when the truth finally comes out (and it will), kids will have to grieve the death again because they will have to make sense of it in light of new information. Secrets and lies actually make it harder. Facts, honesty, and a support system make complicated deaths more manageable to grieve.

6 NOT TALKING ABOUT DEATH KEEPS US HAPPY

Humans are social creatures. We thrive off of connection, understanding, and belonging. Not talking about death or grief assumes we can live a compartmentalized life, and ultimately blocks connection and understanding. Silence around death and grief leaves us unprepared for future losses, and also leaves us without the tools we need to establish healthy coping skills, build resilience, and establish a helpful support system.

7 GRIEF IS AN EMOTION

Grief is the compilation of feelings. But, it is also a physical experience that causes fatigue, headaches, bellyaches, and other physical ailments. Grief is an intellectual experience in which we work hard to "wrap our heads" around the fact that someone was here one moment and then gone the next. Grief is also spiritual and forces us to wrestle with questions of "how" and "why" bad things happen. It also prompts us to question the meaning of life. Grief is not just emotional. All four components of grief comprise our response to the loss or death of someone or something we care about. Grief is an experience that touches all parts of what makes us human.

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8 GRIEF IS TRAUMATIC

Trauma has a very clear definition: a self-perceived threat. Many people experience trauma and grief after the death of someone they love. However, grief and trauma are not synonymous.¹ Some expressions of grief may look like or sound like trauma, but that doesn't mean it is necessarily trauma. We need to be careful with labels that influence the self-identity and the perceptions and response of others. Labels can also get in the way of what type of support is provided. So, unless you are a professional, stay clear of words and labels that you don't fully understand.

9 GRIEF CAN BE INAPPROPRIATE

Social constructs create ideas about what is normal, abnormal, complicated, or otherwise. Remember that grief is unique to each person. It is a normal response. Across cultures people grieve in a lot of different ways. In many cultures families dig up their dead (including in Europe), some decorate bones, worship ancestors, wear black for a year, party after the death, while others are somber. What is "normal" is a social construct. If a particular expression of grief is helpful and healthy for a particular community, then it is likely an appropriate response.

10 CHILDREN DON'T GRIEVE

An infant grieves. Starting at birth, a child will grieve the death of a parent. An infant will be clingy and colicky when sensing something is wrong and doesn't smell or see mom. Just because a 2-year-old can't fully articulate his feelings does not mean he is not grieving.

¹ Kaplow, J. B., Howell, K. H., & Layne, C. M. (2014). Do Circumstances of the Death Matter? Identifying Socio-environmental Risks for Grief-Related Psychopathology in Bereaved Youth. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 27*(1), 42-49.