

Trust circles

An exercise to help bereaved young people explore who of those around them they can trust.

Peta Hemmings BA CQSW

Senior Practitioner, Barnardo's Orchard Project, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK

The death of a loved one profoundly undermines our sense of security in the world. Bereavement, whether it is sudden or anticipated, disorganises the known world and everything has to find its place in the new order. The process by which this reorganisation is achieved is complex and often intensely painful and exhausting. In order to be able to start and sustain this necessary work, mourners need to have a secure emotional and psychological base¹ from which they can make exploratory sorties into the unknown territory of their grief, and to which they can return when they need to contemplate their experiences, or retreat and rest. The secure base may be found in the comfort of a warm and loving family, but the mourner also needs to feel safe in the outside world and, more specifically, about sharing thoughts and feelings with other, non-bereaved people.

Bereaved children are acutely aware of how different they are from their non-bereaved peers. They have experienced events and emotions which many of their peers cannot begin to imagine. The work of mourning means that they now need to think through those experiences, both on their own and with others. The dilemma for young children is, who can be trusted both to understand their feelings and respect their need for privacy? They need sensitive people who will give them extra reassurance and comfort. Knowing who those

people are is difficult for them because it requires a maturity of insight beyond their years. The following exercise helps bereaved children (and adults) to resolve this dilemma.

Creating a trust circle

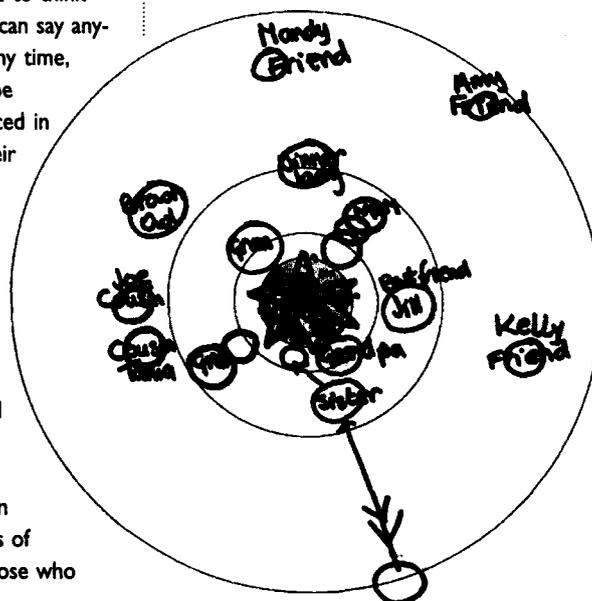
On a large sheet of paper (preferably A3) draw a small circle in the centre and ask the child to think of that circle as being him or herself and decorate it. Some children write their name in it, others use stickers or sequins, or draw and colour a shape.

Another circle is then drawn close to and around that one. The child is asked to think about people to whom he or she can say anything about the bereavement, at any time, safe in the knowledge that it will be understood. These people are placed in this second circle, using either their names or initials to represent them (for some children, symbols or stickers could be more helpful). Another concentric circle is then drawn, slightly wider than the first, for those people to whom some things can be said at any time. A wider, third circle is for people to whom it is only possible to say some things at some times. In this way children learn that there are different sorts of friends and that they need to choose who to trust with what and when.

This very simple exercise has three important functions. Firstly, it creates a picture of the important people in the child's world whilst encouraging him or her to think about their individual qualities and value to the child. Secondly, it can be added to or changed in subsequent sessions and allows the changing nature of relationships to be reviewed and people to be repositioned in the circles. (One child had her elder sister moving across all three circles over the weeks we worked together, according to how treacherously tale-telling or comfortingly supportive she had been the previous week!) Thirdly, it encourages children to develop insight into their need to have trustworthy people around them and encourages them to think before voicing their innermost thoughts, so that they are sharing them with someone who appreciates their value. **BC**

Reference

1. Bowlby J. A Secure Base: Clinical applications of attachment theory. London, UK: Tavistock/Routledge, 1988.



REVIEWS

VIDEO

NO CHANCE TO SAY GOODBYE

Traumatic bereavement and its management

Jo Marcus. Ipswich, UK: Concord Films Council, 1996. £45.00, available for hire £15.00.

The stated aims of this video are to:

- help people understand the reactions to sudden death;
- identify factors that differentiate grief after sudden death from that following expected death;
- enable people to provide relevant help from the earliest stages of grief onward;

- increase awareness of, and mitigate, stresses faced by professionals helping someone through sudden loss.

Support notes accompanying the package indicate it is designed for a wide range of people and that tutors using it are expected to plan their own courses. The notes include information and exercises to supplement the video. The exercises were thought-provoking and would undoubtedly stimulate discussion, although I found some instructions difficult to follow.

Anyone using the video would definitely need the support notes. It begins abruptly with excerpts of interviews with people who were bereaved by sudden death. The lack of introduction left me

totally unclear about what had happened to one of the speakers until towards the end of the film when her initial comments were put into context.

Four different types of sudden death were represented. The bereaved people featured in the video were able to articulate their experiences and feelings very effectively and this left me with a knowledge of some aspects of the effect of sudden death on those four people. Remarks by the bereaved were interspersed with commentary from professionals for which, at times, I could find no purpose. The professional input was incomplete and only touched on a few issues that might arise in the various forms of sudden death covered.

Overall I found the support notes useful, but the video is, perhaps, over-ambitious in attempting to address a number of areas, each of which could give rise to a multitude of issues. The result is a superficial treatment which would not be particularly enlightening to anyone wanting to increase their knowledge or skills, and I did not feel the actual management of traumatic bereavement was very well addressed. However, the video may serve to increase awareness on a basic level; other videos and packs available on this topic seem to focus on only one of the several aspects presented in this package. **BC**

Lyn Franchino
Freelance Therapist and Trainer