

Trust circles

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

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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

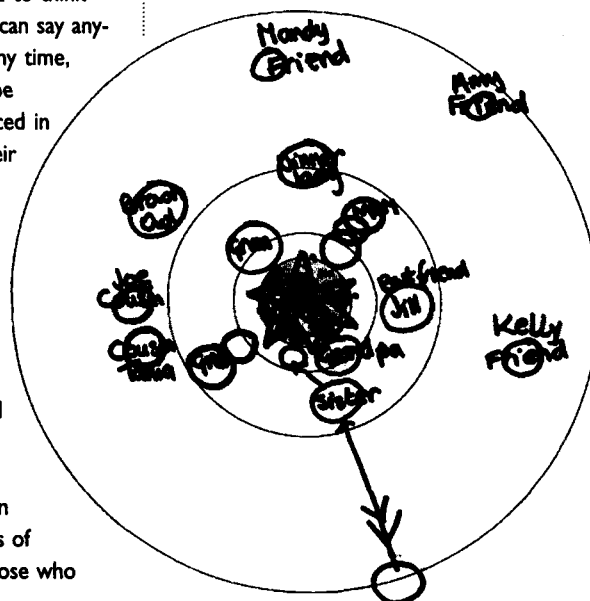
On a large sheet of paper (preferably A3) draw a small circle in the centre and ask the child to think of that circle as being him or herself and decorate it. Some children write their name in it, others use stickers or sequins, or draw and colour a shape.

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

BOOKS

DEATH AND BEREAVEMENT ACROSS CULTURES

Colin Murray Parkes, Pittu Laungani, Bill Young (eds). London, UK: Routledge. £45.00 hb, £14.99 pb.

I never stop wondering at the innumerable ways in which religions, ethnic groups and individuals across the ages conceive death and work through bereavement. One common theme that arises for me, in my own thinking, is the perpetual search for the elusive meaning of life. The present book, which deals with a wide spectrum of rites, rituals and mourning traditions from a vast knowledge base, combines the known and the mysterious and confronts answers with ever-emerging questions without losing sight of the individual story of distress, loss and hope.

The collaborative efforts of the ten contributors, who share with us 'grief narratives' from the major religious as well as from the secular belief systems, eg the Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Islamic and 'secular Humanistic', reflect the fact that there is no one 'pan-human' approach to death. With one voice, they all are adamant that confrontation with death triggers the need to expand our spiritual quest. The editors stress the looming danger in our modern times of losing the 'reverence for the awesome spiritual mysteries of the universe'. Browsing through this book, reflecting on the enormous diversity of the human search for appropriate ways of managing death-related fears and pain, made me realise what is missing from our present therapeutic practices. Although the current repertoire has broadened to include the physical, affective, cognitive and social domains of cure and healing, it still neglects to make space for the spiritual one. Each and every chapter in this unique book reflects the quest for the spiritual as mirrored by the encounter with death.

The well-researched depictions of death rites in both familiar and remote communities seem to be taken from the inside, with an intimate familiarity and care. The genuine descriptions open windows for our curiosity and help us build an attitude of tolerance for beliefs, values and practices which are different from our own. The authors give special attention, and are very sensitive, to parental loss of a child, as well as to the child's loss of a sibling.

Although this book is not meant to

be a handbook of therapeutic interventions, it elaborates on some ways of helping children who have suffered a loss, as well as bereaved adults and those who are dying. The cross-cultural comparisons shed new light on the function of bereavement counselling which seems to be a modern need to replace, or compensate for, lost, indigenous strategies for celebrating life and taking leave of the dead.

The recurrent message of the book is that grief reactions differ greatly within and among societies and can only be understood and respected in cultural context. Cultural prejudices may cause secondary victimisation, by labelling some grieving reactions as pathological. In multi-cultural societies, where this sort of information is vital but not always available, this new book may become an indispensable guide for creating a truly enlightened, supportive and healing environment.

Ofra Aylon
Senior Lecturer

HEAVENLY HURTS Surviving AIDS-related deaths and losses

Sandra Jacoby Klein. Amityville, New York, USA: Baywood Publishing. \$29.95.

Despite its dreadful title – how can pain be 'heavenly' and how can one survive death? – this book has much to commend it. Sandra Jacoby Klein is a marital/family therapist who has, for many years run support groups in California for people bereaved by AIDS. In this book she shares with us a wealth of experience in bringing comfort and support to people whose lives have been touched by this awful disease.

The Californian origins do colour the book and we may blanch at the thought of 'group hugs' and memorial services at which clouds of balloons are released; but we should not close our minds to the fact that, even within non-American cultures, many young people are dissatisfied with the traditions of their seniors and are searching for new ways to cope with death. AIDS is a disease of young people and this fact alone may cause counsellors who are more familiar with the problems of older people to hang back. When, in addition, counsellors are also unfamiliar with the special problems caused by HIV infection and the pre-existing problems of the subcultures in which it tends to appear – gays, immigrants, drug abusers, prostitutes, haemophiliacs and their children – it is hardly surprising if they hesitate to offer help. The book will dispel much of this

ignorance and increase the confidence with which professionals and volunteer counsellors reach out to the friends and families of those who are bereaved by AIDS.

People living with AIDS (PLWAs) have often suffered stigma and rejection. They tend to turn for help to others from the same subculture and mutual support, via groups or the 'buddy system' has proved its worth. Unfortunately, as this book points out, many of the caring people within these subcultures who are running groups or providing befriending services have been multiply bereaved. Some are themselves HIV positive. This is placing an enormous burden on them and it is important for a wider range of professional and voluntary carers to get involved if the support system is not to crumble.

Apart from the title, I have only one serious criticism of this book: it is too loosely organised. Death by AIDS leaves a mountain of complex problems behind it and Klein makes little attempt to organise these into 'bite-sized chunks'. Consequently readers, many of whom can be expected to suffer from the disease themselves, may be overwhelmed by the magnitude and multiplicity of the difficulties. The author has attempted to deal with this level of complexity by compiling check lists and by vivid illustrative examples of individual cases, but these only leave us feeling more submerged. I would like a schema to have been provided, a way of thinking about and analysing the critical issues, to help us understand basic underlying problems and evaluate the various types of counselling and therapy that may be needed.

Colin Murray Parkes
Consultant Psychiatrist

DEATH CUSTOMS.

Lucy Rushton. Hove, East Sussex, UK: Wayland Ltd, 1991. £8.99 hb, £4.99 pb.

This well-produced book for children looks at the customs which surround dying, death and after-life in six of the world's major religions. The text is a mixture of facts and more complex philosophical ideas, and on each page there are splendid coloured photographs.

There are seven short chapters on: philosophy, preparation for death, burial and cremation, happenings after death, judgement, mourning and remembering the dead. The writing style is easy and fairly informal with an attempt to grab the reader's attention in the first paragraph.

I have concerns about some of the writing, for example, that people fear



A Sikh funeral procession from *Death Customs* Photo by J Allen Cash

death 'like a ride on a ghost train'; that death is 'something strange and unknown ... a journey ... this can be frightening.' I am also concerned that some of the facts seem to come from extremes of religious practice, for instance, that Jews are prohibited from eating and drinking wine for the first week after a death, and that 'Orthodox' (Eastern) Christians take the body out of the grave ... and wash the bones in wine ...' One wonders whether these rather obscure practices have a place in a generalist book of this kind and it leads me to doubt the calibre of all other information.

Apparently aimed at the top infants to lower junior age groups, this would seem to be a book most suitable for classroom teaching as much of the information would benefit from interpretation and discussion. From my research *Death Customs* does meet a need as there is very little available at this level, therefore I feel it makes a useful contribution, with the caveat that it is used with care. **BC**

Brenda Freedman
Bereavement Counselling Supervisor

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