The Impact of Grief, Trauma and Ambiguous Loss on Kincare Families and the Professionals that Serve them

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Objectives

1. To identify the different types of losses that affect kincare families
2. To increase knowledge about the impact of grief and loss on kincare families
3. To examine strategies and interventions to best support families
4. To develop awareness of secondary trauma and devote time to self-care
Loss and Trauma

All kin care families have experienced loss, but there are many different types that impact them and can have profound effects such as:

- Separations
- Death
- Trauma
- Ambiguous Loss (Pauline Boss, 2004)
- Intangible Loss (Ken Hardy, 2005)
- Loss of dreams, hopes and ideals
- Multiple and complex losses
- Stigmatized loss

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The Grieving Process

- Children and adults mourn differently.

- Loss of an adult child vs. the loss of a parent.

- Developmental Differences

- Must grieve to recover from loss.
  Blocked grief = blocked recovery.

- Impact of repeated traumatic loss.

- Risk of increased depression, complicated and or prolonged bereavement.

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Kids didn’t like it when adults said…

• “I know how you feel.”
• “It’s been four months now, you should be over it.”
• “You shouldn’t be this angry. Being angry won’t bring your brother back.”
• ”Your mother would be so proud of you for getting on with your life.”
• “You’ll get over it in time.”

Adapted from Fernside Online – Resources for Educators for this compilation. For more information, go to www.fernside.org

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Kids preferred it when adults said...

- “I’m sorry that Tom died.”
- “I know it is hard. It’s OK to cry.”
- “I can’t know how you feel, but I want to help you in any way that I can.”
- “I’m ready to listen when you’re ready to talk.”

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Traumatic Loss

• Death or loss is usually objectively horrifying, frightening, shocking

• Trauma Response / PTSD
  • Re-experiencing
  • Hyperarousal
  • Avoidance / Numbing

• Grief and PTSD symptoms combined
  – Reactions to trauma interfere with mourning
Ambiguous Loss

- Unresolved without clear rituals or responses
- Psychologically present, but physically absent
- Physically present, but psychologically absent, (P. Boss, 2004)
Loss of Dreams, Hopes and Opportunities

- Failed expectations
  - In roles
  - In relationships
- Disappointments
- Interrupted dreams
- Missed opportunities
Stigmatized Loss and Family Secrets

- Meaning and reasons for them
- Being protective of child
- Misconceptions
- Can effect child’s reality testing
- Kid’s sharp antennae
- Sense of betrayal and disruption of trust

How can we respond?
Other losses

• Death of support group member

• Returning child to parents or CPS
Issues for Children

- Impact of separation from parents
- Often they are capsized, upset and derailed
- Behavior becomes disruptive
- Feelings are dysregulated
- Thoughts are confused
- Responses from adults
- Higher rates of ADHD, ODD, PTSD, adjustment and attachment disorders

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Tension between Caregiving and Grieving

How do caregivers attend to their own grief while raising their grandchildren?

- Adaptive Coping
- Stiff upper lip/ John Wayne Stance
- Finding time to grieve
- Putting their own needs on hold
- Fears of opening up the flood gates
- Complicated coping such as substance abuse

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Stressors for Caregivers

- Social isolation
- Lack of collaboration by essential supporting systems
- Complicated family interactions
- Sense of vulnerability both internally and in their communities
- Intergenerational gaps and parenting in today’s society
- Difficulty understanding and managing grandchildren’s difficulties, problems and behavior especially in response to loss
- Physical exhaustion

As a result they are overwhelmed and burdened by the complexity of navigating these multiple issues and systems. Higher rates of depression, anxiety and isolation.

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Issues for Birth Parents

Struggling with their own losses which are often multiple and complex

Issues that interfere with their ability to care for children:
- Mental health problems
- Substance abuse
- Incarceration
- Health issues

Challenges with:
- Communication
- Boundaries
- Authority

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Kincare Triad

- The dynamic interplay between the caregiver, birth parent and child
- Guilt, fear and shifts of identity
- Family secrets

All three members of the triad are coping with numerous disruptions that create major changes in life plans and expectations.

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Families Need:

• Safety and stabilization
• Trauma informed and culturally competent care
• Identification and linkage to evidence based treatments
• Strength based approaches
• Cross-pollination of services across systems
Importance of:

- Psycho-education
- Improving family communication, clarification of roles and boundaries
- Destigmatizing counseling and therapy
- Increased access to comprehensive, culturally sensitive evaluation and assessments
- Learning about treatment options once diagnosis is made
- Availability of resources and services without long waits
- Insurance including Medicaid and Medicare and payment

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The Three C’s

• Communication: Keeping it open, age-appropriate and in small does. Finding and modeling the language of emotions, loss, and trauma

• Consistency: Need for predictability and safety

• Competency: Supporting the caregivers ability to competently help their relative child
What Works

Evidence based trauma and mental health treatments that are:

• Short-term
• Highly effective
• Cost-saving

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Helpful Techniques

• Creating a safe place

• Use of cognitive behavioral therapy esp. for traumatic loss

• Expressive art therapies, such as art, poetry, music, drama, writing

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Use of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

- Especially important for traumatically bereaved children or affect dysregulated
- Connecting feelings, thoughts and behavior
- Used to decrease / contain anxiety
- Used to manage intense feelings
- Techniques
  - Breathing
  - Muscle relaxation
  - Thought stopping
  - Visualization

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Use of Expressive Arts Techniques

• Painting / drawing
  (mandala, my family, etc)

• Clay work

• Bibliotherapy
  (trauma and loss books, word salad, genogram, my message kite, letter to the parent, inside/outside exercise)

• Collage

• Memory books

• Puppetry

• Music

• Films

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Counseling Principals

- Help children and caregivers accept their situation as real by talking about it.
- Help them identify and express their feelings appropriately.
- Educate children and caregivers about typical reactions in an effort to normalize their experience.
- Learn and recognize how different cultures react to separations and loss.
Strength Model

- Resiliency
- Developing adaptive coping
- Stress management skills
- Role of spirituality as a sustaining force
- Value of support groups
- Expanding support networks
- Self-care

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Indicators of Children’s Progress

• Start to express more hope for future

• Success in learning

• Increasing ability to cope with painful feelings

• Managing behavior and feelings effectively

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Best Practice Models

- Brookdale RAPP grants
- Loss and Bereavement Programs
- Evidence Based Treatments
- Collaborative Approaches

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JB Loss and Bereavement Group Model

- 10 – 12 sessions
- Closed, time limited
- Voluntary participation
- Three phases
- Activity focused
- Held in a variety of settings: schools, clinics
- For children, concurrent child and parent/caregiver group
- For traumatically bereaved groups, focus is:
  - Safety
  - Affect regulation
  - Grief work

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Examples of Effective Collaborations

- Brooklyn Grandparents’ Coalition
- NYC Kincare Task Force
- NYS Kincare Coalition
Compassion Fatigue

• Secondary trauma
• The impact of loss on us
• Degree of exposure to loss and trauma
• Being a vessel, instead of a container
Self-Care

Both at work and personally:

• Psychological and Emotional
• Physical
• Professional
• Spiritual
Self-Care Exercise

• Start with symbol on outside

• 2 strategies for self-care on inside

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Summary and Closing
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