Foster Parent Grief: A Special Kind of Sorrow
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Why Should We Be Talking About This?

- As helpers we are all surrounded by grief, particularly those of us who work in child welfare.
- Yet there is little recognition of the impact grief has on the lives of clients and helpers.
- We can all work to develop our skills as loss managers.

Grief

To be human is to experience loss

- Grief: the feelings of sorrow, anger, guilt, and confusion that arise when one experiences a loss. (Synonyms – sadness, heartbreak, anguish, despair, desolation)
- Grieve: the action of mourning or the overt expression of grief. (Synonyms – weep, lament, be sad, shed tears, feel discomfort)
- Grief is a personal experience that is experienced differently by all.

Helping an individual or family deal with loss is emotionally draining.
The Ball of Grief

A TANGLED "BALL" OF EMOTIONS

Grief in the Child Welfare System Comes in Many Guises:

• Grief of the birth family
• Grief of a child over loss of his or her biological family
• Grief of a child returning home or moving to another placement
• Grief of the foster parents when a child leaves the home
• Grief over loss of interactions or relationships – between the child and the caseworker, the birth parents and the caseworker, the foster parents and the caseworker

What Does Grief Feel Like?
You Tell Me
The grieving individual experiences different states of being after a loss...

- Shock, Denial and Disbelief – “No, not me, this can’t be happening.”
- Anger and Guilt – “Why me?”
- Bargaining – “What if?” an attempt to forestall the change
- Depression, Pining and Yearning – “Life isn’t fair, what’s the point?”
- Acceptance or Resolution – “It’s going to be ok.”

From the work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross

NORMAL Feelings Associated with Grief:

- Numbness
- Disorganization
- Resentment
- Anger
- Abandonment
- Guilt
- Pain
- Loneliness
- Hope
- Re-adjusted

There is Work to Be Done...

Mourning is the biological process the brain and the body uses for healing and recovering from loss.
Tasks of Mourning

- Denial
- Accepting the reality of the loss
- Anger, Bargaining and Depression
- Feeling the pain and expressing the grief
- Acceptance
- Adjusting to life without the lost person
- Withdrawal of energy from the lost one and reinvestment into something or someone else

Understanding Losses and How They May Compile

- Separation
- Divorce
- Burglary
- Stillbirth
- Miscarriage
- Abortion
- Death
- Aging
- Moving houses
- Visual or hearing impairment
- Loss of speech
- Natural disaster
- Loss of a pet
- Infertility
- Rape
- Sexual abuse
- Hospitalization or serious illness
- Retirement
- Bullying
- Self-harm
- Menopause
- Birth of a child with a disability
- Diagnosis of a disability
- Job Changes

Factors Influencing How One Grieves

- Age
- Emotional state or ability to cope
- The importance or significance of the loss
- The number of recent losses or lifetime losses
- Support available from other people
The Brain on Grief
Best explained with an analogy to scenes in a play

- Attachments and events are mapped into our limbic cortex as a neuromuscular pattern - like the scenes of a play.
- When a loss occurs, we must let go of the scenes in the play, and learn the lines to a new play.
- One must mourn and feel the states of grief, before moving on to the new play.
- Letting go of the old, deeply held play, and feeling all the feelings attached to it, can take a long time.

Once an attachment forms, it can never be undone completely.
All loss leaves scars.

The Neuroscience Behind the Brain on Grief

The right and left hemisphere of the brain are connected and work in complex unison.

Life interactions that integrate the parts of the brain bring about mental well-being.
It's More Complex than Understanding Individual Parts of the Brain.

- Experiences – memories - are laid down as neural pathways in the brain.
  
  Example – the smell of fresh baked pie may bring up memories of your grandmother.

  Understand that one may bring past experiences and memories with loss into current understanding of and reactions to loss.

Understanding an individual’s history of loss is important.

Good News – The Brain has Plasticity and Change is Possible

- Brain Research informs us that the brain has plasticity –
- Or an ability to reorganize neural pathways as a result of life experiences.
- New Attachments can be formed!

Foster Parent Grief, a rarely recognized phenomenon.
Researchers Administered a Grief Survey with Louisiana Foster Parents (Quantitative Results)

- 73% Miss my foster child or children
- 50% Not planning for the future
- 45% Have periods of tearfulness
- 45% No one will ever take the place of my foster child or children
- 43% Don't have the personal resources to cope with the loss
- 43% Haven't discovered new personal resources
- 41% Haven't adjusted to the loss
- 40% Not functioning as well as before
- 38% Need to talk to others concerning the loss
- 37% Daydream about how life was


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<tr>
<th>Key Theme 1 - Trouble Letting Go and Loneliness</th>
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<td>• &quot;Difficult to lose a child that you care for...not only did I have a terrible time dealing with the loss, but other family members became attached and miss them.&quot;</td>
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<td>• &quot;I did feel the loneliness of not seeing her&quot;</td>
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<td>• &quot;We could not imagine our life without him.&quot;</td>
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<th>Key Theme 2 - Feelings not taken into consideration</th>
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<td>• &quot;My experience surrounding the loss of my foster child was rather thoughtless.&quot;</td>
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<td>• &quot;I think what hurts the most is that with no notice to my family, our foster child was sent back to her natural father. My family was very distraught!&quot;</td>
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<td>• &quot;We feel that not providing closure to foster parents upon the child’s removal or change in placement opens the door for problematic issues.&quot;</td>
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Ambiguity
Key Theme 3 - Wonder and Worry

• Where are they now: "I often wonder what kind of family they are with...I wonder if the sister and brother are still together." "If the children went back to their bad situation, we would be completely devastated...this is hard because it is out of our control."

• Are they okay: "We try to remain in contact with our foster kids but there is little cooperation...This makes us sad and wonder if the kids are really okay." "I often think about my foster children and hope and pray that they are doing well."

What Was Learned from the Research:

Foster parent grief is a special kind of grief.

• It is disenfranchised grief – grief one feels when they experience a loss that is not publically validated and able to be openly mourned
• The loss is an ambiguous loss – (symbolic loss) – the person is physically lost, but psychologically present in the griever’s mind

It's difficult to grieve when your loss is not recognized by society as significant (disenfranchised) and remains unclear and indeterminate (ambiguous).

Four Additional Obstacles which are special to Foster Parents:
1. The relationship with the child may have been ambivalent or even had elements of hostility
2. Number of other demands on a foster parents may leave little time or opportunity to express their grief
3. An unspoken expectation that foster parents should not get too attached to the children
4. Differences in individual personalities, Foster parents may view expressions of grief as a sign of weakness or lack of ability to do the job
5. Lack of support and understanding during the grieving process
Unresolved Grief Can Lead to Complicated Grief

- Symptoms:
  - A persistent, intense yearning for the lost person
  - Withdrawal from friends and family
  - Intrusive thoughts and preoccupation with memories of the lost one
  - Strong emotions – sadness, guilt, envy and anger that are difficult to control
  - Avoidance of situations that evoke painful reminders of the lost one

Getting to Acceptance

- To be resolved most effectively, grief needs to be shared with a supportive, empathetic and informed person.
- The griever needs to give him or herself time to feel and experience grief.
- Learn to make meaning out of the loss – the pride felt from helping a child if even for a short period of time.

*The final stage of grief occurs when the survivor finds that out of the loss may spring new dreams and opportunities.*

We Can All Be Loss Managers

- Understand that grief should be shared with another person to be most effectively resolved.
- Practice meaningful engagement in which foster parents can tell “the whole story.”
- Continue open and frequent communication with foster parents
- Help foster parents to develop a positive view of what they have done for the child
Use Your Active Listening Skills

• Keep an open mind.
• Observe non-verbal communication.
• Ensure that your verbal contributions are clear and relevant.
• Ask for clarification if you haven’t understood.
• Be honest when feeding back feelings.
• Be prepared to work hard at listening especially when the one grieving is exploring painful feelings which may be upsetting for you too.

A Positive Reflection from a Foster Parent - Making Meaning of the Loss:

"I like to think of it as a house that I’m building and when it’s done, a family moves in and I move on. It’s hard to think that they will care for that house as I did. I can never believe that they would know the work that went into it. Each block for the foundation was hand picked, hugged, and held to perfection. The tears, the love, the joy and the fun. All the while I wanted to believe it would be forever, but instead the master builder had a different plan, and I was to move on to a new location and start construction anew...."

Making meaning...

"Remembrance of the original house, and passing it so often, noticing that the wind, storms and all the rest of the elements have not damaged as it continues to stand solid. The shingles needed repair and it needed paint; windows needed replacing, but the original structure was still intact. I knew then that I did a very good job and that was what kept me going on to the next structure. I will never forget that house I built, but I do know that it will survive, and I’m so happy to be part of it."

Jeanett Lomando, President of the Foster Parent Advisory Council of Suffolk County NY
Self-Care Tools to Share

Research Shows:

Implementing healthy self-care practices impacts one's overall well-being. Where neglecting self-care results in sleep deprivation, emotional exhaustion, reduced morale, feelings of despair, high levels of turnover, and it can result in ineffective treatment and care of clients (McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011).

The Goodbye Letter

To: ______________________
I am saying goodbye because _______________________________________
Saying goodbye makes me feel _________________________________________
I remember a time when we ___________________________________________
You taught me _________________________________________________________
Something I want you to know is _________________________________________
I will always remember _________________________________________________

From ____________________
Develop Your Own Strategy for Positive Self-Care

- Attention to Self
- Mindfulness
- Journal writing
- Relaxation Techniques
  - Deep breathing
  - Meditation
  - Music
  - Exercise
- Increase Social Connections

Diaphragmatic Breathing – Belly Breathing

The most common and easy form of relaxation – emphasizes breathing in the lower stomach rather than the upper chest.

1. Assume a comfortable position in a quiet place
2. Place hands over your stomach
3. Concentrate – Feel the air come in through your nose, down into your lungs, feel your stomach rise and then descend as you exhale air, feeling it leave your lungs, and nose.
   - add visualization with practice

Start your self-care regime today.
### Resources

**Support**
- National Foster Parent Association at [http://nfpaonline.org](http://nfpaonline.org)
- The Foster Parent Toolbox - an Ebook and on Facebook at: [https://www.facebook.com/TheFosterParentingToolbox/](https://www.facebook.com/TheFosterParentingToolbox/)

**Meditation Resources**
- UCLA Health at [http://marc.ucla.edu/bodycfm?d=22](http://marc.ucla.edu/bodycfm?d=22)
- iTunes > podcasts > meditation
- Susan David’s book – Emotional Agility – how to thrive in work and life or see her website: [susandavid.com](http://susandavid.com)

### Questions/Contact Information

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