CHAPTER 1

What Is Loss?

THE LAND OF MYTH AND MAKE-BELIEVE

Once upon a time, there was a land where death was never mentioned. In this land, children were always happy and resilient, and they bounced back from any loss or trauma they experienced. In fact, children were thought to be particularly incapable of feeling depressed or of truly understanding or experiencing loss. Children in this land held their heads high and were "strong little troupers" when faced with issues like death, divorce, or other life transitions. In this land, parents and other adults decided it was best not to talk about traumatic events with their children because it might "confuse" them or make them feel upset. The less said, they thought, the better. In fact, the parents of these children as well as the other adults decided that they should hide their own feelings so as not to upset the children. The adults were very surprised then, when the children began to behave differently, act sad or angry, and engage in risky behaviors after they had experienced a traumatic event or life change. "How could this be," the parents thought, "when we have tried our best to insulate our children from pain? Could we have been wrong all along? Do children grieve?"

SOCIETAL MYTHS ABOUT GRIEF AND LOSS

The passage above illustrates a fundamental problem in the way our society handles grief and loss issues with children and adolescents. We live in a very death-phobic culture. We use a variety of euphemisms, such as "passed away," to describe death; even using the word *died* is taboo. We admire people who are "strong" when

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faced with adversity. Many of us remember the image of two-year-old John F. Kennedy Jr. saluting as his father's coffin rolled past during the president's funeral. "How very strong and stoic John-John was," we said to ourselves. This image serves as an example of the way we expect children to respond to adversity. We want them to be "brave little soldiers" because it makes it easier for us.

In a society in which people average only three days off work to mourn the loss of a relative—and then only a close relative, such as a spouse, parent, or child—how can we expect children to understand and work through their losses (Eyetsemitan, 1998; Sunoo & Solomon, 1996)? Also, if topics as crucial as death are off limits, then so-called minor losses, such as a breakup or a move to a different city, will be treated as downright trivial and inconsequential. These minor or trivial losses are, however, a source of great pain and anguish for our children and adolescents.

MYTHS ABOUT GRIEF AND LOSS IN CHILDREN

In their book *When Children Grieve,* James and Friedman (2001) discuss major myths that society holds about children and how they should and often do handle grief. These myths strongly contribute to adults' overlooking or underestimating the pain children experience as a result of loss. James and Friedman cite the following myths about the way children handle grief: (a) children don't grieve, (b) it is possible to replace the object of loss, (c) grief is private, and (d) helpful strategies include being strong, keeping busy, and allowing time to heal all wounds. These are only some of the many myths surrounding grief and loss that negatively affect the way adults interact with children and adolescents who have experienced loss. Let's explore more fully some of these and other myths our society holds regarding children and grief.

Children Don't Grieve

In all our years of working with children and adolescents, it has never failed to amaze us that adults from a wide variety of backgrounds, socioeconomic groups, education levels, and ethnicities share an underlying belief that children and adolescents are incapable of grief. We believe that children are resilient and capable of bouncing back from any loss. The notion that children cannot understand death or loss is simply not true. Children do feel grief and experience loss in profound ways. They understand death but not in the way that adults do. Children can handle strong emotions for only short periods of time,

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and then they will put their grief aside (Fitzgerald, 1992). They may be very upset yet soon afterward play with toys as though nothing were wrong. This reaction is confusing to parents and may lead them to believe that their children are doing just fine when, in actuality, they are not. Children may engage in egocentric or magical thinking and assume losses are their fault or that people can come back, but these belief systems do not isolate or shield them in any way from the pain of loss. Children's inability to verbally express themselves and their feelings, coupled with our reluctance to engage children in dialogue about their losses, contributes to the myth that children cannot and do not feel grief or understand loss.

Adult resistance to and denial of belief that children experience loss is particularly evident when discussing the rise in child suicides in the United States. Many adults simply refuse to believe that children are capable of committing suicide. However, the increasing numbers of children who purposely commit these acts and leave notes has provided us with irrefutable evidence that children are capable of such depths. The rate of suicide in children under the age of 14 is alarming. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, suicide is the sixth leading cause of death nationwide of children ages 5 to 14 (Weaver, 2002, July 23). Because children have less access to the most lethal means of committing suicide than adults, they may resort to riding a bike in traffic, hanging themselves, and so forth. These acts may be and often are construed as accidents. In our own home region of central New York, "a 13-month study in Onondaga County in the late 1990s found 39 cases of children 10 or younger who ended up in an emergency room because they had either threatened or intended to harm themselves," and in two cases children died by hanging themselves (Weaver, 2002, pp. A1, A6). This situation can no longer be ignored. Societal denial is impeding our ability to help children who are seriously at risk.

It's Not Okay to Feel Bad

Another common myth that complicates the grieving process of children and adolescents is the message that they shouldn't feel bad (James & Friedman, 2001). We have repeatedly heard adults say to children, "Don't feel bad." Our initial reaction as adults is to want to eliminate the pain that children are experiencing. We will often say things like "Don't worry, it's okay" or "You're really lucky—it could be worse" or begin phrases of intended comfort with sentiments such as "Well, at least . . . ." Although the intended result is to make children

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or adolescents feel better, responses such as these actually minimize and invalidate their feelings. Such reactions can be responsible for producing a sense of numbness in children because the message received is, in essence, "Don't feel." .

You're Supposed to Feel Bad

At the same time adults are telling children not to feel bad, they may add to their confusion by also sending the message that they *are* supposed to feel bad. There are certain expected responses to grief in our society. One is that a person should feel sad after experiencing a loss, when in actuality a person may feel nothing or may even feel relieved after experiencing a loss. An example from one author's (J. F.) experience may help illustrate this phenomenon:

> When my grandmother died, I was 10 years old. My parents, very serious, took me aside in private to "break the bad news to me." Although I had known my grandmother, I felt no great attachment to her. I saw my grandmother only a few times a year and did not have an emotional bond with her. When my parents told me about the death, I literally felt nothing. My predominant feeling was concern for my father. I remember the look my parents exchanged, as if something were wrong with me. Because I was a sensitive child, they had expected me to have an emotional reaction. I remember feeling at the time that I was letting them down—that I *should* feel bad. Although such an expectation was never voiced, it was there nonetheless. I remember vividly trying to recall a sad incident in my life so that I could produce tears. When I did begin to cry, both my parents visibly relaxed. I had done my job.

We have seen similar reactions when we are providing crisis response counseling services in schools following the death of a student or teacher. Many times, we have seen a number of children or adolescents who feel that there is something wrong with them or that they are bad or heartless people because they have no emotional reaction to the loss. Just the presence of crisis response counselors signals to students that they "should" be feeling bad. Very often children need reassurance that it is okay to feel nothing, it is okay not to feel bad.

Replace the Loss

One of adults' favorite strategies in responding to loss felt by their children is to try to replace the lost object (James & Friedman, 2001). The

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most common example is the parent who responds to the death of a beloved pet by running out and buying the child another pet. This strategy is faulty on at least two counts. First, it doesn't allow time for the child to assimilate the loss and go through a mourning process. Losing a pet is a learning experience for children. It allows them to come to an understanding that all things die, and it allows us to model healthy grief. By quickly replacing the lost object, we are signaling to children that grief is "awful." Second, such strategies as "We'll just buy you another one" minimize the child's experience by assuming that the object or animal is replaceable. It is often the emotional attachment to the object that causes the feelings of loss, not the object itself. It is important to note that we use replacement strategies with other types of losses as well. When an adolescent experiences a breakup with a girlfriend or boyfriend, we may say, "There are other fish in the sea." Such advice is a variant of the replace-the-loss theme.

Don't Talk about It

One of the most common messages we send to children and adolescents is that grief is a private matter (James & Friedman, 2001). When we send the message to children that they should not talk about their grief, we are really saying , "Don't make me think about it." When children talk about their grief, it makes us feel uncomfortable, sad, and, most of all, helpless. Keeping our children from talking about their losses saves us from our own pain and discomfort. The implicit message children receive is that no one cares about their loss and that they are utterly alone in their grief. We believe that squelching children's discussion of their feelings of loss is responsible for the reemergence of loss issues later in life. The pain does not simply go away. It is repressed and stored away until another loss triggers an emotional response down the road. Ironically, at this point, a child may not realize why he is reacting so strongly to what he considers a relatively minor loss. Suppressing thoughts and feelings surrounding childhood losses can have serious long-term repercussions on a person's mental health.

Brave Little Soldier

In the introduction to this chapter, we discussed the notion of the "little trouper" or "brave little soldier." Our society sends the message loud and clear that we value people who are strong in the face of adversity. We admire people who put up brave fronts and who show a stiff upper lip. How many times have we witnessed deathbed scenes in movies

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where mourners were told to "be strong" and "don't cry"? Trozzi (1999) refers to this as "buck-up therapy." Children and adolescents receive these messages loud and clear. We have counseled families who had experienced a loss who were so busy putting on brave fronts for one another that there was no communication going on at all. People were going through their days like automatons, trying to keep up appearances for each other's sake, all the while heavily laden with grief and pain. In many ways, the myth of being strong is the most insidious and dangerous of all.

You'll Get Over It

One of the classic myths related to grief and loss is the notion that time heals all wounds (James & Friedman, 2001). This myth is detrimental in many ways. First, it is in itself a faulty statement. Time does not heal all wounds. Some wounds are very deep and leave a lasting impression and accompanying feelings of sadness. The loss of a parent, for example, is not a loss that goes away. Each time Mother's Day or Father's Day rolls around, each time there is a father/daughter banquet or a mother/son dance, when a child does not have her father to walk her down the aisle at her wedding, the feelings of loss come to the forefront. Even non-death losses are slow to heal. When I (J. F.) broke up with my high school boyfriend, I was told, "Give it time, you'll forget." I can still feel the pain associated with that experience. It was the first major loss I had experienced, and I was basically told, as many teens are, that it really wasn't a big deal.

Children and adolescents may also be highly resistant to the notion that they will get over their loss. To many people, getting over it implies forgetting about the lost object or person. Children and adolescents do not want to get over their loss if it means giving up their relationship with the lost person or object. "You'll get over it" may be one of the most hurtful, minimizing phrases anyone can use with a child or adolescent who has experienced a loss.

You're Overreacting

As we have already seen, adults are masters at minimizing children's loss experiences. When a child has a strong reaction to parting with an old toy that she hasn't played with in years, we tell her things like "You're making a big deal out of nothing." To the child it is certainly not "nothing" to be asked to give away a prized possession that has personal meaning. That object may bring back fond memories or may have made the child feel safe in the dark. It may signal that the child

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is leaving childhood and growing up—and this may be a very scary thought and a transition the child is not ready to face. We would caution any adult who feels that his or her child is overreacting or just seeking attention to consider the underlying hidden losses that the child may be associating with the primary loss.

Just Don't Think about It

A favorite adult strategy for dealing with loss is to distract or deflect. When we are overwhelmed with emotion or experiencing loss, we may resort to "keeping busy." If we keep ourselves busy enough, we will not have time to dwell on our feelings of loss and will exhaust ourselves so we can sleep at night. Because this strategy is often successful for us as adults, we often suggest this strategy to children and adolescents who have experienced loss. "Keep your mind and body occupied," we tell them (James & Friedman, 2001). This strategy, however, robs children of the opportunity to work through their feelings of grief. It does not take the feelings away; it merely postpones them until the child finally runs out of things to do or energy to do them. The "keep-busy" strategy is a Band-Aid that may lead to more complicated grief feelings down the road. It is simply another mechanism to deny the reality of children's grief.

It's Time to Move On

Our society has little patience with the grieving process. As mentioned previously, corporations typically allow people little time off to attend the funeral of a close loved one. Many consider anything beyond a couple of months of emotion "milking it" or a sign of a mental problem. In fact, there is no time limit on grief. Each person experiences grief in his or her own unique way, and the length of the grieving process differs based on a variety of circumstances. For example, if the loss is one in a series of several losses, the grieving process may take longer. Other factors that may affect the length of the grieving process are the personal attributes of the griever, the support network available to the grieving person, and the severity of impact on the person's life.

If You Don't Cry, You Don't Care

Children are often fed the faulty notion that there is a right way to grieve, but not everyone grieves in the same way. We always cringe when we watch crime shows on television if the police officers assume a person's guilt, based on the emotional reaction to the news of a loved

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one's death. The notion is that if people show no emotion or do not cry, there is something wrong with them. We see the same expectations applied to children and adolescents who have experienced grief and loss. The false tears one of the authors (J. F.) felt forced to produce at the news of her grandmother's death, and the pressure put on adolescents to feel sad when a fellow student dies are examples of society's expectations about what grief is supposed to look like. The last thing a grieving child needs is to be made to feel that he is not grieving correctly. The very notion that there is a right way to grieve is a dangerous myth.

We have discussed only some of the many myths about grief that pervade our society and impede our ability to work with children and adolescents who have experienced loss. It is imperative that counselors examine their own beliefs surrounding grief and loss to be sure that their own biases will not prevent them from helping their child clients through their loss experiences.

DEFINING LOSS, GRIEF, AND MOURNING

Because there are many definitions of grief, we challenged our students, as a group, to come up with an all-encompassing definition of grief and loss. We were impressed with the result:

> *Grief is an inevitable, never-ending process that results from a permanent or temporary disruption in a routine, a separation, or a change in a relationship that may be beyond the person's control. This disruption, change, or separation causes pain and discomfort and impacts the person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Although loss is a universal experience, the causes and manifestations of it are unique to each individual and may change over time.*

This definition suggests that grief and loss occur not only as a result of an end to something (for example, a death or the end of a relationship) but also as a result of a change or disruption in the person's life (for example, moving or divorce). The definition accurately implies that even the happy events in our lives—such as going to school, getting married, and graduating from high school—are life-changing circumstances that can and often do produce feelings of grief and loss. Our definition of loss also suggests that the experience of loss is unique to each person and that grief can be expressed in an infinite number of ways.

These facts should not be overlooked in working with children. We very often expect certain events in a child's life to be exciting or

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happy when the child actually responds with fear and anger. For instance, a parent might assume that moving to a nicer, larger home within the same school district would be a rather exciting, positive opportunity for their child; the disruption seems from their perspective to be minimal. Therefore, when the child responds with anger or sadness, the parents are dumbfounded. Each of us has had experiences that bear this out. When J. M. removed a tree from her front yard, her daughter responded with tears and fury. It seems that the tree was her friend. She talked to it and played with it every day. J. M. had no way of knowing either that her daughter had this connection to the tree or that she would be upset by its removal. Likewise, when J. F. moved from an apartment to a house, her daughter, who was then two years old, would not take a bath in the new tub. Bath time was a favorite ritual in the family, full of singing songs and playing games. She expressed her displeasure with the move by refusing to participate. Again, the old tub was her friend, and although the new tub was bigger and shinier, to her it was cold and unfamiliar.

Mourning used to be seen as a task that required detaching from a lost loved one or object. For example, Worden (1991) defined mourning as a "process of separating from the person who has died and adapting to the loss" (p. 10). More recent definitions suggest, however, that mourners do not just move on and relinquish the relationship to the lost person but continue to have a relationship with that lost person or object throughout their lives (Webb, 2002). This approach is a much more hopeful and satisfying one for counselors who work with children and adolescents who have experienced grief and loss. Instead of insisting that children and adolescents work through and "get over" their feelings of grief, counselors are able to help them redefine their relationship with their lost loved one or object and hold on to meaningful memories.

To this end, Dr. Sandra Fox (1985) outlined four tasks that children work through as they mourn a loss. These tasks include understanding, grieving, commemorating, and moving on. One of the first questions asked when a person has experienced a loss is "Why?" During the task of understanding, a child or adolescent seeks to understand what caused the loss and why it happened (Trozzi, 1999). In chapter 3, we will discuss the ways and extent to which children can understand loss at different developmental and cognitive stages.

The second task of mourning, the task of grieving, means allowing children and adolescents to experience the painful feelings associated with a loss (Trozzi, 1999). As we have already discussed, adults often

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try to protect their children from common feelings of grief, such as sadness and anger, or reward them for being strong. In reality, however, children need to be allowed an opportunity to feel and express their emotions about the loss in order to process their experience.

The third task of mourning is commemorating the person or loss (Fox, 1985). During this task, children and adolescents are encouraged to develop a personally meaningful way to affirm and remember the lost person or object. For example, in the case of J. M.'s daughter, the loss of the tree could have been commemorated by planting a new tree with the seeds from her old friend. In chapter 11, we will examine many strategies for assisting children and adolescents in commemorating their losses.

The last task in the process of mourning is the task of moving on (Fox, 1985). During this task, children and adolescents discover new ways to "maintain an inner connection with and representation of the deceased as they develop other friendships, attend school, play, and perform all the things that shape their daily lives" (Trozzi, 1999, p. 67). It is important to note that the task of moving on does not imply getting over the loss, but instead refers to the process of defining a healthy, new relationship with the lost person, object, or experience.

SUMMARY

As a society, we have not done an effective job of helping our children and adolescents through their grief and loss experiences. Our children are hurting because we are reluctant to confront issues of loss within ourselves, let alone within our children. In the name of protecting our children, we keep information from them and deny them the opportunity to feel their grief. Helping children through their loss experiences requires that we actually accept that children feel grief and are bright and capable enough to understand many aspects of loss.

There are serious consequences of overlooking or minimizing loss issues in children and adolescents. Children who are given incomplete information are likely to fill in the gaps of their knowledge by using their imaginations. Very often, what children imagine is much worse and far scarier than the reality of the situation. For example, the child who is denied an opportunity to attend a funeral to say goodbye to Grandma may envision funerals as frightening encounters. Children are left to imagine death as they have seen it portrayed in cartoons or other television shows. These images can have a lasting impact on chil-

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dren and may contribute to the continuation of our death-phobic society.

Similarly, adolescents who are told, "Don't worry, there are other fish in the sea" after a breakup are learning two lessons. First, their feelings are being minimized because, in essence, they are being told that their loss is "no big deal." Second, they are being encouraged to squelch their feelings by entering into a new relationship to replace the lost one. This advice may make friends or parents feel better. It allows the teen an opportunity to be active and stop wallowing in her feelings. As anyone who has ever experienced a rebound relationship knows, however, such help is fleeting and only temporarily prevents people from experiencing the pain of their loss. The result may be that the teen never develops true coping skills for handing the grief feelings associated with loss.

Counselors have an opportunity to play an important role in assisting parents and other adults in understanding the way grief and loss are manifested in children and adolescents, helping them to provide comfort and support to their children, and providing them with useful interventions that will allow their children to work through their feelings of grief without minimization or denial. The remainder of this book will explore the developmental and cultural implications of grief and loss in children and adolescents; present a framework for assessing clients who have experienced loss; offer case studies to help counselors understand the issues related to grief and loss in children and adolescents; and demonstrate strategies and specific interventions for working with this population.

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