

Understanding the Stages of Grief in Adoption

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals.

This lesson is: Understanding the Stages of Grief in Adoption.

Here we will examine the ongoing nature and stages of grief and your clinical role in helping youth manage their losses.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objective

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Integrate two loss and grief models that support grief work in your clinical practice.

2. Stages of Grief in Foster Care, Adoption, and Guardianship

2.1 Stages of Grief in Foster Care, Adoption, and Guardianship

As you already know, there are several noted theories about the stages of grief, the most familiar being Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' Five Stages of Grief, developed initially in relation to death and dying.

The stages are:

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression and
- Acceptance

2.2 Modified Model

For our purposes, we will use a slightly modified model that includes affect, behavioral expressions, and diagnostic implications as the result of separation from birth parents, siblings, and other attachments.

Keep in mind that this is simply one construct that conceptualizes common ways of grieving as well as common behavior patterns. However, there is no set path for grieving and many children and youth do not go through these stages in a set order. We offer this as one reference for your consideration.

Please remember that children process grief through a developmental lens and the age of significant separation often dictates developmentally where the child is. For example, you may have a 12-year-old who is emotionally functioning at age 8, so they will be processing these losses as an 8-year-old rather than a 12-year-old.

Additionally, please note that this work should not be done in isolation. The child's family members should be involved in the therapeutic process with the child. This work will bolster attachment and felt safety for the child.

Click on the photos to learn more about each stage.

2.3 Stage 1 Shock and Denial

Stage 1 is Shock and Denial. Click on each tab to hear more.

1. The child or youth appears compliant and somewhat removed from the event, is indifferent, robot-like, with little emotional expression. They may deny having any feelings about it.
2. Behavioral expressions may include:
 - Going through the motions of normal behavior and compliance
 - Little commitment to activities
 - Very quiet, passive, and emotionally detached or numb
3. Too often, adults may misinterpret these behaviors. They see the child's or youth's affect and compliance as indicating that they are not having a hard time with a move or separation and are quite resilient.
4. Of concern, clinically, are children and youth you may see who have had years of separations or failed placements who are so disconnected from these losses causing deep psychological harm. If they remain in this stage over a long period without appropriate treatment, it can lead to more serious emotional disturbance.

2.4 Stage 2 Anger and Protest

Stage 2 is Anger and Protest. Once the loss can no longer be denied, the first emotional response may be anger, often directed at the person perceived to be responsible for the loss, but sometimes more directionless. The response may also be sadness and despair.

Also common are guilt and blaming others, especially when the child feels responsible for the loss through their disclosure of maltreatment.

2.5 Behaviors Reflection

Think about children and youth who are experiencing this stage of grief.

List some of the behaviors commonly seen in the anger or protest stage.

2.6 Behaviors Response

Did you think of any of these common behaviors?

- Having tantrums
- Having angry outbursts
- Being withdrawn, sulky
- Being grouchy or hard to please
- Being aggressive with other children
- Breaking toys or objects
- Being oppositional and hypersensitive
- Lying and stealing
- Refusing to comply or having mutism
- Having eating or sleeping disturbances

2.7 Common Behaviors

Consequences of the behavior may include confrontations with caregivers, and oppositional and defiant behaviors which can lead to inappropriate punishment of the child or youth, inappropriate diagnosis and medication, and, in the worst case, disruption of the placement.

It is important for you as the clinician to help the parent understand how these behaviors may be related to grief and loss and not necessarily indications of pathology resulting in inappropriate diagnosis.

Now let's watch another clip of Zoe from *Removed 2: Remember My Story*, depicting the common response by mental health professionals who sometimes misdiagnose the impact of unresolved grief and loss.

[Video Transcript]

[ZOE RIPPING A PICTURE OFF OF A SCHOOL LOCKER]

ZOE: All your fault! It's all your fault! [THROWS SOMETHING AT WOMAN IN FRONT OF A CLASSROOM] [KICKING OBJECTS AROUND CLASSROOM] It's all your fault! It's all your fault! It's all your fault!

FOSTER MOM: [TRYING TO CALM ZOE DOWN] No. Zoe.

ZOE: No. [SCREAMING] No. No. [ZOE SITTING ON THE FLOOR] [THE TEACHER TRIES TO CONSOLE ZOE AND SHE PUSHES HER AWAY]

PSYCHIARIST: She may have some negative side effects to it, but this will help with moments of uncontrollable anger. I really believe this will make life easier.

FOSTER MOM: Zoe doesn't need meds. She needs more therapy. She needs more interaction with her mom.

[End of Video]

2.8 Zoe

It is easy to see how adults might be focused on the inappropriateness of Zoe's behavior without thinking about it in the context of her loss and grief.

As a therapist working with children in foster, adoption, and guardianship placements, you will need to integrate grief work into the treatment to address the underlying emotions and feelings.

As Zoe's foster mom so appropriately stated, *"Zoe doesn't need more meds, she needs more therapy and more interaction with her mom."*

2.9 Stage 3 Bargaining

The third stage, Bargaining, is marked by attempts to gain control and prevent the finality of the loss.

Click on each color to hear more about the bargaining stage.

1. What you may see are children and youth who may work hard to shift their behaviors or promise to be good to change the outcome. *"I promise that I will help take care of my younger brother and sister if we can go back home with mommy." "I will go to school and do my homework if you let me go home."*
2. The child or youth may try to bargain with the person who they think can influence the outcome. During this stage, they are trying to control their environment and stave off the inevitable loss.
3. Behaviors might include:
 - Being eager to please
 - Attempting to be compliant
 - Becoming moralistic
 - Engaging in ritualizing behaviors they think will exhibit good behavior
 - Rejecting or denying their heritage or community of origin

2.10 Stage 4 Depression

Stage 4 is Depression. In this stage, the child's or youth's realization that the loss is real brings expressions of despair, futility, sometimes fear and panic, and lack of interest in people, surroundings, or activities.

They may present with behaviors that may include:

- Social and emotional withdrawal
- Anxiety
- Tearfulness
- Being frustrated and overwhelmed by minor stresses
- Listlessness
- Regression
- Distractibility
- Short attention span
- Robot-like activities

Emotional distress, as exhibited by:

- Head banging
- Rocking
- Eating and sleeping disturbances
- Immune system weakness
- Whining and whimpering

As with the other stages, a critical part of your work is helping parents understand this behavior in the context of their past and present experiences.

2.11 Stage 5 Resolution or Acceptance

We will now consider the final stage, Resolution and Acceptance.

The symptoms of depression and distress abate, and the child or youth begins to respond to people around them, planning and returning to active life in the present. This is a sign that they are moving forward out of active grief.

Click on each box to reveal the behaviors:

1. Developing new attachments in the new family
2. Experiencing pleasure and fun
3. Ability to concentrate
4. Decreases in emotionality
5. Interest in activities and surroundings

2.12 Positive Movement

These behaviors indicate positive movement toward more normal functioning. However, as mentioned earlier, this does not mean that once a child or youth moves through these phases of grief, all is resolved.

Grief resolution means accepting and integrating the loss into one's life and sense of self, allowing the individual to function in a healthy and productive manner, confronting and mastering age-appropriate life tasks.

This is not a linear process and it is important to remember that many children and youth impacted by these losses may revisit them at different developmental stages, often attributing new meaning to them. Your ongoing therapeutic support will be invaluable as they manage these issues developmentally over time.

2.13 Zoe

Let's return to Zoe as she exemplifies the movement to acceptance.

[Video Transcript]

[ZOE PAINTING AT A TABLE]

ZOE: Sometimes things begin to get better. [ZOE SPEAKING TO A SMALL CHILD] Once upon a time there was an astronaut and she was stuck in space because she lost her rocket ship. And she didn't know how to get back to Earth.

Life falls to a new rhythm. [ZOE SPEAKING TO A SMALL CHILD] Where did it go?

BENAIAH: Under your shirt.

ZOE: You're so smart.

The new normal. [ZOE SPEAKING TO BENAIAH] And she went through the atmosphere. That's a big word. Can you say atmosphere?

BENAIAH: Atmosphere.

ZOE: Nice.

And it may not be the best. [ZOE WASHING DISHES] But I've made peace with it.

[ZOE SPEAKING TO BENAIAH] What's that? A truck.

FOSTER MOM: Oh, that's cool. Look at that.

ZOE: And it feels like almost I might be happy.

[ZOE SPEAKING TO BENAIAH] What should she do?

BENAIAH: Uh-ah.

[End of Video]

3. Good Grief Model

3.1 Good Grief Model

Now let's discuss the Good Grief model.

3.2 Good Grief Tasks

The Good Grief model was developed by Maria Trozzi, M.Ed., Director of the Good Grief program at Boston University School of Medicine.

It was designed to help children and youth manage loss.

This model provides four tasks to guide mourning and equip children and youth to process their grief. These four tasks are:

1. Understanding
2. Grieving
3. Commemorating
4. Going On

3.3 Understanding

The task of understanding is to help children and youth gain information and process what they do know as to the reasons for the loss - knowing what happened to the person who left and why or knowing what situations caused the loss and why they happened.

Click on each picture and listen to some youth talk about their understanding of their loss and grief experience:

1. *"My counselor told me that the reason my birth mom never came back was that she was sick. She did too many drugs. I remember now that my mom did drugs and I couldn't live with her. She still does drugs and lives in a hospital."*
2. *"I really loved living with my grandmother when the judge said that my mom could not take care of me anymore. After about a year and a half, my grandmother got very sick and died. I had to go back into foster care."*
3. *"I always thought that my mother took good care of me and for a long time I didn't understand why I couldn't live with her. I now know that it was not okay the way my older brother touched me."*

3.4 Grieving

Once children and youth have an understanding as to the nature and cause of the loss, it is time for the therapy to provide a safe space, so they can begin to grieve and process these powerful losses.

Children's and youth's grieving will often depend upon their age and the relationship with the people they have lost and how the loss occurred.

It is important to understand that children and youth grieve differently than adults because of the powerful nature of the loss and where they are developmentally. They often grieve in spurts and the work will evolve over time.

As grieving does not occur linearly, therapists must be creative in their approach to this work, integrating expressive therapy tools such as sand tray therapy, art therapy, use of loss box, and role-playing.

It is important to keep in mind that the ambiguity of the loss can complicate the grieving process for children and youth with whom you work.

3.5 Commemorating

Children and youth must be given the opportunity to formally or informally remember the person they have lost in their lives and create a ritual to commemorate them.

This can include planting a garden in their memory, creating a picture collage of the loved one, saying a daily prayer for them, or holding onto a keepsake.

For Native American children and youth, this may involve a ceremonial ritual that is considered traditional, sacred, and tribally specific.

3.6 Going On

Once they have moved through the first 3 stages, children and youth need encouragement from supportive adults in their lives to go on.

It is the role of the therapist to help them understand that going on does not mean they are being disloyal to the person they lost, nor are they being asked to forget the person.

For children in some communities, the phrase "go on" when pertaining to the loss of elders and ancestors can be seen as disrespectful since, for many, their spirits continue to be an integral part of their hearts. This notion is important to explore with the child and their supportive circle.

3.7 Permanency

In your clinical role, it is critical to understand that the child or youth may have difficulty expressing their ambivalent feelings related to the losses in adoption, guardianship, or birth family connections.

Don't assume because they are not talking about these issues, they are not thinking about them.

Permanency is seen by society as a positive thing, yet the child or youth might be feeling stress and sadness at the losses that are necessary to move toward adoption or guardianship.

Let's listen to Alex talk about his birth mother in the following video clip:

[Video Transcript]

ALEX: I was adopted when I was a week old and my birth mom wanted to stay a part of my life.

ANGELA: Such a sweet photo.

ALEX: I know. So, like, the last time I saw her was when I was 1 or 2 years old and ever since then I haven't seen her and this is the last photo with her that I have. I keep this in my room.

ANGELA: You keep it in your room, like next to your bed?

ALEX: Yeah.

ANGELA: How often do you look at it?

ALEX: I look at it I look at it a lot.

[End of Video]

3.8 Metaphors

In your work with foster and adoptive children and their families you will need to bring these losses to the surface, giving them the space to be acknowledged and explored.

For example, one therapist shares her approach to working with adolescents around loss and grief.

She shares that youth often report that grief is a feeling and that gives her the opportunity to include and validate a variety of feelings and describe grief as a process.

She uses metaphors, imagery and symbols for grief to enhance understanding, including grief as:

- A path that you move along - sometimes stopping or getting off; healthy grieving is to keep moving forward. While there is no specific destination, you can look back at how far you've come, and the scenery along the path can change as you move through your grief and heal.
- A wound you can't see that needs healing through care and attention. What happens if you don't bandage, or you bandage and then don't go back to clean, check, reapply ointment, and the wound never heals?

- Feelings that have been put in a shoe box and then left in a closet. Sometimes they are pouring out of the box and out of the closet and you can't shut the door; at other times they haven't been looked at in a while but are still there, and then we discuss opening the closet to do some organizing.
- An umbrella and underneath it are a variety of feelings and ways of adjusting to the loss, life during and after the loss can be represented as the storm clouds and rain, even when the storm gets lighter or goes away, we hang on to our umbrella, and the loss doesn't go away.

These metaphors can be shared verbally, or using imagery and art, or a sand tray.

3.9 Awareness

Your awareness of the depth and breadth of the losses facing children and youth and your comfort addressing them will certainly help to promote adoption adjustment and enhanced child and familial well-being.

Remember that you need to integrate the family in grief work and that at times you may receive push back from parents who may not see why we must bring up hurtful memories.

3.10 Parent's Resistance to Doing the Grief Work

As we mentioned earlier, some parents have a difficult time doing the grief work with their children because it is painful work and they want to protect their child from reliving painful experiences and traumas.

You must help them understand the importance of working with you to support their child's expression of grief in order for your work to be successful. Approach the parent's resistance much the same way you would approach the child's resistance.

See it as a protective mechanism for the parent, and have a conversation about how painful it might be for the parent to sit with and listen to their child's pain, while helping them to see how their openness to this experience can build a trusting relationship with their child.

3.11 Conversation Starters

Click on each number to hear some conversation starters you might use:

1. *"It is difficult for Janece to talk about what happened to her, and I can imagine how painful it must be for you to see her struggle. If you can sit with her while she talks with me about it, I think it will be comforting to her to know you support her. Your support will only help the trust you have built with her."*
2. *"Can you tell me how it feels to hear Janece talk about how sad she is and all the losses she is grieving? Maybe we can practice hearing about the difficult things she went through, so you can be better prepared to hear her talk about her losses and sadness. You have such a good relationship, it will be important to help her heal."*

3. *“When you hear Janece talk about how sad she is and all the people and things she has lost, does it make you think of people you have lost? If so, maybe we can talk about that so you can separate out your feelings and be supportive of Janece as she processes her grief. She needs for you to be there for her as part of her healing.”*
4. *“It’s okay for you to let Janece know that you have also had losses in the past and maybe share how you worked through your grief. This could be reassuring for her.”*

Help the parent to participate in sessions with the child, so that with your guidance, the parent-child relationship can be strengthened.

4. Triggers Resurfacing Grief and Loss

4.1 Triggers Resurfacing Grief and Loss

As you think about integrating these models in your work, it is important to remember that grief and loss can be triggered at any point in an adoptee’s life. Children, youth, and their parents will benefit from a foundational understanding of normal grief reaction and its recurrence.

The family needs to be aware that any loss can trigger the child’s previous losses. For example, having a pet die, a friend move, or even having to change teachers can result in a grief reaction and challenging behaviors.

4.2 Triggers Reflection

Take a moment to think about some of the triggers youth might have during various developmental stages that results in feelings of loss and grief. What are some of the triggers your youth have experienced?

4.3 Triggers Response

You might have thought of some of these: Click on each number to reveal the triggers.

1. Family related school assignments, such as family trees, studying genetics
2. Anniversaries, like the date the child was separated from birth family and/or the date of adoption
3. Holidays such as birthdays, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Grandparent’s Day, or any holiday that included specific rituals or celebrations in the child’s birth family, or events marked by gatherings, rituals, and celebrations
4. Break up in a relationship
5. Not being chosen for a sports team or invited to a party
6. Changing schools, classrooms, bus drivers
7. Loss of a pet
8. Contact with family members and revisiting places
9. Graduating high school or going to college
10. Sibling moving out or going to college

11. Death of family members

All these are potential triggers and can bring expected or unexpected grief reactions, as memories of losses re-emerge. In your clinical work with children and youth and their adoptive or guardianship parents, it will be important for you to help them understand and anticipate these potential triggers and the grief it elicits.

5. Wrapping Up

5.1 Wrapping Up

In this lesson, we covered how children and youth experience the various stages of grief, as well as models to support grief work. This work is essential to their emotional adjustment and mental health, as well as the well-being and stability of their family.

5.2 Learning Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

5.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how might you apply these in your practice?

5.4 Journal Response

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

5.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have completed Understanding the Stages of Grief in Adoption. In the next lesson, we will focus on the impact of abandonment and rejection on the mental health of children and youth.