

# Helping the Grieving Child or Teenager



by Judy Blore

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I am myself grieving child—when my ninety-three-year-old mother died one year ago, I grieved her loss as a daughter mourns her beloved mother. I am an adult who has experienced other losses. And I am a professional in the area of grief. For many years I have worked with grieving families, so I know about normal grief patterns.

Yet I was sometimes surprised during my own grief process. At first I felt like I was moving through Jell-O. Even trying to think was heavy slogging. At times, I lashed out at petty frustrations, the usual stuff of life that I normally would have taken with calm, even-tempered patience.

Yet at the same time, I was hopeful in my grief. My mom's life was hard for the last three years, and terribly painful for the last six months. But she loved our Lord, and we both knew she was going to be with Him in the home He had prepared for her. So I did not grieve with the despair of those who have no hope when she passed away. Even so, I was keenly aware that I was not functioning in anything close to top form in the months after her death. A cloud of sadness filled my whole life, both the interior life

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of thought and feeling, and the exterior life of activity. In the months before this first anniversary of her death, my thoughts often went to “last year at this time....”

I know that this cloud of sorrow is ‘normal’ in grief. But I did not expect it to hit so hard or to last so long. Thankfully now, at long last, my zest for life and my creativity have both returned.

## *Principles for Grieving*

I knew all about grief, yet I struggled. But what is grief like for a young person who has no prior experience with grief? Who has no information about normal grief reactions? Who is not as well-grounded in the hope of the gospel? How will he act as he grieves the loss of a parent, sibling, close friend, or favorite teacher? And, through it all, how will he react to the on-going normal responsibilities, annoyances, relationships, and challenges of daily life? After all, life does not stop long for grief.

Some young people act out in their grief in disobedience to parents or others in authority. They become hostile to others. They pursue self-destructive addictions. Or they wallow in suicidal despair.<sup>1</sup> How does one help grieving children and teens who are disobedient? Who show self-destructive tendencies? Who express

thoughts of suicide? These are difficult questions. On the one hand, they can be all the more difficult for parents who are going through their own grief at the same time. The death of a parent, spouse, or another child leaves a grief-stricken parent to cope with children who are also grieving.

A different kind of difficulty arises when a schoolmate or teacher dies, and it hits one child in the family harder than the others. The parent cannot identify with this child's depth of sorrow so does not realize the need to be involved. Whether you are too involved in your child's sorrow, or not involved enough, it can be even more difficult to help him when he reacts with disobedience, hostility, and acting-out rather than by simply grieving.

As I have wrestled with these difficult questions over many years, I have come up with principles that guide my counseling with both parents and children who are grieving. In this article I will share these principles with you.

Most importantly, begin with prayer. Pray to gain a Lord's-eye view of your child as he grieves. The same God who comforts us in our grief deals with the sins of acting out and the internal sins that distort our grieving hearts. Hold to the biblical promises and principles that apply in situations of grief. The Bible says many different things, coming at particular situations from many angles. Parents must first live those promises and principles for themselves. And parents must learn how to apply those truths into a child's life, seeking to bring about responses that are life-giving and healthy. It is always necessary to pray for wisdom where we lack it (James 1:5). God gives willingly, both to parents and to children who ask. He does not reproach us for needing Him.

God gives us the wisdom to live out the following principles.

### **1. Grieving is natural and painful.**

The intensity of normal grief surprises some people. They may think that survival is impossible amid unbearable pain. Grief in and of itself is natural. Sorrow at loss is not sinful. For example, see the honest grief portrayed in the following passages:

- Then David and the people who were

with him lifted their voices and wept until there was no strength in them to weep. (1 Sam. 30:4)

- Jesus wept. So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!" (John 11:35-36)
- For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow. (Phil. 2:27)
- And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. (Rev. 21:4)

Give your child reassurance that survival, and even thriving, after the death of a significant person in your child or teen's life will come, perhaps down the road a bit, after they go through this valley of the shadow of death with God at hand. God will one day comfort all sorrows, and bring only joy (Rev. 7:17).

### **2. Grieving is hard and lasts a long time.**

The Commander in Chief, the Lord, our Father "knows our frame and remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:14). Parents, teachers or others in positions of authority must remember the world in which a grieving child is living. Keep these points in mind.

**Grieving takes energy.** It is difficult to be a parent when your child is grieving! It is necessary to know your child and how he handles emotional difficulties. Each one's heart is different. Each one experiences the world in a different way. Grief takes so much of a child's or teen's energy. He doesn't have as much mental or physical energy left over to listen, process, and act on your directions. He isn't in a position to make major decisions. Keep things simple. Don't overload him with directions or new responsibilities.

**Grieving hurts.** Lighten up. Allow time for emotional pain. You may have to reevaluate your expectations regarding chores and schoolwork for a short period of time. You may need to reduce his work or responsibility load right now. Think about your priorities and continue to require the few things on the top of that list. Make time for honest grief and make it

a conscious priority. Your child or teen will gain strength and be able to reassume their previous responsibilities in due time.

**Grieving brings questions.** After the death of a person close to him, your child may re-think everything about how his world works and how his loss will change things. He may be deeply concerned whether you will be okay (in the case of your spouse's death), whether you will be able to continue being his parent and mentor. If the parent is grieving, then the child grieves also, and vice-versa. The child who depends on the grieving parent has concerns about stability and safety in his world. Give reassurance. And then make your requirements very clear. Restate even basic ground rules in your household. For example, "Everyone is treated with respect. Everyone contributes. Everyone participates." It's like starting over because their world has changed so dramatically.

### ***3. Grief brings occasions for disobedience, but disobedience is not okay.***

Paul quoted Psalm 4:4 when he said, "In your *anger*, do not sin" (Eph. 4:26). There is a similar principle at work in grief. "In your *grief*, do not sin." But grief exposes the sinful tendencies in our hearts. Bad behavior is the external evidence of something going on within the heart of the griever. Grief gouges the veneer of our perfectly polished behavior and rubs it raw. Our mask of polite, civilized behavior crumbles! We may act like our true inner selves—like beasts, self-centered and childish. While we grieve, we see ourselves more honestly than usual. And sometimes that truth hurts. Grieving parents openly admit to times when we say or do something that is an unusual and uncharacteristic outburst of emotion. One parent may lash out at the other using words she has never said before! This is the grief talking. The behavior that you see in your child or teen expresses his fears, hurts, and frustrations relating to his loss. It is his grief talking. Practice these responses:

**Meet bad behavior with grace.** Disobedience is not okay. And grief is no excuse for sinful or disobedient behavior in the grieving adult, teen, or child. Disobedience, hostility, blaming, anger, self-recrimination, and even

drunkenness and immorality are typical sins that arise in the context of grief. None of this disobedience is okay. But disobedience happens, even in the kingdom of God. Just look back over the history of Israel, over church history, over your own history. You will easily find disobedience and misbehavior. This does not excuse wrong, and it does not mean the bad behavior should not be constructively addressed at the right time. But try to understand the pressures and temptations that the child or teen experiences when he is grieving.

When our deep grief over loss intersects with expressions of our sinful hearts, we suddenly see a double reason to deal mercifully with one another. We forgive because we have been forgiven so much ourselves (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). In dealing with wrongs, God proceeds patiently. He never condones wrong, but He is not surprised by wrong. He sets out with a long term, multi-pronged strategy that includes a great deal of forbearance.

**Overlook and forgive these outbursts. Do not take them personally.** "Love covers a multitude of sins." Sin is interlaced with the emotions of grief and angry outbursts occur. The offended one should recognize the source of the outburst and become an aid to the offender. Bad behavior should not be read as a final measure of the other person's commitment to the relationship. Instead, it can be the beginning of a changed relationship based on forgiveness. At the appropriate time, usually after the situation has calmed down, encourage the offender to confess his wrong and ask for forgiveness, without offering excuses. Say, "You have hurt and offended someone you love. By confessing real wrongs, you will be able to deal more constructively and directly with your pain and loss."

**Overlook minor offenses as much as possible.** Meet your child's words and misbehaviors with wisdom and grace. Focus on the grief that is being masked, rather than the outburst by which he might blindly lash out. Love in those ways most necessary during a season when grief, confusion, and sin come out all tumbled together. Treat the cause—the grief, rather than the symptom—the outburst.

**Seek to fill your child's heart with both your love and God's in Christ.** Does your child

know, without a doubt, that you love him? How can you express love that will get through his pain? Does he know God loves him and is an ever present Helper, available to him right now? How can the gospel be freshly put so that the hope of Christ connects? Let love come out in a multitude of ways that connect and communicate to this child.

#### **4. Some grievors need grief counseling.**

Consider whether your child needs outside help from a pastor, family friend, or other counselor. Consider these rules of thumb regarding for when to seek counseling help.

- When the child is stuck in his grief.
- When grades slip and stay down for more than one semester.
- When you feel so overwhelmed with your own grief that you can hardly think about meeting your child's need for love and encouragement.
- When there is no conversation between parent and child about heart issues or

for the surviving one, for the one who is there, even as they express their sadness over their loss.

Threats of suicide are another major way that a child or teen may act out. Suicide is the sin of self-murder. It always expresses motives: ruling fears (e.g., "I can't make it without my friend"), lusts of the flesh (e.g., "I just want to escape the pain"), and false beliefs (e.g., "If I kill myself it will make everything better"). Grief and self-murder each have a different feel, a different intention operating. Almost every grieving person expresses a desire to be with the one who died. Obviously the only way to join them is to die also. But this is not usually a suicide threat. How can you tell the difference between a desire to be with a loved one and the desire to end ones own life? Ask God for wisdom to weigh what you are hearing and observing. Then use the following guidelines.

Ask directly, "Are you thinking about suicide?" Tell your child openly if you are concerned about what seems like suicide wishes.

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that reveal mutual understanding.

- When he seems to have no other allies in their life.
- When he asks for help.
- When he talks about suicide.

Many grieving people feel so tired and wonder, "Is anything worth it anymore?" A child (and certainly a teen) may think, "He was always trying to be a good person, but look what happened to him? He died. It's just not worth it."

Grieving teens often compare themselves with others. When a family member dies, the survivor might evaluate, "Will my parents grieve for me as much as they grieve for my sister who died?" He may think, "I should have been the one who died." Grief is an expression of love for the one who died. Teens have expressed how hard it is to compete with the memory of a dead sibling! The only antidote for this is for parents to actively and intentionally express their love

Tell him that you are trying to decide whether to call the suicide prevention people or not. Then, if you are not completely convinced that he is talking about his wish to be with the person who died rather than the wish to end his own life, call on others who are knowledgeable in crisis counseling and suicide prevention. Better to err on the side of caution.

At this time, grieving children and teens need patience and grace from the parents and other adults around them. Most of all, they need reassurance that there is still love and laughter in their future. They need to be "renewed in the inner man" and "strengthened with grace" (2 Cor. 4:16; Heb. 13:9)

Give frequent and confident reassurance that the future still holds good things for them: (Jer. 29:11). Reassure them that you love them, and will not abandon them when life hits a rough patch. Ask questions about other things the child or teen might plan for the future. Plan

with the child their participation in the soccer tournament, in school work, in getting a summer job, things that may now seem meaningless, but matter. Help them to invest in the future. Life has purpose as long or short as God allows it.

Find a counselor who understands how God reinterprets and works in the midst of bereavement and loss. When you look for a counselor, it is very important that you find a counselor who understands that grief is a normal human process, who is aware of the complicated ways in which sinful people manifest grief, and who understands how grief can be distorted. Ask the potential counselor direct questions about his views both of people in the midst of struggles and of how God's truth and grace connect to those struggles. Use this article as a talking point with a potential counselor. Share the article and talk about where he agrees or disagrees, what he would include, leave out, or add to the article.

When you do make an appointment for grief counseling for your child, assure your child or teen that you don't think he is crazy, but that you want to give him all the tools he needs to honestly and constructively walk his way through the valley of the shadow of death. Let him know that, in your own grief, you are not sure you have been able to do that. Let him know you love him completely and want him to come through this grief complete, whole, and ready to live life.

### ***Continue in Prayer***

And finally, just as you began with prayer, continue in prayer. Pray and listen. God is patient and generous: "You are good and You do good" (Ps. 119:68). He can work great good in a child's or teen's life even through the experience of heartbreaking loss.

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<sup>1</sup> In my earlier article ("How to Help a Grieving Child" *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 16:2 Winter, 1998) I discussed how children often react to the internal chaos spawned by their grief in one of three ways: some act out; others withdraw; still others become the perfect little woman or man. This article deals with the child who acts out in their grief.