



## **Believing in Kids & Families**

### **Counseling Services**

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#### **Fall 2001 Newsletter**

The events of September 11, 2001 have significantly impacted those who have lost family members and friends. Many feel a loss of security and are forced to confront the destructiveness of humankind. We are left struggling to explain the events to our children, as well as deal with our own emotions.

How can we begin to take our changed outlook on life and translate this into a renewed sense of safety? How do we begin taking steps to heal our children, families and communities?

We are all dealing with reactions to trauma and feelings of grief and loss. This newsletter deals with the affects of the recent disaster. It is an overview of the elements of the disaster and provides ideas on how to address the situation with your child(ren)...and when to seek outside professional help.

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**Do children react to disaster differently based on their age?** In short, yes. Each child is unique in his or her responses to such situations, but there are also general age-appropriate levels of functioning to help indicate how a child might react.

#### Ages 2 through 6

- Children begin to acquire information based on their own experiences or understanding of their immediate world (family life, preschool).
- Children this age understand death as a person going to sleep, leaving for long time and wonder when they are coming back, and understand the person is hurt or has a "boo boo."

#### Ages 6 through 12

- Children understand specific details such as a building fell down.
- Children this age are able to see that other people exist outside of their immediate world and begin to understand experiences of others.
- Children recognize that death is more permanent, rather than temporary.
- Children are concerned with pain, injury and separation; "Did it hurt?"
- Children are also developing their understanding of death based on information they have gathered from the media, peers, and family members.

#### Adolescence

- In adolescence children begin to think more abstractly and understand that hanging the flag indicates patriotism.
- Adolescents begin to question their beliefs about death such as questioning their own existence and what happens to them after they die.
- The uncertainty of death becomes a concern and they could become fearful or scared.

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#### **What are some of the basic factors about disaster that are helpful to know?**

- Because television creates the lack of a "geographical safety zone" we are unable to retreat. Television draws one into the experience and can result in living the experience for some.
- Disaster creates anxiety about death and a loss of security.
- Life assumptions are shattered and your understanding of the world is questioned resulting in an increased sense of vulnerability and helplessness.

- We all need to understand that children and adults are impacted by television. Routinely seeing violence on television leaves us questioning what is real vs. what is not.

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**How does someone deal with this disaster?** The following list provides a framework for addressing this difficult situation. This list, in addition to your prior family methods of coping, should help in dealing with this grief and loss:

- It's okay to feel a range of emotions such as sadness, anger, confusion, and fear. It's difficult to comprehend what's occurred based on the enormity and extent of what has taken place.
- Children may feel a need to feel safe and emotionally secure in a world that has demonstrated this is not always so, thus needing a lot of reassurance.
- The use of play and drawing can be a way to decrease the uncertainty of death.
- Ask the child(ren) to state their understanding of the loss or disaster.
- Allow the child(ren) to verbalize their feelings.
- Explain in a clear, specific, and understandable way the facts that are known without overdramatizing or under reporting what has occurred.
- Some children question if it is their fault, reassure them it is not.
- Ask the child if he or she wants to participate in religious services, view television coverage or prefer to grieve in his or her own way such as lighting a candle, making a donation, sending a card, etc.
- Provide ongoing support and opportunities to talk, ask "How are you doing?"
- Continue with your pre-disaster routine as much as possible because this provides familiarity and a sense of security.
- Do something stress relieving and relaxing together. (This includes parents taking care of themselves as well.)

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**When should outside professional help be sought?** Any significant deviation from normal behavior for a particular person may be cause for concern and thus indicate a need for outside professional help. The following are also possible signs that the person needs to talk with someone.

- Increased aggression
- Increased jumpiness, nervousness, overwhelming feelings of worry
- Risk-taking behavior
- Continually blaming themselves, feeling guilty or sense of feeling responsible
- Self-care decreases
- Desire to die or talk of suicide shows up
- Ongoing complaints of feeling numb or feeling sick when no physical condition is legitimately occurring
- Tearfulness
- Changes in activity level
- Fearful of going to school or other activities outside of the home
- Preoccupation with death

Reference: Children with Grief. Linda Sayler Gudas and Gerald P. Koocher. Handbook of Clinical Child Psychology, III Edition. Edited by C. Eugene Walker and Michael C. Roberts. John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 2001.

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"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms-to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

-Viktor Frankl

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This newsletter is published on a quarterly basis. Next time... We'll be eager to share with you how you can turn holiday chaos into holiday bliss.

Contact our office at (303) 794-7008 for a free workshop or to schedule a consultation meeting.

May peace & possibilities be bestowed upon all of you during this time.

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**Psychotherapist:**

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