

CUSD Cares Podcast

Supporting Your Child through Grief/Loss

Season 2, Episode 3– March 2021

Brenda Vargas:

Greetings Parents. Thank you for joining us for another episode of CUSD Cares podcast. I am so happy to be joining you today about a topic that can be really heavy to really comb through and wrestle with. But I have an amazing presenter today. Joining us, Jill Lovill is a clinical director at New Song. Welcome Jill. Thank you for joining us for our CUSD Podcast on supporting students and children through grief.

Jill Lovill:

Thank you for having me, Brenda. I'm so thrilled that you're doing this.

Brenda Vargas:

Well. We know that folks out there have had just such an incredible amount of loss, whether it's personal loss and/or helping another family member deal with loss. And it's been very heavy lately and in the midst of trying to help someone, we know we have lots of parents and caregivers out there that are trying to take care of their children, their students, as they go through this journey of grieving, possibly a loved one or someone that was very close to near and dear to their heart. And parents, you know, as you listen to this podcast, I just want to preface, please take the opportunity to take care of yourself as you're listening, pause, take a moment to, you know, breathe and make sure that you have someone out there that you can reach out to and support you because we know that talking about this is not easy to do so thank you for tuning in with us on this topic. And we're going to take things slow, but we will see you through this entire conversation. Jill, I thought we'd start with just a basic, what is grief?

Jill Lovill:

Grief can be a number of things. It's a reaction, a normal response to loss, and oftentimes when we hear grief, we think of loss by death, but of course, particularly in the COVID world, there is loss by death obviously, but also loss by many other means. Not going to school, changes in school, having to move, loss of jobs. All of these various things, loss of social interaction, are things that we grieve along the way, and that grief is our reaction to that. It can be physical in the body, it can be emotional is largely a part of it, cognitive changes. So it's all a big mix of the things that we feel when we've lost some thing.

Brenda Vargas:

And it's hard to make sense of it. And hopefully folks will be able to at least identify ways that have an understanding about how they can support their children. I appreciate you sharing the fact that loss is kind of that big umbrella term. I think everyone in this last year, as we hopefully all get well and are able to continue to live a healthy lifestyle and make just healthy choices for ourselves, our neighbors, our families. I know everyone has dealt with an incredible amount of loss in one capacity or another. And for children as well as adults, it can be heavy. It can be confusing. It can be a multitude of emotions like you had shared. And I know that some folks might be under the impression about the stages grief. And I

know you have some really important information to share with us about when it comes to that mourning versus lost piece, what that looks like and the tasks that we should keep in mind when mourning.

Jill Lovill:

And so when talking about death loss, particularly a lot of people turn to what is known as the five stages of grief, which is a model that actually came from Elizabeth Kubler Ross, and is really like into the five stages of dying. So when someone is dying, they go through these different emotions. In grief, we like to remind people that it is not a linear process. And what that means is when people hear the five stages of grief, they think, okay, good, I'm done with anger. I can move on to denial and I'm in this place and that's all that that's there. But what we know about grief unfortunately, is that it's a big mess and that we don't move through it in stages. It's all over the board and at New Song Center, what we usually focus on when doing grief work or looking at grief is something called the four tasks of mourning. And those came from a reputable well-regarded psychologist out of Harvard named Dr. Warden. And it talks about what we're hoping to kind of accomplish in our grief. And the first one, the first task is known as accepting the reality of the loss. And a lot of people think, Oh no, I know that this happened and that's enough. But in grief you can know in your head that someone has died and knowing in your heart is a very different thing. It takes time, it takes movement, it takes a lot of things. So that's the first task. And the second one is processing the pain of grief. And so big rule at New Song is it's okay to cry. A lot of people think if I'm crying, I'm not being strong. We think the very opposite. If you're crying, you are being strong, you're working through this, and that it's okay to cry. And it's important to be in the space of your grief.

Brenda Vargas:

And I loved you guys mentioned, as you were training some of our counselors and social workers, you refer to it as tears are courage.

Jill Lovill:

Absolutely. And it comes from my favorite philosopher, Viktor Frankl, saying that tears are courage. It shows you have the courage to suffer and with the third part or the third task of mourning, we kind of move into some not practical things, but kind of through the emotions and talk about what do I actually have to do and that's adjusting to life without your person. So when we work with families where a spouse has died and there's a lot of practical needs they need to do now, they're the only one working or now they need to bring the children to school and pick them up. They need to make sure dinner is made every single day. And so those practical sides adjusting to life without your person is a big one.

Brenda Vargas:

While still recognizing that it is a great loss. And there's an emptiness that is felt especially for children.

Jill Lovill:

Absolutely. and also that a lot of people feel they need to take on the role of their person, both, practically and emotionally, and we saw a little girl in the video that said she doesn't have to be mom and dad, she's the best mom in the world.

Brenda Vargas:

I know that was really insightful as kids, most of the time, they are, they see and hear things, that sometimes really surprise us as we try to protect them

Jill Lovill:

A hundred percent. Yes, and thank you for bringing that up, Brenda. As you think about these tasks, they all intermix together too. It's not a checklist. Unfortunately, everyone wants a checklist in grief. So they're all together blended. And then the last goal, kind of the ultimate goal in grief that we see, is staying connected to your person and continuing to move forward. So the hope is not to forget your person or to move on from them. It's to kind of take them with you as you move forward with your life.

Brenda Vargas:

And kids can get pretty creative with this piece. That remembering piece. I mean, honestly, I know in some situations, a lot of caregivers and parents, they too will be grieving at the same time that they're trying to help their child grieve. And so sometimes their ideas may seem out of the box or a bit unique. What are your thoughts about that? And what are some unique ones that you have heard your clients come up with that you could share with parents. Hey, it's okay.

Jill Lovill:

Absolutely. And so hugely in grief, we say pretty much anything goes as long as you're not hurting yourself, someone else or property. So that's like our tuck away rule; as long as it's within that constraint, anything goes, so a lot of people will say the biggest question I think we get is, am I crazy? Or is it bad that my kid is talking to their mom who died? We don't think so at all. Very rarely is someone crazy in grief. So anything that brings you comfort again, as long as it's not hurting you, someone else or property is A-okay. So we have kids who, gosh, I think, 'cause I'm in grief, I don't think of anything is that out of the box. But we have kids who will, maybe talk to their special person at night, even though they know they're not there. We've had people seatbelt the ashes into a car, on a trip to Disneyland, bringing their person with them. We've had people do kind of all kinds of different things in that way. And we don't think that's crazy. It's maintaining a connection and that's going to evolve over time, but it's okay. Don't judge yourself in grief if it feels good, and it feels like it's comforting to you nine times out of 10 it's okay.

Brenda Vargas:

And I think that you bring up an integral piece in this as children try to make sense of losing someone very close and near to their heart, but that connection piece that they're so desperately holding onto in order just to get through, you know, their journey of grief, they can be creative and you know, things seem a little bit out of sorts and intermittently, you know, go from time of play and creativity and or something more routine to switching back with random thoughts as far as what they should do or how they should proceed to continue to have that connection with their dear loved one.

Jill Lovill:

Absolutely. And thanks Brenda. So especially with younger kids, we see that and it's a little unnerving to parents, but they're going to be playing, playing, playing, having the best time of their life. And then in the middle of the playground, they'll just start crying. I miss mom, I miss dad and everyone's like, Whoa, I thought we were having fun. What happened here? It's totally normal. The other is true as well. If they're having a major breakdown about missing their person. And then the next thing you know,

they're out running in the street having a blast. It's their coping strategy. I can take so much. And then I have to go back to being a kid and that's totally normal.

Brenda Vargas:

And that's the best way to put it. Jill. I'm so glad you said that because I think for parents and caregivers that are facing the situation head on, they feel like they've failed at something, right? Oh my gosh, they were having such a good day or they were having a good couple of days or a good week. And now we have a setback. So I want parents and caregivers to know it's okay. That could happen. And, just that acceptance. And in that moment.

Jill Lovill:

You bet. And in a lot of times in our grief work, we encourage people not to think of it as a setback or a step back, but rather they're just going a little bit deeper in their grief. So just as you said, we hear, I was doing so great. And now I feel like I'm back at square one. On the contrary, I would challenge that you're not at square one. You're just moving in a different direction or a little bit deeper, and that does not mean you're going backwards.

Brenda Vargas:

One of the things that I know is tough sometimes, especially the younger the child, or depending on the situation of the cause of death of your dear loved one, what do I, as a parent or caregiver say, you know, what's important for them to keep in mind as they have to share the initial news? And what tips would you give parents and caregivers, of how to approach that, because that can be a really tough conversation.

Jill Lovill:

Yes. And so I think my first tip would be to ask the child what they think and what they know. So a lot of times, you had mentioned, we don't think the kids are listening because we kind of don't want them to be, but usually they are. So starting the conversation with there's been a lot of changes around here lately. Can you tell me a little bit about what you think is going on? They might be spot on, they might be in far left field, but it gives you a great place to start. And then our next thing at New Song that we believe wholeheartedly in is that children do need to be told the truth. I mean, as you mentioned, some circumstances of death are so hard to comprehend so hard to put in words, but we do believe that children deserve the truth because it's their story as well.

Brenda Vargas:

And that can be really hard if the caregiver, parent is still finding their way through that truth. And even figuring out all the pieces of that, because in some situations it's very complex. It might've been sudden and/or it might have been something someone was struggling with for very long time. And I think that the big one that comes up that I think a lot of people, a lot of parents may not know how to approach the topic. And that is probably suicide. When the loved one has died to suicide. What advice can you give, Jill?

Jill Lovill:

And so again, it's all dependent on the age of the child, the relationship with the person who's died, and so many different factors. You can always reach out to me, that is part of my role at New Song is to help people disclose cause of death to their children, if they're not sure how to go about doing that. But

again, I would start with the truth and step number one is that the special person has died. New Song Center does believe that using that word "died" is super important because it allows children to really make sense of what happened.

Brenda Vargas:

And for some people it's really hard for them to use that final word, a death, dying. I know that I've heard other terms in sometimes passing, gone to heaven. I mean, there's so many different euphemisms. So could you expand on that a little bit?

Jill Lovill:

Yeah, absolutely. And so the euphemisms exist because we want to protect our children, right? And a lot of times it feels too harsh to say your mom has died. But we believe even if you go back to what we talked about at the beginning of task number one, which is accepting that reality of the loss, in saying the word "died", concrete thinking children, which is appropriate for their age level, we'll fully understand what that means. They will start to say, when something dies, we don't get to see them here alive anymore. When something dies, they don't need food and water. They don't feel pain, things like that. The other euphemisms can make that confusing, particularly for a concrete thinker, which is our younger children.

Brenda Vargas:

So true. And you know, it's so complex depending on the age and the experience the student is having when they've seen them last and just the entire relationship in itself. They are still children, even though sometimes they look a little bit bigger and we think they have it altogether, we need to allow them to be children. And it's so speaking truth or speaking from a place of just transparency and sharing with your little one, you know, no matter how little or small, whether they're a teenager and/or five or six or eight, nine, it doesn't matter. They're still our children. And as parents and caregivers, we want to oftentimes put them in a bubble and protect them from the world and the experiences that can bring pain and fear and anxiety and stress. But this is a normal part of life for us to lose someone that we so dearly love. Will you talk to folks about how grief is so closely connected with love?

Jill Lovill:

Absolutely. And so grief is really love turned inside out, right? And so sometimes people say, how do I feel this bad? I mean, for those of you who are grieving, there's nothing like it in the world. And that reason is because you love so deeply. And sometimes people might say, gosh, I didn't even know this person well, or, you know, if it's a community death, something like that, but the relationship was there. They impacted your life somehow. And it's important to note that sometimes we grieve strongly, even when a relationship wasn't going so well. I was estranged from my father for so long, but he died now. We're grieving different things. We're grieving that we'll never repair that relationship. So again, number one, don't judge yourself or your feelings as you go through this, you can grieve deeply, for a relationship that was tenuous.

Brenda Vargas:

It's certainly essential to really recognize that as some families are blended and there are many different relatives at impact and/or loved ones and neighbors that are like family. And sometimes people move away and we lose touch. And so it doesn't mean that that relationship at any point in time before wasn't significant and/or that because of time and space, that it's not going to be as impactful, right. Because

let's say it was years ago or the relationship as you said, was somewhat challenged in some way, or was still in the mending stages, I guess is a great way to put it, but what's the primary need that children have as they go through grief?

Jill Lovill:

Again, we do believe the primary need is that they're told the truth and I'll touch back on that one more time simply because the protection that you're offering them in doing so is the trust in you, right? And so you're their safe person. You're who they can go to. And by telling them the truth, they're going to say, okay, that was really hard, but I know I can still trust mom. She's not hiding things from me. So that is one of the big ones that we say. Kids also need help in identifying and expressing their emotions. And so if, again, someone is grieving as an adult, you know, it is a mess. You don't really know what you're feeling one moment to the next, for kids who don't have that vocabulary, that can be even trickier. So we know that kids grieve usually in behaviors rather than words. So if you see your child, who has just lost someone special from death and they're acting out, let's say, what they might need there is help identifying what that emotion is. You're feeling super angry because your mom isn't here anymore because she died. Anger is what you're feeling as an example.

Brenda Vargas:

That's a great example to bring up some times, right? Anger masks everything else that we're feeling so deeply and is hurting so badly for children and youth. So I know that it's a lot to digest to what we've shared and I hope parents and caregivers out there take some time to hit that rewind and pause, and really listen. And, I guess find acceptance with having to share the truth. Students and children are so incredibly insightful, and I really appreciate that. We start where they're at, as you've mentioned before, Jill, finding out what they already know about the situation or what they've gathered; we communicate with so many nonverbals these days, right? So again, there is no judgment; accept your child where they're at and go from there. Jill, if people want to get a hold of you in order to seek direction or guidance, or, you know, maybe take a look at some of their resources, I know your organization has a wealth of information to share with families and are willing and ready to assist, where should they go? How can they find more information?

Jill Lovill:

You bet. We are here as a resource. I was intentionally, didn't give too much information about disclosure to the child because so many circumstances are so different, and we want to make sure that we meet your needs and the needs of the child based on where they're at, just as you said, Brenda, but we are here if something has come up to make sure we can walk you through that. We have a website that is available with many activities and information, and that is newsongcenter.org. You can also always reach us at (480) 951-8985. Again, my name is Jill. So if you want to talk directly to me, just give an ask and they'll make sure you're in my hands and we can walk through pretty much anything. There's really nothing off the table about death, dying, bereavement, grief, that we don't want to be a part of with you. So please don't hesitate to reach and we can share. There's so many great books out there, resources out there. We offer peer to peer support groups, all kinds of different things. So you're not alone in this. We're here.

Brenda Vargas:

Yes. And if you're a parent or caregiver that is dealing with this, and it's very raw for you, I would really encourage you to reach out, just to get some guidance and sometimes, just knowing the information. So

at any point in time throughout your grief, if this is something you want to pursue, this kind of support for your child and/or for yourself, it's important to have that information so that you can make sense of it again and determine what's the best fit for you and your family. Jill, thank you so much. I know we're going to have a follow-up with more information for parents and caregivers. Thank you parents for joining us for another CUSD cares.