

# Grief, loss and young people

The impact of loss on the lives of young people can easily be overlooked, writes **Lee Rogerson**. It is a reality that touches us all and can result in poor or negative outcomes in life



Your brother committed suicide. I'm so sorry. I felt my knees give way, bodily strength evaporating until I felt limp. My head was spinning. The words failed to register, no matter how many times I replayed them in my mind. I am told I showed no outward emotion. All I remember inside was an overwhelming and dreadful numbness.

Loss comes in many forms and it comes to all of us sooner or later in life. For some, it comes suddenly and unexpectedly. For others, it is a slow inevitability. One thing is certain. None of us is immune; it is a reality we all must face. Carl Jung once said: 'There are as many nights as days, and the one is just as long as the other in the year's course. Even a happy life cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word "happy" would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness.'

The emotional reaction to the darkness of loss is what we call 'grief' and the outworking of grief is what we term 'mourning'. Although we commonly think of grief and mourning as intrinsically linked to death, in truth grief is the emotional reaction to the experience of any significant loss – career, home, friendships, health, freedom, marriage.

It comes in numerous guises and impacts on us in different ways. Things that might crush others, we find able to bear. Types of loss others cope with, we may find intolerable. We are unique and our emotional response is unique. Neither is loss the prerogative of the old, though at times they may feel it most frequently and keenly.

The Joseph Rowntree Trust discovered that 92 per cent of young people will experience significant (to them) loss before the age of 16. The vast majority of young people can 'bounce back' from even serious setbacks, but there is a significant minority who fail to do so<sup>2</sup>. 'Interchange 78', a study produced by the charity Barnados, examined why two-thirds of young people deemed 'at risk' grew up to be emotionally balanced and well adjusted, whereas

the remaining third did not and life consequently spiralled out of control.

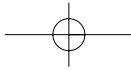
It was discovered that while all children, to a greater or lesser degree, possess emotional resilience (the ability to bounce back), where support networks (eg family, school, friends) around them are poor or non-existent and the losses either chronic, multiple or sustained, resilience is dramatically reduced<sup>3</sup>.

As someone who works on a professional basis with young people within deprived communities, the emotional, psychological and even physical damage experienced in young lives is all too shockingly visible. The impact of one too many setbacks in life can knock many down a helter-skelter path into drugs and substance misuse, risky lifestyles or crime. For some, it is an attempt to escape the pain; to become, as in the famous Pink Floyd song, 'comfortably numb'. For others, like a caged animal goaded once too often, it is a striking out and raging against the injustices of life.

Working in communities to tackle youth offending and antisocial behaviour, I am acutely conscious that, as practitioners, we focus all too often on managing symptoms and fail to address causes. Much time and money has been spent on education and diversion strategies without ever really touching the well of pain from which many young people draw their self-esteem, self-image and view of the world. Many practitioners working with young people feel ill equipped to deal with the deeper emotional needs they display.

There can also be an over emphasis on challenging behaviour, and focusing on the cognitive processes that lie behind it, without engaging the powerful emotions driving this. In my experience, many young people's negative actions stem from emotional reactions that they are at a loss to explain rationally.

Sometimes where grief is delayed, even by many years, a connection between presenting issues and previous painful losses fails to be made even by



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the young people themselves. Sometimes it cannot be socially acknowledged or publicly mourned and becomes disenfranchised. The emotion builds like a pressure cooker and anger is transferred towards another object or turned inward upon themselves.

It is increasingly apparent that it is impossible to ignore the part played by grief and loss in shaping young people's attitudes and actions. In 1996, Dr Gwyneth Boswell drew a link between serious violent crime and grief and loss<sup>4</sup>. More recently, 'On the Case', a study conducted across Greater Manchester, analysed 1,027 cases in the Youth Offending Service<sup>5</sup>. Random samples of 147 case files were studied in depth for common factors associated with offending behaviour.

The study discovered that 92 per cent had experienced at least one of the following:

- loss of contact with a parent through divorce/separation
- death of a parent/carer
- outright rejection by parent/carer
- illness/disability of parent/carer to the point of being unable to carry on
- impermanence of home
- 48 per cent had experienced at least two of these scenarios.

Drawing causal links between emotional distress and offending behaviour is notoriously difficult but the study highlights that it is a strong correlating factor. It has led some to conclude that unless such issues are addressed then the success of intervention work to prevent re-offending is often limited.

The Freagarrach Project in Scotland, which works with persistent young offenders, has taken this on board. It actively engages with the emotional issues they struggle with in an environment that stresses care, nurture and comfort. It has an exceptional record in reducing re-offending rates<sup>6</sup>.

Having previously worked in a Coventry based counselling organisation for three years and been

a trustee for a further two, I am aware of the value and benefit of good counselling. In my current role, I am equally conscious that too many practitioners simply refer on to already overstretched counselling services, where appointment waiting lists are long.

Sadly, many young people refuse to attend. I therefore felt challenged to produce a resource which was not intended to equip anyone as a professional counsellor but which provided basic tools to equip practitioners, in a wide variety of settings, formal and informal, to know how to respond to grief and loss in young people. In many respects, it is a preventative tool that also helps identify when specialist support is appropriate.

I began by saying that loss is an inevitable part of life. While this is true, it is not inevitable that it has to lead to negative outcomes. Through the love and support of family and friends, I have found that even terrible and tragic experiences can be a time of personal growth. I have a deeper sense of empathy and compassion for other people's pain. I have a different outlook on life. The loss doesn't go away. I revisit it, especially at birthdays and other significant dates.

It doesn't go away, but it doesn't control me either. One of the great challenges of working with children and young people is that wherever they are currently in life, at whatever point they may find themselves 'stuck', there is the possibility of moving on. To be a small part of that process, a step on the journey, is also its greatest privilege. ■

#### References

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- 6 Loble D, Smith D, Stern C. Freagarrach: an evaluation of a project for persistent young offenders for Scottish Executive Central Research Unit. 2001

*Lee Rogerson has worked with young people in a variety of settings, including pastoral, alternative education, and detached youth work on the streets. He received an MBE in 2004 for his innovative projects in tackling antisocial and offending behaviour in Coventry and is currently managing director of Street Talk Ltd. To find out more about Lee's bereavement resource visit: [www.first-response.info](http://www.first-response.info) His email address is [rogerson2@ntlworld.com](mailto:rogerson2@ntlworld.com)*

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