

Chapter 5 - Meeting Developmental Needs: Loss

The losses that children have experienced in their young lives generally have been traumatic. They place these children at risk for leading healthy, productive lives. It is primarily through the care of their foster parents that the hurt these children feel will be healed.

But loss is not unique to children who have experienced the tragedy of abuse, neglect, and separation from their parents and kin. It affects the parents of children who are in foster care and who are in foster care and who have been adopted. Loss is universal. It is an “equal opportunity employer,” affecting probably all of us in this room. So we will also talk about the importance of learning from our experience so we can help others.

Introduce visualization exercise called a “Self-Portrait.”

As a foundation for discussing the effects of losses, we are going to do an interesting exercise together to help us think about losses and the factors that influence how loss is experienced.

*The purpose of the next activity is to connect what we have learned about attachment to the issues of loss.

The purpose of the first part of exercise is to see how we define ourselves by ourselves by our relationships and the roles we play.

Direct the exercise by using a dialogue and questions that will help the participants visualize and see their world.

*Distribute a handout with a picture of a person on it or distribute a blank piece of paper and instruct them to draw a picture of a person on it that represents them, then distribute post-it notes for them to draw their connections. Have a prepared flip chart with a picture of a human being shown in order to model the first few directions. Explain that you will be asking questions and would like for them to share their responses with the group. Explain that they may pass at any time if asked a direct question, and that they may leave the room at any time if they become too uncomfortable.

Ladies and gentlemen, draw a picture of a human being to represent you. The space around him on the sheet of paper is his/her world. Mr./Ms. Human Being, we would like to get to know you a little and to understand exactly “who in the world you are.” We need to ask you a few questions to discover who you are. Do you have a name?

Write your name on the picture of the person. He is now you. All right, let’s represent your mother and father in your world. Think about your father and draw a picture of something that represents him or a memory of him on a post-it note and place him on your self-portrait as you see him connected to you.

*Trainer needs to model this by drawing something about their own father such as fishing, working, etc. Be sure that you give permission to participants to write or draw their answers. As the trainer, you should model both options.

Now, think about your mother and draw a picture or write words that represent her on another post-it. Place her on your self-portrait as you see her connected to you.

Continue to direct the exercise by helping them to identify and represent the other significant connections in their lives.

*Ask participants to draw each of their significant others on a post-it note doing something that represents them. Then ask them to place each of post-it on their self-portrait representing the connection. Ensure that they represent their roles as spouse or partner, parent, brother or sister, aunt or uncle, community member, and friend.

Think about your spouse or partner and visualize your relationship; draw a picture or write words that represent that relationship on the post-it note and place it on the picture, as you see that person connected to you. Continue in this way thinking of major relationships and roles are represented. Be sure to include children, extended family, friends and community involvement.

Continue with the activity

Continue asking the participants to draw items which represent their lives as described below:

- Ask them to identify their occupations and have them draw something that representative and place it on their self-portrait. (For example, if one is a salesman, put a customer in the picture; if one is a bus driver, put some passengers in the picture.)
- Ask them to draw a picture that symbolizes a positive personality trait that they possess and place it on their portrait.
- Also help them identify what they like to do for recreation or pleasure. Draw the activity and place it on the picture.
- Ask them to draw a picture of their pet(s) and add this connection to their portrait.
- Ask them to think about a special possession, draw a picture of it and add it to their portrait.
- Ask them to think about their faith or spiritually, draw something that represents their faith and place it on their portrait.
- Ask whether or not the portrait represents a good picture of them.

You started out as human beings we knew very little about. Right now we know quite a lot about how you see yourselves and how other people help us, and perhaps help you, explain and define who you are. All of us in this room have a way of understanding who we are that has a lot to do with the people and activities that are important in our lives.

Introduce the second part of the exercise to the group.

Now I'm going to conduct the second half of this exercise. This is an exercise in "make believe." Try to pretend there is some realness in the "make believe." Listen to what I

am saying and think about how you are feelings. This part of the exercise is an example of the types and kinds of losses people experience.

Conduct the second part of the exercise by removing the connections from their self-portrait as a result of an expected loss or an unexpected loss.

- Examples of expected losses:
Your children have grown up and are leaving to pursue their ambitions. Remove your children from your self-portrait. Your parents have been growing very old. Your parents get Alzheimer's disease and have to be placed in a nursing home. Remove them from your self-portrait.
- Example of a loss of self-esteem:
You made a serious error at work. It wasn't your fault, but as a result, you lose your job. Remove your job from your self-portrait.
- Example of a loss of health:
You developed health problems and can no longer engage in your hobby or recreational activity. Remove it from your self-portrait.
- Examples of loss of significant people (try to use humorous as well as traumatic examples):
Your spouse/partner has a very special skill that is needed in Timbuktu, to save millions of people. They will be gone for five years and you can't go with them. Remove your spouse/partner from your self-portrait.
Your friend moved away because their job was transferred. Remove your friend from your self-portrait.
Your siblings, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles have split the lottery and have taken a world cruise and leave you behind because you're too sick to go. Remove them from your self-portrait.
- Examples of loss of identity:
Your community has been tragically hit by a flood and you lose all your possessions. Remove them from your self-portrait. As a result of the flood you no longer have a community in which be an active participant, so remove your community membership.
Your pet ran away during the flood, so remove your pet from your self-portrait.
You were hit on the head and lost the personality trait that you valued. Remove it from your self-portrait. Because of all your losses, you have lost your faith and spiritually. Remove it from your self-portrait.

Conclude the exercise by pointing out that everything is gone except for your name.

At this point, everyone and everything is gone. There is nothing in your life right now. (Pause) Now we have the human beings with whom we began.

Process the exercise with the group by asking these questions:

*Ensure that you pause after each question to allow for a few responses. When you give directions, allow a moment or two so that people can follow through.

- How are you feeling right now?
- What has this experience been like for you?

- Is there anything you would like to say about what has happened in your world these last few minutes?

This was just a visualization which was very emotional and you expressed pain or humor, which can be a cover for pain.

- What is the first thing that you would like to restore?
- Take the post-it representing that connection and put it back in your self-portrait.
- What is the second thing?
- Replace that post-it now.
- Replace the rest of your connections.
- What are some feelings now that your connections have been replaced?

Summarize the exercise and introduce the discussion of the kinds of losses we experience.

We tend to define ourselves and other people by the important relationships and roles we have. Our life is structured by the activities we do within these relationships and roles. When there are losses of important people or roles, our sense of who we are, and the way others see us, can be seriously shaken. Our self-portrait was dramatic, but we know all people will experience significant losses in their lives

- Of the things that you lost, what do you think that a child entering foster care might lose?

*Cover the following points in discussion:

- Parents
- Siblings
- Toys
- Friends
- Sports
- What can you do to help a child who has experienced loss?

*Cover the following points in discussion:

- Listen to them talk
- Tell them it's okay to cry
- Allow the child to be sad
- Let the child visit past friends

Categories of losses (expected and unexpected).

People experience two categories of losses. Expected losses are that occur within normal life development. For instance, as one approaches late middle age, it can be expected that one's parents will soon pass away. It can also be expected that some males will lose their hair.

Unexpected losses may include the loss of a sibling or child, a young child's loss of a parent, or a sudden illness.

Ask participants the following questions:

- Can you give an example from the self-portrait activity of losses that are an expected part of life?

*Cover the following points that were relevant to the self-portrait activity:

- Loss of parents from old age
- Loss of children from the home when they grow up and move away
- Can you provide some examples that were not covered in the self-portrait activity?

*Cover the following points in discussion:

- Children first attending school or leaving home for school
- Moving to a new location
- Graduation, marriages, new jobs
- Menopause, the loss of continued child-bearing ability
- Retirement, the loss of a job through aging
- The physical aging process
- Loss of spouse, family and friends in the normal aging process
- The loss of certain privileges and freedoms as we grow out of childhood
- Can you give an example from the self- portrait exercise of losses that are “unexpected” or not typical part of life?

*Cover any of the following points that were relevant to the self-portrait activity:

- Illness
- Injury
- Natural disaster
- Loss of job

*Discuss other kinds of unexpected loss:

- Death of a parent at an early age
- Infertility
- Car accidents
- Fire
- What are some differences between expected and unexpected losses in terms of how we may react to them?

*Cover the following points about losses:

- Expected losses are shared by all human beings.
- There is usually a lot of support for expected losses, because we all sense that these are universal losses and we too will experience them
- Expected losses are considered “normal”, and we may feel normal in our need to grieve.
- There are regrets but there is usually no great sense of blame or shame in experiencing expected losses.
- We are generally prepared by life for expected losses.

*Cover the following points about unexpected losses:

- We are usually unprepared for unexpected losses.
- Unexpected losses are not shared exactly the same by all human beings.
- For some kinds of unexpected losses, like infertility, or being an adopted person, there is little understanding or support from society about our need to grieve these losses.
- There is often a sense of personal shame or blame that can complicate unexpected losses.
- Unexpected losses are often not regarded as “normal losses” and this complicates our grieving process.
- What is it a challenge to deal with issues regarding separation, loss, and grieving?

*Cover the following points:

- Separation, loss, and grief are painful experience to think about and talk about.
- We feel uncomfortable to be with children and adults who are sad and angry.
- Other people’s grief can remind us of our own painful experiences, their pain can “trigger” our own sad memories and feelings.
- Our own painful experiences can help or hinder the way we respond to other’s losses.
- We often feel unsure how to help other people with their pain.
- Dealing with painful losses can take a long time, sometimes a lifetime.

Type of losses within categories.

Besides thinking of loss as expected or unexpected, all the losses we have talked about fall into four sub-types.

First, there’s loss of health, both physical and mental. For example, in the self-portrait, loss of health deprived you of an activity that is really important to you. But also, your job loss can cause financial problems, lack of health care, and a lot of emotional stress.

Second, there is the loss of a loved one, whether through death or leaving. Some people regard infertility as experience the loss of babies one could never have.

Third, there’s the loss of self-esteem, when we feel shame or hurt. Some losses can combine all four types-such as job loss. Certainly self-esteem suffers from experienced job loss. In the same way, although a divorce may be mutually acceptable to both parties, it can represent a loss for both a person who has been in our life a long time and the loss of self-esteem.

Fourth, there is the loss of identity. Who we are and how we identify ourselves is a combination of our connections, environment and experiences. Our identity is like a three legged stool. If one of the legs were to be removed, such as our connections, the stool would fall over.

Help the participants understand why knowledge of loss is relevant to foster care.

Let’s think about losses for children who need foster families and adoptive families. What are some of the reason that children come into foster care?

Summarize the discussion. Ask the following:

- Are the reasons children come into care expected or unexpected losses?
- Which of these losses were unexpected?
Circumstances that bring children into care are usually unexpected losses. Sometimes the losses that bring children into foster care and adoption are multiple and serious.
Many children coming into care have experienced many losses in a considerably short period of time. They have often not had the time or help to process all of these losses. The job of foster parents and adoptive parents is to help the children deal with these losses.

Discuss the losses experienced by birth parents, foster parents, and adoptive parents.

Earlier we said that separation, loss, and grieving are part of the child protective services system – a shared experience for children, birth families, foster families, and adoptive families. Let's think about the kinds of losses the experience of foster care and adoption can mean for birth families, foster families, and adoptive families.

Ask participants to identify losses that birth families/ foster families/ adoptive families encounter when their children are in foster care. Record responses on a flip chart.

*Cover the following in either activity you choose above:

- Loss of a child/children
- Loss of their home: loss of housing assistance because there are no longer children in the home
- Loss of their health: for example, drug addiction, AIDS
- Loss of their spouse, significant other: for example, when mother leaves a husband who has abused her child
- Loss of their self-esteem: our society sees people who neglect and abuse their children as horrible and worthless
- Loss of control, self-direction: for example, they must negotiate for contact with their children and they must meet agency expectations in a particular time frame.
- Now, identify some of the losses which foster families can encounter:

*Cover the following points in either activity you choose above:

- Loss of family stability/constellation.
- Losses to their own children in assuming role of foster family and sibling to a child who may be very different and difficult to deal with.
- Loss of self-esteem: for example, children who do not respond to us, children who do not respond to us, children whose behavior is difficult to managed, children we feel we fail.
- Possible loss of status in the community: society is ambivalent in how values or regards foster families and adoptive families.
- Loss of important people: the child when he returns home, the child's other team members with whom we have worked so hard, such as caseworkers and therapists.

- Losses to our own children and extended family when a foster child returns home or is placed in adoptive family.
- Loss of control: the agency and/or courts may make decisions on behalf of a child.
- Loss of privacy: example, when a family undergoes a particular stress, the agency and birth family share an interest/stake in the resolution of family problems.
- Can you now identify losses that adoptive families may encounter?

*Cover the following points in either activity you choose above?

- Loss of the family experience as we expected it to be: if we are unable to have biological children
- Loss of exclusive parenting role in children's lives: Birth parents and/or foster parents are always an issue for children of adoption, through the various stages of their growth and development.
 - Loss of control in family development: the need to work with agencies and other team members to match a child and help the child and the family develop a mutual attachment.

Summarize the importance of why we are spending a session on separation, loss, and grief.

It seems apparent as we make our lists, that loss is a shared experience for all the adults and children involved in foster care and adoption. One of the basic components to the job of foster parents and adoptive parents is helping children with their losses.

Team members in the Child Protective Services system have to be able to be good "loss managers". This job of loss manager requires the ability and experience of dealing with our own losses in a healthy way. Being foster families and adoptive families requires being able to help children and sometimes their birth families deal with their losses, as well as being able to help ourselves with the inherent losses we and our families will experience in our role.

Introduce the discussion of the grieving process stages.

Having the willingness and ability to take on the role of foster parent or adoptive parent requires an understanding of how people grieve losses. It is important to understand that grief is a healthy thing. It is a process that we go through to heal the painful feelings of separation and loss.

There is a body of knowledge collected by people in the helping professions about the process most human beings go through in grieving a loss. Let's look at what is known about the way we grieve.

Introduce the Stages of Grief

Although adults and children can react differently to losses depending on a number of things that we will talk about later, there is a progression of common reactions and common behaviors.

The five stages of the grieving process are:

- Shock, Denial
- Bargaining
- Acting Out/ Anger
- Depression
- Understanding and Coping

Introduce a group discussion using the prepared flip chart of the Grieving Process.

We are going to have a discussion as we walk through the stages of grieving outlined on the chart.

In this exercise we are going to define each stage. I am going to offer examples of thoughts and behaviors typical at that stage. I am then going to offer an example of thoughts and behaviors typical of children in foster families or adoptive families, and give you an opportunity to provide some examples.

Define and provide an example from the first stage.

The first stage is Shock and denial. In this initial stage children and adults try to stop the loss from occurring or deny that the loss has occurred. This is often called the “honeymoon stage”.

Some examples of indicators that a child is in the shock or denial stage include:

- Children who may sleep a lot;
- May develop upper respiratory or intestinal problems soon after entering care;
- Toddlers may walk around the house looking for their mother;
- Deny that they have been physically abused;
- Deny that they have been removed by seemingly not reacting to the separation, acting as if they are carefree;
- Continually ask to go home;
- Deny there is anything wrong;
- Turn to a fantasy world where hope still flickers that parents will reclaim them, thinking any day their family will come and take them home.

Define and provide examples from the second stage.

The second stage is bargaining. In some ways we feel that we can make a deal and make the situation go away. We feel there must be some atonement, some action we can do to forestall the threat of what is happening. There are often many feelings of guilt connected with the bargaining stage.

An example of bargaining is when someone says, “Please God, if you make my mother well, I’ll stop smoking.”

Provide examples of how children “bargain” by presenting the “no-good hypothesis.”

Children in the bargaining stage of managing the losses associated with placement being to ask the question, “Why am I here?” Most children seek the answer to that question in what has been called the “no-good hypothesis” The child may think: I am no good,

something is terribly wrong with me, and that is why I got beaten or I got taken away from my family. The child begins to try to figure out the specific badness which led to his mistreatment and rejection by his family. For instance, Vernon in the video might have felt that his failure at school shamed his mother so she no longer wanted to keep him. He could then “bargain” that he would do better in school if only he could go home. Generally, children tend to consider whatever issues they are dealing with in their growing up stage as the probable cause of their separation and loss – they were too independent, they didn’t toilet train, they fought with their siblings, they were too clingy, they didn’t meet an expectation, etc.

Some older children have an alternative form of the “No good hypothesis.” They think that their parents are bad but still hope they will take them back. Their bargaining takes the form, “I am willing to forgive and forget all the pain they have caused if only they will take me home again.”

The third form of the “no good hypothesis” is when the child sees neither himself nor his parents at fault, but rather the trouble is from some caseworker, teacher, or foster or adoptive parents that took them away – “If only I can get another caseworker I know I’ll be able to go home.”

Define and provide an example of the third stage.

The third stage is acting out which is anger turned outward. People express angry, hostile behaviors. At this stage comes the realization that the loss has in fact occurred and it cannot be undone.

Although some children do, it is very hard for children to express their anger at separation and placement directly at their parents. Birth parents remain the focus of both positive as well as negative feelings. It is easier to make foster parents or adoptive parents angry than to direct anger and negative behaviors toward birth families. If angry feelings can be expressed and managed in a helpful way, it gives children the opportunity to get out of the “no good” hypothesis.

Some examples of behavior from this stage include:

- Inability to get along with peers
- Disruptive behavior
- Running away
- Destroys property
- Verbal expressions of anger
- Hurt themselves and other children
- Anger directed towards foster parents

Ask participants if they can provide examples of angry behavior they either saw or heard about regarding children in the video.

Define and provide an example of the fourth stage.

Just as the third stage is based on anger, the fourth stage is also. But the focus of the anger in the fourth stage is turned inward. Anger turned inward is usually referred to as depression. As you see from the chart there is some moving back and forth between these opposite behaviors because they have the same feeling basis.

When Nathan's mother died his father had an increase in his drinking and was unable to care for himself or Nathan. This behavior was an example of depression.

The understanding and coping stage is the beginning of managing the powerful feelings of grief. People can understand in a more realistic way, according to their age, abilities, and their emotional development, what happened to them and why it happened.

When people reach an understanding of their losses they are able to express, again depending on their age and abilities, why they feel ashamed, guilty, mad, sad, or glad. Children begin to let go of the "no good hypothesis." Coping allows more energy to apply to the tasks of life, and there is a sense of hope for the future.

When adults and children have been successful at grieving their losses they are often in a position to help other people with managing loss.

Children in family foster care and children who have been adopted will be affected by their losses. They need foster parents and adoptive parents who can help them grieve. They may also need to overcome the developmental losses caused by their multiple losses or by getting stuck in the grieving process.

People who are successful in completing the pathway through the grieving process are often able to use their awareness and skill to help other people grieve. These people are experienced "loss managers." Children in family foster care and adoption need "loss managers" to help them on the pathway through the grieving process. Also, many adolescent children express a desire to help others who are experiencing loss similar to our own.

Provide participants with information about how someone can get "stuck" in one of the stages of grieving.

Progress through the grieving process means that people move through the stages. But sometimes there is a step back along the way. Some people get stuck in a stage for a long time, sometimes forever.

*Has anyone in the group has known someone who was stuck in a stage? How did you know? (For example, years later they are still talking about their ex-husband, divorce.)

These stages of grief do not happen to everyone in exactly the same order. There is not always a clear beginning or a clear ending to grief work. But most people go through each of these stages in one way or another. Because of limited intellectual and emotional abilities to

understand and cope at a particular stage of development, children often have to revisit the grieving process at each new developmental stage.

*How might a child getting stuck in a stage affect their ability to grow and develop? (For example: unable to concentrate or focus on homework or more comfortable playing with younger children)

Many children in care have suffered many losses. They experienced the death, desertion, or disappearance of significant people in their lives. They experienced loss of trust when their parents failed to meet their needs or abused them. Some have lived with several different families. Pain from loss and separation is another type of trauma that can cause children to become stuck at one level of development, or even regress to an earlier level.

Even though there are specific stages of grief, most of us find we move from one stage to another and back again while the loss is still fresh. In other words, we go back and forth through the stages which means we travel back and forth through the pathway of grieving.

We may also find ourselves grieving again, at a later time, even after we understand what happened, developed some coping skills, and are managing fairly well. This is called developmental grieving.

Here's an example; perhaps some years ago you were in love with someone, and then the relationship ended. You didn't want it to end, and you were very sad for a long time. Then you got over it. In fact, you have been happily married to someone else for many years. Then one day, you hear a song on the radio that was your special song with that other person. And, suddenly, to your surprise, you feel sad again.

Developmental grieving can be "triggered" by anniversaries, holidays, birthdays, songs, and foods, smells, or even meeting someone who resembles the person we miss. Developmental grieving, and moving back and forth along the pathway is very common, especially for children. Many children seem to forget their pain for a while, and then suddenly became very angry or sad.

Once we reach the stage of understanding or coping, we might think we have resolved our loss. Of course this doesn't mean we are happy about it. It just means we are able to continue our lives, and may even have learned more about ourselves and others as a result of the loss experience.

Children also experience developmental grieving when moving from a foster home to an adoptive home. Children and foster parents may experience tremendous grief. While the child is grieving the loss of the foster family, this loss is also "triggering" feelings around the earlier loss of his/her parents.

Because of the many losses that children have experienced, they may "trigger" grief responses in the people who care for them. It is important to understand your loss history, so that you can anticipate and prepare for your reaction.

