Helping Traumatized Students and Those Who Experience Grief, Loss, and Mourning

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Workshop Objectives

From this session it is hoped that participants will increase their …

1. Understanding of the difference between traumatic stress and the grief associated with traumatic loss
2. Understanding of interventions for traumatic stress
3. Understanding of interventions for traumatic loss

NOTE: The presenters, Stephen Brock and Melissa Reeves, have no known financial conflicts of interest related to this presentation

Workshop Outline

• Introduction
• Definitions
• Responding to Traumatic Stress
• Responding to Traumatic Loss
• Resources
• Concluding Comments

Introduction

• Prevalence
  • Loss of a parent
    • 4% of children experience a parent’s death
    • 1 in 20 lose a parent by 18 years
  • Loss of a peer
    • 14,820 deaths in 2013 of school aged youth (5-19 years)
    • 23.75 per 100,000

CDC (2015); US Bureau of Census (1990)
Introduction

• Outcomes
  • Sudden parental death
    • Melhem et al.
      • 59% experienced resolution of grief within 1 year
      • 31% show a more gradual diminution in symptoms
      • 10% show high and sustained prolonged grief at 3 years
    • Wordon & Silverman
      • Higher levels of social withdrawal, anxiety, and social problems as well as lower self-esteem and self-efficacy.
      • Most do not show signs of serious emotional/behavioral disturbance
      • However a significant number show serious problems at one year (19%) and at two years (21%).

Melhem et al. (2011); Wordon & Silverman (1996)

Introduction

• Outcomes
  • Educational Implications
    • Significant academic underachievement
    • Adolescent self reports include disrupted concentration and motivation
    • Adolescents have difficulties at work, less well-elaborated plans for career development, lower peer attachment, and diminished educational aspirations.

Abdelnoor & Hoolins (2004a, 2004b); Brent et al. (2012); Coalition to Support Grieving Students (2015)

Introduction

• Outcomes
  • Complicated Grief
    • 85-90% = uncomplicated/normal grieving
    • Probability of developing is 4.4% following major bereavement for adolescents and young adults
      • 18.6% among persons hospitalized with depression
      • 24% among bipolar patients

Kersting et al. (2011)

Introduction

• Causes/Predictors of Pathological Outcomes
  • Gender (female)
  • Personal history of depression
  • Long term surviving parent’s grief reactions.
  • Violent death
  • Intellectual disability

American Psychiatric Association (2013); Melhem et al. (2011); McClatchey et al. (2014); Dodd et al. (2008)

Definitions

1. Traumatic Stress vs. PTSD
2. Bereavement vs. Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder

1. Traumatic Stress Warning Signs
   • It’s been 6 weeks and student not feeling any better
   • Difficulties functioning at school, home, work (high school students)
   • Terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks
   • Increasingly difficult time connecting and relating to others
   • Experiencing suicidal thoughts or feelings
   • Avoiding more and more things that remind person of the disaster or traumatic event

http://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/traumatic-stress.htm
1. **Traumatic Stress vs. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**
   - **Precipitants (PTSD Criterion A)**
     - Directly experiencing
       - War, physical assault, sexual violence, kidnapping, being taken hostage, terrorism, torture, disasters severe MVA
     - Witnessing
       - Serious injury, unnatural death, physical/sexual abuse, domestic violence, accident war or disaster
     - Indirectly experiencing
       - Learning about violent assault, suicide, serious accident or illness affecting close relatives or friends (death due to natural causes does not qualify as PTSD Criterion A)

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**American Psychiatric Association (2013)**

1. **Common Traumatic Stress Reactions**
   - **Preschool**
     1. Reactions not as clearly connected to the crisis event as those observed among older students.
     2. Reactions often expressed nonverbally.
     3. Given equal levels of distress and impairment, may not display as many PTSD symptoms as older children.
     4. May include a temporary loss of recently achieved developmental milestones.

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**Brock (2012)**

1. **Common Traumatic Stress Reactions**
   - **Elementary**
     1. Event-specific fears may be displayed.
     2. Feelings associated with the traumatic stress are often expressed via physical symptoms.
     3. Trauma-related play becomes more complex and elaborate.
     4. Problems paying attention.

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**Brock (2012)**

1. **Middle and High School**
   - More adult-like reactions
   - Sense of foreshortened future
   - Oppositional and aggressive behaviors
   - School avoidance
   - Self-injurious behavior and thinking
   - Revenge fantasies
   - Substance abuse
   - Learning problems

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**Brock (2012)**

1. **Pathological Traumatic Stress Reactions (PTSD)**
   - **Preschool**
     - Intrusion symptoms
     - Persistent avoidance of stimuli
     - Negative alterations in cognitions and mood
     - Alterations in arousal & reactivity

   - **Note**: To Dx PTSD symptoms must be present for 1 month

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**Brock (2012)**

1. **Pathological Traumatic Stress Reactions (PTSD)**
   - **School Aged**
     - Intrusion symptoms
     - Persistent avoidance of stimuli
     - Negative alterations in cognitions and mood
     - Alterations in arousal & reactivity

   - **Note**: To Dx PTSD symptoms must be present for 1 month
Definitions

2. Bereavement vs. Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder
   • Precipitants
     • Death of someone the student had a close relationship with
     • Loss vs. traumatic loss
     • Death due to a long-term terminal illness
     • Provides the opportunity to make cognitive and interpersonal adjustments.
     • Sudden and unexpected death
     • Results in the need to cope with traumatic stress and to grieve a loss

American Psychiatric Association (2013)

Definitions

2. Bereavement vs. Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder
   • Precipitants
     • Traumatic loss


Definitions

2. Bereavement vs. Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder
   • Common Grief Reactions
     • Preschool
     • Decreased verbalization
     • Increased anxiety (e.g., clinging, fear of separation)
     • Regressive behaviors (e.g., bedwetting, thumb sucking)

NASP (2010)

Definitions

2. Bereavement vs. Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder
   • Common Grief Reactions
     • Elementary
     • Difficulty concentrating or inattention
     • Somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach problems)
     • Sleep disturbances (e.g., nightmares, fear of the dark)
     • Repeated telling and acting out of the event
     • Withdrawal
     • Increased irritability, disruptive behavior, or aggressive behavior
     • Increased anxiety (e.g., clinging, whining)
     • Depression, guilt, or anger

NASP (2010)

Definitions

2. Bereavement vs. Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder
   • Pathological Grief Reactions
     • At least one of the following present at least 6 months in children, 12 months in adults
       1. Persistent yearning/longing
       2. Intense sorrow and emotional pain
       3. Preoccupation with decease
       4. Preoccupation with death circumstances

American Psychiatric Association (2013)
Definitions

2. Bereavement vs. Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder
   - Pathological Grief Reactions
     - At least six of the following present at least 6 months in children, 12 months in adults
     - Reactive distress to the death
     1. Difficulty accepting the death
     2. Disbelief or emotional numbness
     3. Difficulty with positive reminiscing
     4. Bitterness or anger
     5. Maladaptive beliefs about self in relation to deceased (e.g., self-blame)
     6. Avoidance of loss reminders

American Psychiatric Association (2013)

Responding to Traumatic Stress

1. Assessment of Traumatic Stress
2. Universal Mental Health Crisis Interventions
3. Selected Mental Health Crisis Interventions
4. Indicated Mental Health Crisis Interventions

American Psychiatric Association (2013)

Responding to Traumatic Stress

1. Assessment of Traumatic Stress

American Psychiatric Association (2013)

Responding to Traumatic Stress

2. Universal Mental Health Crisis Interventions
   - Reestablishing of Social Support Systems
   - Informational Bulletins, Flyers, and Handouts
   - Psychological First Aid
   - Caregiver Trainings
   - Classroom Meetings

American Psychiatric Association (2013)
Responding to Traumatic Stress

3. Selected Mental Health Crisis Interventions
   - Student Psychoeducational Groups
   - Group Crisis Intervention
   - Individual Crisis Intervention

Brock (2012)

Responding to Traumatic Stress

4. Indicated Mental Health Crisis Interventions
   - Psychotherapy

Brock (2012)

Responding to Traumatic Loss

1. Address Traumatic Stress
   - Seek comfort and support
   - Reestablish a routine
   - Connect with others
   - Challenge your sense of helplessness
   - Minimize media exposure
   - Acknowledge and accept your feelings
   - Make stress reduction a priority

http://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/traumatic-stress.htm

Responding to Traumatic Loss

2. Assessment of Grief
   I. Has there been changes in sleep patterns since the death?
   II. ... eating patterns since the death?
   III. ... academic performance since the death?
   IV. ... increased dependency since the death?
   V. ... overall behavior (increase in energy; acting out more; increase aggression)?
   VI. Has the student been more withdrawn and/or appeared sad or depressed?
   VII. Has the student complained of an increase in physical complaints since the death?

www.healinghouse.org

Responding to Traumatic Loss

2. Assessment of Grief
   • If answered "yes" to 4 out of 7 of these questions; your child is grieving
   • If child has experienced a death, and answered "no" to 4 out of 7; remain aware of these symptoms, as a child's grief may not become apparent until months after the death has occurred.

www.healinghouse.org
Responding to Traumatic Loss

2. Assessment of Grief (Normal Verbal Behaviors)
- Talking about the deceased or loss a lot or not at all
- Asking numerous questions or not asking any questions
- Wanting to hear the story of the loss over and over – OR – not wanting to hear anything about the loss
- Wishing to be with the deceased (monitor for potential suicidal ideation but don’t assume that to be the case)
- Talking a lot to engage others
- Saying silly things/being the class clown
- Nighttime dreams about the person who died
- Talking about having “seen” or “felt” the person who died
- Numerous fears of many things
- Worries about safety, other people getting sick or dying

2. Assessment of Grief (Normal Emotional Behaviors)
- Lot of tears; crying at unexpected times
- Strong feelings/emotions about seemingly small things
- Over-reacting
- Difficulties concentrating or focus
- Noncompliance
- Strong need to be near an adult all the time
- Increase in intensity of anger - angry at everyone and everything
- Seeing someone and believing it is the person who died
- Forgetfulness
- Lowered self esteem
- Irritability
- Clowning around

2. Assessment of Grief (Normal Physical Behaviors)
- Eating a lot or not much at all
- Sleeping a lot or not sleeping at all
- Urine and bowel accidents
- Pains in the stomach not explained by medical condition
- Non-serious, recurrent illnesses (e.g. colds, sore throats, and headaches),
- Regression in behaviors (e.g. toilet training, difficulties separating, hitting, pinching)
- Needing to touch people frequently
- Weary and fatigue, even with enough sleep
- Aggression towards others and/or objects

2. Assessment of Grief (Intervention Cues)
- Dangerous risk taking
- Self destructive behaviors
- Threatening to hurt self or others or violent play
- Total withdrawal from people and environment
- A dramatic change in personality or functioning over a long period of time
- Drop in grades
- Angry outbursts
- Depression or Anxiety
- Assuming identity of person who died
- Substance use/abuse
- Any of the “normal” behaviors happening over a very long time or to an extreme

2. Assessment of Grief (Secondary Loss)
- Changed relationships/peer groups
- Changes in schools
- Financial challenges
- Change in lifestyle
- Parent less available
- Change in lifestyle
- Parent less available
- Loss of shared memories
- Change in future plans
- Loss of special recognition an support
- Decreased sense of safety and security

http://www.griefspeaks.com/id4.html
Coalition to Support Grieving Students (2015)
Responding to Traumatic Loss

2. Assessment of Grief (Identifying Triggers)

Events such as the following may act as grief triggers for:

- Hearing a song or seeing a TV show
- Going to or seeing a photo of a place
- Transitions (graduation, starting at a new school, moving)
- Loss of opportunities (vacations, performances, sports events, father-daughter dances)
- Smells or sounds
- Hearing a news report (of someone who died in a similar way)
- Special occasions (holidays, birthdays, Mother's/Father's Day)

3. Universal Grief Interventions: Role of Peers

- Provide information at basic level – avoids asking repetitive questions
- Give opportunity to ask questions
- Provide safe environment to share thoughts and feelings
- Offer concrete advice and practical suggestions

What to say… and not to say

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t say this…</th>
<th>Say this…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I know just what you’re going through.</td>
<td>&quot;Can you tell me more about what this has been like for you?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You must be incredibly angry.</td>
<td>&quot;How do you think this is happening to them and what has this been like for you?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is hard. But it’s important to remember the good things in life, too.</td>
<td>&quot;What kinds of memories do you have about the person who died?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least he’s no longer in pain.</td>
<td>&quot;What sorts of things have you been thinking about since your loved one died?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I lost both my parents when I was your age.</td>
<td>&quot;Tell me more about what this has been like for you.&quot;</td>
</tr>
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<td>I lost both my parents when I was your age.</td>
<td>&quot;Tell me more about what this has been like for you.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You’ll need to be strong now for your family. It’s important to get a grip on your feelings.</td>
<td>&quot;How are you doing? What kinds of concerns do you have about them?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My dog died last week. I know how you must be feeling.</td>
<td>&quot;I know how I’ve felt when someone I loved died, but I don’t really know how you’re feeling. Can you tell me something about what this has been like for you?&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Universal Grief Interventions: Cultural Sensitivities

- Be present and authentic.
- Even if unfamiliar with a particular culture’s practices, let the family’s responses be your guide; be guided by their responses.

4. Selected Grief Interventions

- Funeral attendance
- Benefits – feel included, comforted by support of others
- Learn about own grief when see others grieving
- Explain what will happen
- Answer questions
- Let children decide
- Pair adult with each child

http://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/traumatic-stress.htm

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Drs. Brock & Reeves
Responding to Traumatic Loss

4. Selected Grief Interventions
   - 20 Activities for Processing Grief
   - Helping Children with Traumatic Grief
   - Sesame Street
     - Caring Cards
     - Memory Chain
     - Children’s Book
     - Parent’s Guide

5. Indicated Traumatic Grief Interventions
   - CBITS: Cognitive Behavioral Interventions for Trauma in Schools
     - Teaches six cognitive-behavioral techniques:
       - Education about reactions to trauma
       - Relaxation training
       - Cognitive therapy
       - Real life exposure
       - Stress or trauma exposure
       - Social problem-solving
     - Includes two parent education sessions and one teacher education.
     - Average = 10 sessions
     - Reduces symptoms of PTSD depression, behavior problems

http://www.rand.org/health/projects/cbits/  

Behavioral Regulation: Zones of Regulation

- Red Zone: extremely heightened states of alertness and intense emotions.
  - May be elated or experiencing anger, rage, explosive behavior, devastation, or terror when in the Red Zone.
  - A person is described as “out of control” if in the Red Zone.

- Yellow Zone: heightened state of alertness and elevated emotions; has some control
  - May be experiencing stress, frustration, anxiety, excitement, silliness, the wiggles, or nervousness

- Green Zone: calm state of alertness; may be as happy, focused, content, or ready to learn
  - Zone where optimal learning occurs.

- Blue Zone: low states of alertness; one feels sad, tired, sick, or bored.

http://www.zonesofregulation.com
Responding to Traumatic Loss

5. Indicated Grief Interventions

- Trauma Focused CBT
  - Uses acronym: PRACTICE and incorporates psychoeducation
  - Parenting skills - optimize children's emotional and behavioral adjustment.
  - Relaxation and stress management skills
  - Affective expression and modulation are taught to help identify and cope with a range of emotions.
  - Cognitive coping and processing – focus on relationships among thoughts, feelings and behaviors; modify inaccurate or unhelpful thoughts about the trauma.
  - Trauma narration - children describe their personal traumatic experiences
  - In vivo mastery of trauma reminders – help overcome avoidance of situations that are no longer dangerous, but are reminders
  - Conjoint child-parent sessions - help the child and parent talk to each other about the trauma.
  - Enhance future safety and development – address safety, help the child regain developmental momentum, and teach additional skills needed to end treatment.

Responding to Traumatic Loss

5. Indicated Grief Interventions

- Care for the Caregiver
  - Take physical and psychological care of self
  - Identify friends, family, and colleagues to talk to
  - Monitor own emotions - seeking additional support if guilt, resentment, or personal grief begin to interfere with work life.
  - Ensure employee assistance programs are available
  - Engage in social activism and advocacy.
  - Practice your religious faith and spirituality.
  - Use creative self-expression.
  - Use humor

Resources

- PREPaRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Program
- Sesame Street: When Families Grieve (also has specific resources for military)
  - www.sesamestreet.org/grief
- CBIT's
  - https://cbitsprogram.org/
- Coalition to Support Grieving Children
  - http://grievingstudents.scholastic.com
- Series of kids books for bibliotherapy
  - Dawn Huebner – many have accompanying activity books
  - Julia Cook – many have accompanying activity books
  - Children’s Books:
  - When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by Laurie Krasny Brown
  - The Healing Tree by K. Hemery

Concluding Comments


Brock (2011); Coalition for Grieving Children

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