

Living Through Mourning

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VOLUME SIX

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Meet Our Guest Grief Specialist

Mary Robinson, is the Founder and Executive Director of Imagine, A Center for Coping with Loss, a free year-round grief support center for children and adults coping with loss due to death, or living with a family member with a life-altering illness. Working and volunteering in the field of grief support since 1997, Ms. Robinson's commitment is to ensure grieving children's resiliency, emotional health and well-being and to create communities where children coping with loss get the love and support they need to thrive and live up to their unique potential. Mary has a BA in English, a Master's Degree in Applied Psychoanalysis, a Certificate in Thanatology and a Certificate in Computer Technology from Chubb Institute. She is a member of the Association of Death Education and Counseling, the National Alliance for Grieving Children and is a board member for the Academy of Clinical and Applied Psychoanalysis. Imagine grew out of Mary's personal experience of loss as a child and her commitment to make sure no child grieves alone.



Everyone's Had Someone Who Died

By Mary L. Robinson, President and Founder, Imagine, A Center for Coping with Loss

"If we teach children to mourn, it will serve them the rest of their lives."

"You know what's really cool about this place?" eight-year-old Ryan asked me as we waited for the pizza delivery. "Everyone here's had someone who died!" he exclaimed as the realization that he was not alone settled over him. And so it begins, the lovely journey at Imagine in which children and adults start to make sense of the painful losses they have experienced. Ryan, whose dad died in an accident, had been attending Imagine for just a few weeks at that point but he was already benefiting from the power in numbers.

Power in Numbers

There is something magical that happens at Imagine and at grief support centers like it around the country. It is the power of connecting with other human beings and feeling understood and not alone.

Grief can be an extremely isolating experience and one in which you think you are going crazy. A peer support group provides relief to people of all ages.

Ashley was 12 when her dad died and 16 when her mother died, both of cancer. She arrived at Imagine feeling sad, depressed and very alone. What she found was a group of teens just like her who all had a parent or sibling die. Suddenly she was no longer different. And suddenly she didn't have to keep her feelings bottled up inside for fear of seeming "crazy."

"I knew if I could just make it to Imagine, I'd be okay," Ashley shared. "Here everyone understood and I didn't feel alone. When Ashley's music teacher died she was able to cope with the loss in a healthy way through journaling and creating a memory box, skills she had learned at Imagine. And she was able to help her peers at school cope, too.

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Everyone's Had Someone *cont'd*

The Forgotten Mourners

Over fifty years ago Elizabeth Kubler Ross, a psychiatrist and prolific author of many books including the groundbreaking *On Death and Dying* and *On Children and Death*, called children "the forgotten mourners." After the death of a parent or child, friends, neighbors and clergy would come to call on the adults in the household.

They brought sympathy, food and a listening ear, but rarely did anyone ask about the children.

Fortunately today there is a greater awareness among adults that children who have experienced the death of a parent, sibling or other significant person in their life need support and concern, too. Unfortunately in many cases the pendulum has swung to the other extreme with parents rushing to get their children into counseling or therapy.

This Thing Called Grief

But grief is not pathological. It's a normal, natural response to losing someone or something we love or value. Most often when we think of grief, we think of death. But as human beings we grieve all types of loss, whether it is the death of

a person, the death of a pet, moving to a new neighborhood, parents divorcing, the end of a relationship, losing a job, or the loss of a dream.

How We Mourn

One of the ways we mourn is by telling the story of our loss over and over again. Adults, older children and teens do that through talking or writing. Younger children who don't yet have the vocabulary or ability to talk can be given opportunities to tell their story of loss through play and arts and crafts.

Telling children they need to "be strong for mom" or to "stop crying" or "you are the man of the house now" sends the wrong message and stifles healthy mourning. Healthy mourning encourages tears and the expression of all feelings without judgment.

It is hard to see the children we love sad and in pain. Instinctively we want to make them feel better, take away their sadness and "fix" them. As adults and parents, our hardest job is being patient with the process of grief and having the fortitude and faith that our children will be okay.

If you are concerned because the child in your life has a lot of anger, give them a constructive way to express their anger such as punching an "anger pillow" or yelling into a scream box at the top of

their lungs. Give children a safe place to get physical and discharge some of the pent-up energy that accompanies difficult emotions. This can be a special place in your house designated as the Volcano Room (see below) or it can be riding their bike, running, shooting hoops or punching a punching bag.

Grief often shows up in a variety of physiological responses ranging from confusion, an inability to concentrate, clumsiness, sleep disruption, changes in appetite and energy levels.

A child in grief who may have been outgoing becomes withdrawn. Or an easygoing child is now hitting or kicking other children on the playground. A child's grades may decline or they forget homework, gym clothes or lunch.

These are normal behaviors and symptoms of grief. They tell us the child's heart is hurting and that they need support. During this time we need to make sure to take extra special care of ourselves and our children. We need to be gentle with ourselves and give ourselves and our children time to heal and adjust to the loss.

There is a myth though that time heals all wounds. But it's not time alone that heals, it's what we do during that time that makes the difference. We have to do the work of mourning, no matter what our age.



Volcano Room



You can create a Volcano Room space in your own home. All you need to create an environment for the healthy expression of emotions and the discharge of energy are the following items:

- Plenty of bubble wrap for stomping
- Old phone books or magazines for tearing into shreds
- Scream Boxes: Use a shoe box stuffed with newspaper. Cut a hole in one end to insert a cardboard tube from a roll of paper towels. Decorate the box with your kids. Let them scream through the tube as loud as they can! (Adults can use it, too!)
- Drums to bang on or other musical instruments
- Lots of big soft pillows and foam tumbling mats

Only two children at a time should use the space, and an adult should be there with them when they are playing.

How to Support a Grieving Child

By Mary L. Robinson, President and Founder, Imagine, Inc.

Some of the things you can do as an adult to support grieving children include:

- Educate yourself: read books on grief or attend a workshop
- Enroll your child in a peer support group program
- Listen with your eyes, ears and heart—this is called empathic listening
- Don't give advice or try to take the pain away—you can't
- Do give the child your undivided attention
- If you are a grieving parent, find other adults who can help support your child while you are grieving
- Accept all feelings and help children express themselves through play, arts and crafts, journaling, music, etc.
- Make sure the child or teen is getting enough physical activity. There is a lot of kinetic energy in the body around emotions and it needs to be discharged in healthy constructive ways.
- Create your own "volcano room" for physical expression and to provide a safe place for your child to express anger and all emotions (see box at left). There are many wonderful books to


assist parents and other adults who want to support grieving children. One of them is *Healing a Child's Grieving Heart—100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers* by Dr. Alan Wolfelt. Dr. Wolfelt is considered the grief guru when it comes to grieving children, and I encourage you to get one of his books. Reading books and getting educated is part of healthy mourning.

Here are some of his ideas and tips that you can use:

- Include the child in planning and carrying out the funeral. Give them choices for their involvement no matter their age. Yes, children of all ages should be invited to attend and participate in funerals and memorial services. Prepare them in advance for what they will see and give them options for participating.
- Share memories together and use the person's name. "I remember when your mom Julie made cookies for our class." Create a memory box to store photos or items that were special to the person who died. Ask the child if they want to carry a token or touch-

stone of the person who died in their pocket or backpack.

- Be artists together.
- Plant a garden together.
- Create rituals together to mark anniversaries, birthdays, and other life passages and transitions.
- Listen to music together.
- Play together.
- Imagine together what the person who died would do or say in a particular situation or if the child is struggling with a decision.
- Let the child feel what he or she feels.

Children coping with loss can and do grow up to be healthy, functional adults. Loss provides the opportunity to grow personally and spiritually, to develop deeper empathy and compassion. It can be a transformative experience for children and teens if they get the love and support they need. 

Imagine, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) privately funded non-profit. All of our support programs are completely free to children and families. For more information, to volunteer, donate or register for a support group, please contact Imagine at 908-264-3100 or info@imagineinj.org. Please visit our website for additional information and resources at www.imagineinj.org.

MY GRIEF RIGHTS for Bereaved Kids

1. I have the right to my own unique feelings about the death. I may feel mad, sad or lonely. I may feel scared or relieved. I may feel numb or sometimes nothing at all. No one will feel exactly like I do.

2. I have the right to talk about my grief whenever I feel like talking. When I need to talk, I will find someone who will listen to me and love me. When I don't want to talk about it, that's OK too.

3. I have the right to show my feelings of grief in my own way. When they are hurting, some kids like to play so they'll feel better for awhile. I can play or laugh too. I might also get mad and scream. This does not mean I am bad, it just means I have scary feelings that I need help with.

4. I have the right to need other people to

help me with my grief, especially grown-ups who care about me. Mostly I need them to pay attention to what I am feeling and saying and to love me no matter what.

5. I have the right to get upset about normal, everyday problems. I might feel grumpy and have trouble getting along with others sometimes.


6. I have the right to have "griefbursts." Griefbursts are sudden, unexpected feelings of sadness that just hit me sometimes—even long after the death. These feelings can be very strong and even scary. When this happens, I might feel afraid to be alone. (can be triggered by a smell, sight, sound, picture, and event)

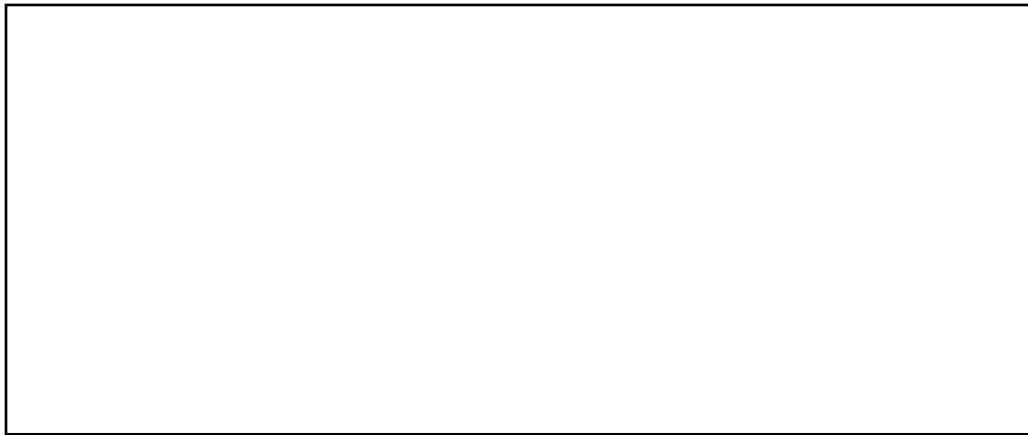
7. I have the right to use my beliefs about my god to help me deal with my feelings

of grief. Praying might make me feel better and somehow closer to the person who died.

8. I have the right to try to figure out why the person I loved died, but it's OK if I don't find an answer. "Why" questions about life and death are the hardest questions in the world.

9. I have the right to think and talk about my memories of the person who died. Sometimes those memories will be happy and sometimes they might be sad. Either way, these memories help me keep alive my love for the person who died.

10. I have the right to move toward and feel my grief and, over time, to heal. I'll go on to live a happy life, but the life and death of the person who died will always be a part of me. I'll always miss them. 



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**Fake it 'til you make it
Carry on
Endeavor to persevere
Tend your garden, blossom**

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I Depressed?

VOL. 10 Bereavement and Your
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