

Little Broken Hearts

Peter is 9. His mother and teacher are concerned that he is not achieving at his grade level. Last year he was doing so well at school he was placed in a class for gifted children.

Everyone at his school believes Peter is a child of superior ability. They are puzzled about why his academic work has deteriorated over the last six or eight months. Even Peter can't figure it out. He knows he is smart, so why isn't he doing better?

Peter doesn't seem to be able to get up the energy to do anything. He just sits and stares at his homework. He used to be able to zip through it quickly and even enjoyed it. Now he feels like a zombie.

More recently Peter has begun to withdraw into himself. He refuses to participate in class events and won't talk to his friends. Even getting him to go to school has become a major project. He resists every strategy to motivate him and frequently mumbles, "I just wish I were dead."

Fearing that Peter might have a severe brain disorder, His mother took him to see a specialist in children's problems. Examination and testing showed that he was indeed achieving far below the level of his superior intelligence. It also revealed that he was extremely sad, lethargic and experiencing a lot of insecurity.

In short, Peter was suffering from severe *reactive depression*—the same depression we experience in response to a major loss, as in the death of someone we love. A few personal questions directed to his mother revealed the cause.

Peter's father left home recently and filed for divorce. Neither parent realized that Peter's problems were related to

the prolonged conflict and final death of their marriage.

Divorce as a Depression Trigger

Some parents desperately hold on to the erroneous belief that children are not affected by their parents' conflicts. But it just isn't true.

Every unhappy marriage, not just those heading for divorce, places an emotional strain on the children of the marriage. The strain is *not* caused solely by the separation and divorce. The divided house, the tensions leading up to the separation and the events that follow all contribute their share.

The form this emotional toll takes depends on the personality and emotional healthiness of the children and on the way parents behave toward them. Children may develop anger problems, sleep disturbances or severe anxiety disorders. Most will become physically ill at some point, while others will later become rebellious.

Whatever the specific outcome of the emotional disturbance, almost every child will experience a degree of depression. For a few—like young Peter—the depression will be severe. Peter will always have difficulty with depression if something is not done to help him.

Divorcing parents need to understand how depression develops in the children of divorce. Parents, grandparents and teachers need to be able to recognize depression in children and know how to deal with it.

How Does It Start?

Depression is a coping mechanism for those who have experienced a great loss. It has the effect of slowing us down and making us lose interest in our environment. This forces us to retreat to a place where we can evaluate the loss, adjust to it and then, having let it go, return to normal functioning

again.

For the child, and for one or both parents as well, divorce is the death of an intact family and can create just as great a sense of loss as real death. Depression actually helps the grieving process. It is a call to adjust to the loss. We understand this process well in bereavement.

First, there is profound lethargy—a loss of energy. Second, there is a loss of interest in normal activities. Third, there is a profound sadness.

Parents need to learn how to help their child go *through* the depression—not bypass it. Depression forces the child to retreat from the world to deal with the loss. It is not an intruder, but rather the process through which healing comes.

In many ways divorce is worse than death. Facing the finality of death actually helps us get over it more quickly. But in divorce, a child is confronted by a loss, the grief process begins—yet there is always hope for reconciliation.

As a result, the child is subjected to a series of contradictory losses and nonlosses—the worst type of grief a human being can experience. It is no wonder that depression is so common in the children of divorce and that it so often leaves permanent scars.

Other Losses

Divorce precipitates many significant losses in addition to the loss of a parent. No two children experience these losses in exactly the same way. To help a child through reactive depression, it is important to discover exactly what aspect of the divorce he is grieving over. Losses that result from a family breakup include:

- * Loss of siblings if children are split between the parents
- * Loss of the “ideal” home. An intact home with both parents

present has an important symbolic significance for children.

- * Loss of hope for the future. Children are full of dreams and expectations about how the parents will fit into their future lives. Divorce shatters these expectations.

- * Loss of financial security. For most children, divorce means a drop in the standard of living. A single, divorced parent is our newest poverty class! And this can cause a lot of insecurity for the children involved.

- * Loss of faith in their parents. Divorcing children often feel betrayed by their parents and see themselves as an unwanted intrusion.

- * Loss of faith in God. "I prayed that God would save our family, but He didn't. I don't believe there is a God!"

There are many other losses a child might experience. For example, when my parents divorced I experienced the loss of spending time with my father in his workshop. All his reassurances didn't help; I felt I didn't belong there any more. After the divorce, I would always be a visitor!

Symptoms of Childhood Depression

Masked signs. Children may be too young to have learned appropriate ways of expressing their grief; therefore rebellion, negativity, resentment and anger can often mask a deeper, underlying depression. Parents may not see the real problem because they are focusing on the mask.

Children often mask their depression by regressing to bedwetting or angrily attacking siblings or friends. They may become clingy and refuse to leave the presence of the parent. Other masks include a marked deterioration of school performance; sexual promiscuity; persistent requests for an explanation; and lying and telling exaggerated, often bizarre stories.

Obvious signs. These are much easier to recognize as symptoms of depression. Among the more important ones are:

- * *Sadness.* The child appears to be sad, but does not necessarily complain of unhappiness.

- * *Lethargy.* Physically and psychologically the child is "slowed down."

- * *Loss of interest.* The child loses interest in all normal activities and gives the impression of being bored or physically ill.

- * *Eating disorders.* The child complains of headaches, abdominal discomfort or insomnia. He or she may lose all appetite, or become preoccupied with food and overeat.

- * *Discontent.* The child appears discontented and gives the impression that nothing can give him or her pleasure. He may blame others for this, complaining that "nobody cares" and projecting onto them his feelings of being rejected by parents, siblings and friends.

- * *Frustration.* Depression is both caused by and the cause of much frustration. This frustration can make the child irritable and very sensitive. The slightest provocation may trigger an exaggerated anger response.

- * *Self-denigration.* The child engages in self-rejecting talk, indicative of self-hate and self-punishment. He says things like, "I am no good at anything."

These signs of depression can appear in different combinations and may vary from time to time in the same child.

What Can You Do?

It is possible to help a child cope with depression. Try taking the following steps:

1. See the loss from the child's point of view. Don't make light of what your child is experiencing. Though it may be difficult to acknowledge his pain because you feel responsible for it, you must start here.

2. Accept the child's depression as a normal reaction. Often the child's depression triggers guilt feelings in the parent, who then, to relieve the guilt, ignores the child or tries to get the child to stop being depressed. This only increases the depression because it makes the child feel worse.

Grieving is a normal response to severe loss. Working through it takes time and is best accomplished in the context of support and understanding.

3. Help the child experience the depression fully. Parents are frightened by the thought of prolonging their child's sadness. But be patient and give your child space to work through his or her pain, providing the same careful encouragement and help as you would in any other grieving.

How long the process takes depends on the child. He will complete it in the shortest possible time, if allowed to do his grieving fully and completely.

When the grieving process is interfered with, secondary losses can be created. For example, the child feels rejected because he isn't doing what Mommy or Daddy say he should. Parental anger, followed by punishment and rejection, will cause the child to withdraw, prolonging the depression and increasing its severity.

4. Accept the reality of the loss. If it has been hard for a parent to accept the loss, that parent will naturally have difficulty helping a child accept it. So make sure you yourself are dealing with reality. Be honest and open. Vagueness and innuendo feed imagined fears.

Helping very young children accept reality is not as easy as

helping older children. The child's questions should be responded to honestly, but gently. It's not easy to be forthright, but it is the best in the long run.

5. Help the child develop a new perspective on the loss. One of the greatest blessings God gives us as His children is the ability to change our perspective on life's tragedies. Otherwise, we would be left with mountains of ungrieved losses.

When my parents divorced, my saddest thought was realizing that our family would not be visiting my grandparents' country home for vacations any more. My brother and I would still go, but we would do it without Mom, and this was painful.

Later I realized that what was most important to me about going was being with my grandparents, especially my grandfather, whom I adored. This changed my perspective and brought healing.

An important way to help children develop a perspective on loss is to allow them to talk about it. Difficult as this may be for parents, it is a vital part of the grieving process.

Knowing Christ will make a difference in the way we view catastrophes. Reassure your child that God remains on the throne and that His rule embraces your tragedy as well. Your divorce does not dethrone Him. Rather, it brings out His power and releases His healing in new ways.

6. Pray with your child. Prayer brings healing and helps us to see things God's way. But pray *for*, not *at*, your child.

Pray sensitively and wisely with him. Pray for the strength to receive life's blows with grace. The impending loss of a united family—what a child prizes above everything else—can be too much for him to bear. Pray for understanding, patience, for God's peace to fill both your lives, and for God to show you how to be loving and forgiving toward the one who has

harmed you.

Pray so that you communicate a genuine understanding of your child's feelings. Every child will receive healing from such prayers and develop a deeper sense of trust in God. He will also be enabled to respond to his grief as God designed us to—by coming to terms with his losses and getting on with life.

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