

Helping a Child to Cope with a Parent or Sibling's Death

The Role of Spiritual Visions

MELVIN L MORSE MD FAAP

WWW.SPIRITUALSCIENTIFIC.COM HARBESON DELAWARE 19951

A READER ASKS:

While I understand your need to support parents who have lost their children, what do you do to help children who have lost siblings or parents? Do they have trouble recognizing messages from the other side, or precognitive dreams of loss and the guilt from having done nothing to prevent? Kids tend to feel pretty helpless.

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

I am always amazed when parents tell me that my work has helped support them. I deeply appreciate it, but feel compelled to share with you that I am learning from them, not supporting them. If a medical professional, simply by listening and trying to understand what a parent goes through while grieving, results in support, this is an invaluable lesson in itself, and contains the answer to your question. So often, as a physicians, social workers, nurses, or family members, we feel that we have to have the answer, have to supply the insight to help others.

So, with children, as with adults, it is important to listen and learn. I have learned the hard way, in my efforts to be a good husband, that often my wife does not want my advice, or need my high powered brain to solve her problems. She only wants my time, my nodding head, my hand to hold. However, there are some specific areas that while you are listening, you should be particularly attentive to.

MAGICAL THINKING IT'S ALL MY FAULT

Adults and children, when confronted with tragedy, tend to assign blame and fault through "magical thinking". Often a child will be angry with an adult. Since they are very concrete thinkers, they will say or think such things as "I hope you die", instead of the more abstract thought "I am so angry with you".

Then, when someone they love does in fact die, the child will often feel it is their own fault.

Many times these magical thoughts can be dissipated simply by listening to them, and trying to understand them. When I am counseling a parent whose child has died, I routinely explain to them that parents often assign meaning to the death based on their own secret fears and shames. I throw out a few common ones, "the baby died because I smoked pot", or one of my own "my brother-in-law who died of complications from drug and alcohol use really died because I was mean to him and failed give him enough love." I often find this gives them permission to then share their own guilty secrets. Frequently just saying the secret out loud exposes how ridiculous it is, and it disappears.

I frequently use the same technique with children. "I know a little girl who thought that because she was mad at her mother, the airplane crashed", or "I know a boy about your age who thought his dream that his mother died made it come true". "I wonder if anything like that has ever happened to you.

I then drop the subject, and often, with children, it will resurface when you least expect it, while waiting in line at the grocery store, or at a party with all your friends around. Seize the moment and take the time to complete the conversation.

JEALOUS OF THE DEAD

Children frequently are jealous of their dying sibling, and will often say to me "I wish I had leukemia" or a brain tumor. They frequently are resentful of the time a parent will spend attempting to spiritually communicate with a sibling who has died. It often implies that they, the surviving child, are somehow not good enough. Spiritual visions without a family belief system often confuse the issue.

TIME, NOT WORDS, HEALS

This can be accentuated when dealing with premonitions of death or shared dying experiences.

For example, a mother wrote to me of her child who accidentally drowned in the bath tub, while the mother was out of the room for a few minutes. She called into the bathroom to inquire about the child (who drowned), and an older child watching the bath said "oh, she's getting up out of the tub now".

When the mother went into the bathroom, the child had in fact drowned. The older girl said that she saw her sister "standing up in the tub, and being taken into the ceiling by a lady."

This vision only increased the guilt for mother and surviving child.

No platitudes or wonderful spiritual insights can help such a situation. As professionals, or family members, it is far more important to signal that you have not assigned blame. This best occurs with expressions of love, and the gift of your time.

NO POP TOP TO HEALING

Often, I become filled with zeal and I want others to understand how healing and wonderful visions are. Rarely does such an approach work.

My idea of supporting children dealing with such issues is to return them to normal life as soon as possible, and spend time with them. Take them to the park, play a game of catch, build a treehouse with them, read them a book about a child whose parents or sibling died.

And be ready to listen.

Melvin L Morse MD
Georgetown, Delaware
www.spiritualscientific.com