

PRACTICE FORUM

# Reducing Depression among Adolescents Dealing with Grief and Loss: A Program Evaluation Report

*Paulette Walker and Michelle Shaffer*

The experience of grief wears many faces for children and adolescents. The death of a loved one from a shooting or stabbing, sexual abuse, physical abuse, abandonment, pregnancy loss, or an incarcerated parent often leaves a teen struggling to cope with life. The feelings and emotions experienced from these losses can be intense and frightening, frequently resulting in depression, destructive behaviors, drug and alcohol use, self-mutilation, and eating disorders. Reporting on research concerning bereavement groups for inner-city children, Schilling and colleagues (1992) found that death may affect children in later adulthood if the loss is not given proper attention and the children are not provided grief support and the opportunity to express their pain. Although programs are available for grieving adults, little support and few resources are available for grieving teens, who often must grieve alone or with very limited support. When teens experience severe emotional pain, they are tempted to "numb out" to avoid the painful and unfamiliar emotions.

Among approximately 300 incarcerated teenagers surveyed at a California Youth Authority facility, 96 percent indicated that someone significant in their life had died (Cunningham, 1996). The average number of losses per teen was six. Similarly, a survey at the Indianapolis Juvenile Correctional Facility found that 141 of 150 female offenders (94 percent) had experienced at least one painful loss before being incarcerated (YWCA Indianapolis, 1993). Many revealed multiple losses. Later recent research at the facility revealed that 99 percent of the 133 incarcerated youths surveyed reported multiple losses before incarceration (Indianapolis Grief & Loss Consulting & Educational Services, 2003). The average number of losses per teenager was 4.5. Sixty-one percent admitted using alcohol, drugs, or both, and 35 percent reported having engaged in self-mutilation to cope with the pain.

## DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE TREATMENT PROGRAM

The Growing Through Loss program, a seven-year project, developed out of the recognition that many youths entering the Indiana correctional system had experienced multiple losses prior to incarceration. Using collected data, surveys from participants, trial and error, and feedback from counselors and facilitators, we found it crucial to address the core issues of grief rather than treating the symptoms of the destructive behaviors we were observing. We believed it was important to create a treatment program that would provide a supportive, enriching learning experience and empower those we serve with healthy coping skills. The Growing Through Loss program emphasizes the value of support, educational, and therapeutic groups for grieving adolescents. We have observed firsthand that healing takes place when group members have the opportunity to deal with their painful feelings in a safe, nonjudgmental setting. In addition, the grief group experience provides a place for hurting adolescents to vent and discuss the anxieties and fears often associated with the grief process.

Growing Through Loss was created with defined goals, objectives, and session activities. The program contains information that covers antisocial attitudes, values, beliefs, interpersonal skills, dangers of alcohol and drugs, and dealing with adverse family circumstances. The 12-session curriculum uses several strategies, such as role playing and hands-on activities that have consistently proven to be effective in teaching prosocial skills. It combines sessions on grief and loss, forgiveness, attitudes, friendship, developing a healthy conscience, life mapping, and leadership.

The Growing Through Loss student workbook provides the educational component of the program and has served well in teaching youths about the various stages of the grieving process. Workbooks

provide language, concepts, and activities that assist in promoting the healing process. Art therapy is the creative component of the program that allows participants to create a memorial wreath, which communicates that the loss is a real and permanent aspect of the person's life history. Family genogram activities also provide an opportunity for participants to identify destructive family patterns or behaviors. Participants are encouraged to become the generation of change within their families. Youths learn to define future goals through the creation of a personal mission statement identifying a purpose for living, personal character, and responsibilities to family and community. Memory books provide opportunities for artistic and creative expressions of pain. *Growing Through Loss* concludes with a "Letting Go" ceremony, which offers agency staff and family an opportunity to recognize the effort of participants. Participants light a candle symbolizing their commitment to make a difference in the lives of others in an effort to find meaning to the painful loss they experienced.

### PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Since the inception of the *Growing Through Loss* program, approximately 5,000 adolescents have completed the program in correctional facilities, alternative and traditional schools, and residential treatment centers and community centers.

The following are documented program outcomes achieved by participants:

- Ninety percent of program participants demonstrated and reported an understanding of the correlation between grief and loss and maladaptive behaviors.
- Eighty-eight percent of incarcerated adolescent girls showed a reduction in levels of depression as measured by the Beck Depression Inventory; 87.5 percent of adolescent boys showed a reduction.
- Ninety-eight percent of program participants wrote a personal mission statement, created a symbol of loss, maintained a personal journal, and created a family genogram.
- Ninety-eight percent of participants completed 90 worksheets from the *Growing Through Loss* student workbook.

### CONCLUSION

The *Growing Through Loss* program has been successful in reducing levels of depression among

incarcerated youths in 88 percent of program participants. A study conducted between August 1995 and July 1997 at the Indianapolis Juvenile Correctional Facility revealed a 25 percent recidivism rate for those who completed the program as compared with the 75 percent recidivism rate for nonparticipants (Indianapolis Grief & Loss Consulting & Educational Services, 2003). This program is not an attempt to help adolescents forget about their loss experiences, as lives are forever changed by loss. Rather, it is a program designed to help hurting youths integrate single or multiple loss experiences into their life story in a way that is meaningful and hopeful rather than overwhelming and self-destructive. The journey of grief is a lifelong process, and often one's greatest strengths are recognized through painful experiences. The experience of understanding the tasks involved in the grieving process, the opportunity to share painful experiences with others in a nonjudgmental setting, and the opportunity to learn new and healthy coping skills serve to benefit group participants and society as well. **HSW**

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**Paulette Walker, LSW**, is director, Indianapolis Grief & Loss Consulting & Educational Services, 8306 Balmoral Lane, Avon, IN 46123; e-mail: [paulette@indygriefloss.com](mailto:paulette@indygriefloss.com), and adjunct instructor, Indiana University School of Social Work. **Michelle Shaffer, LCSW**, is clinical therapist, Cummins Behavioral Health, Inc.; adjunct instructor, Indiana University School of Social Work; and, formerly, director, Intensive Treatment Unit, Indianapolis Juvenile Correctional Facility. For more information on the *Growing Through Loss* program, contact the authors at [Indygriefloss@sbcglobal.net](mailto:Indygriefloss@sbcglobal.net) or visit <http://www.indygriefloss.com>

Original manuscript received July 14, 2003  
Final revision received October 16, 2003  
Accepted October 28, 2003