

GRIEF AND TRAUMA HEALING APPROACHES FOR CHILDREN

A. Overview of Topic. Children, like adults, are unique individuals. No two children are alike, and no traumatic experience is the same. In short, there are no formulas for helping children heal. Taking into account the child's developmental level, learning style, personality, and coping mechanisms, compassionate adults can learn basic counseling skills to foster healing. Assuring a safe and nurturing environment is essential for healthy coping, healing and growth.

B. Understanding Children. There are some basic models that provide a structure from which to assess the child's situation. The models give a simple framework to: a) look at the child holistically; b) understand what needs the child is trying to meet; c) identify the thoughts that lead to the feelings and behaviors; and d) help the child navigate the process of change.

C. Whole Body Communication. One mistake adults often make is thinking that our children learn in the same way we do. In addition, adults may misinterpret body language, or use only our ears to try to understand what is happening with a child. Using the five senses to communicate gives us a much broader scope with which to bring healing. Using our brain, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands and feet allow the child to have a total body experience in the healing process. Being trustworthy, spending time, and being compassionate open the door to effective communication, relationship, and healing. Treating the child as we would like to be treated fulfills the golden rule.

D. Learning the Story. The idea of counseling can be challenging or overwhelming for many people. Instead of seeing yourself as a counselor, engage in normal conversation as you would with anyone else. It's important to learn the story from the child's perspective. While the details of the grief and trauma are important, it's equally important to give the child hope. This can be done by not only listening to his story, but by sharing a little of your story as it applies, and by bringing in God's story. The Holy Spirit has a remarkable way of sharing God's story of love and redemption. Nothing is impossible for God, though at times the journey may seem impossible. While there are obstacles and times when the process goes backward, be sure to point out any progress that has already occurred. It may be difficult to see successes, but there is always opportunity to see God's healing touch.

E. Whole Body Counseling Approaches. The beauty of whole body counseling is that God has equipped each and every person to be an agent of healing for someone else. Though some may be better at counseling than others, all of us can grow in our ability to listen with a loving heart. And no equipment, other than our bodies, is required. This makes healing through counseling low cost. Some of the approaches to counseling are:

- 1) Listen to the story with your whole body.
- 2) Have the child draw a picture of his family or of an experience that was painful for him.
- 3) Ask the child to make an object that reminds him of someone or something he lost. (Below is a recipe for play dough).
- 4) Use music to calm the child, to release tension, or to worship. Include dance when possible.
- 5) Use role play to allow the child to present a situation. Or use play to express emotion or release tension. Play is also a necessary part of childhood, and many children have never had the opportunity. No one is too old to play.
- 6) Regularly practice relaxation with the child. This will help to lower the frustration response and arousal symptoms (see below).
- 7) When the child has symptoms that interfere with normal home or school activities, or if the child is not improving, refer the child to a mental health professional. In some countries there aren't any mental health professionals, so consider a primary health care worker or another lay counselor.
- 8) Be sure to care for your own mental health needs. Ignoring severe stress or trauma symptoms is destructive to everyone involved in your family or caregiving system.

Play Dough Recipe

1 Cup Flour/1 Cup Salt/add small amounts of water for best consistency

Relaxation Exercise

Sit comfortably with eyes closed

Breathe slowly and deeply, in and out . . . in and out

Think of a relaxing place, like the ocean or a mountain

Imagine Jesus being with you, telling you how much He loves you

Continue breathing slowly and deeply, in and out for 5 minutes

When you are ready, open your eyes, stretch, and continue your day