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How to Talk to the Children and Teens in Your Life About the Newtown, CT Tragedy

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

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Once again we are faced with the traumatic, violent deaths of a group of innocent people, this time precious children in Newtown, Connecticut. I have been asked to provide some guidelines on how to communicate with children and teens about this tragedy. If you know of others who might benefit from this information, I invite you to forward this article to them.

First, it's important to remember that children can cope with what they know, but they can't cope with a reality they are over-protected from. As a father and as a counselor, I understand the instinct to want to protect children from such tragic news. But the reality is that many if not most of the children and teens in our lives (with the exception of the very youngest) have already heard about the recent school shooting from their peers, social media, or television. They have been exposed to the fact that 20 first-graders were shot by a stranger who barged into an elementary school. Many of them have also seen photos of the killer and of the children and teachers who were killed. Some may have read the horrific details of the massacre.

The point is, we cannot protect children from the tragedy, but we can let them teach us how they feel about it. As the caring adults in their lives, we have the responsibility to be available to them when they are struggling to understand what happened or if they have fears that the

same thing could happen in their schools. We also have the responsibility to be honest with them within the boundaries of what is developmentally appropriate for a given child.

Listen (and observe), then respond

Watch the children in your life a little more closely this week and in the weeks to come. Notice if they are listening to news of the shooting, reading news online or in print, sharing stories that other kids have told them at school, or asking questions about the shooting. If it's on their mind, or if you think it might be, then it's your turn to ask a couple open-ended questions. "What have you heard about the school shooting that happened last week?" "Are the kids or teachers at your school talking about the kids who died in Connecticut?" You can also share your feelings: "I've been feeling sad about the children who were killed last week."

Also watch for a change in behavior. Children who are more irritable or aggressive than usual or who are complaining of physical ailments uncharacteristically may essentially be telling you that they have absorbed some of the nation's horror and anxiety about what happened at Sandy Hook Elementary.

When ignored, children and teens feel all alone in their grief. Respond to them with sensitivity and warmth. Use a caring

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How to Talk to the Children and Teens . . . from page 1

tone of voice; maintain eye contact when talking with and learning from them. This commitment to actively listening tells children that their feelings will be respected.

Remember that often kids don't want to have a long conversation about the tragedy. They don't want to be "talked at." But if they're given the opportunity, many will tell you what's on their mind, allowing you a glimpse into their reality. Respond based on what they tell you or show you through their behaviors. Use their words and level of understanding. Don't over-explain. Keep it simple and honest and loving. Let them know you're someone they can talk to about the tough things.

Also, some kids, especially younger ones, may truly not be concerned about the shooting because it seems like just another far-away story that doesn't affect them. That's why it's important to listen and observe, then respond. Allow for a discussion but don't insist on one if the child isn't telling or showing you she's sad, anxious or perplexed. Let the child lead.

Safety first

If a child is expressing, verbally or behaviorally, that she is afraid, reassure her that you and the other grown-ups in her life are doing everything you can to make sure that she is safe. Because it's true, it's OK to say, "This kind of thing almost never happens. It's a one-in-a-million situation. You're protected."

Teens are ready to handle the more nuanced truth, which is that safety can't be 100 percent guaranteed in anything we do in life. Model living each day with boldness, resilience, meaning, and purpose for the teens in your life.

Many kids will find it helpful to review school safety and security procedures, and indeed, this is happening at schools across the country as I write this. Physically show them the security measures in place and step through the drills.

In the home, if a child seems to be regressing to the behaviors of younger kids—such as wanting to sleep with mom and dad, bedwetting, thumb-sucking, etc., these are signs that this child simply needs some extra attention right now. Don't punish

him for the regressive behaviors. Indulge them for now. And spend extra time with him in the coming days and weeks. Be available when he gets up, when he comes home from school, after dinner, and on weekends as much as you can.

Be the grown-up

We as a nation have been traumatized by the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary. The multiple, violent deaths of precious young children and the adults who cared for them can result in intense feelings of shock, fear, anxiety and helplessness. Some of us confront these feelings by obsessively watching TV coverage of the event or talking about it with anyone and everyone.

While it's normal and natural for us to try to integrate the reality of what happened in these ways, this kind of exposure may be too much for children. So limit your media viewing and conversation about the tragedy in front of your children. Younger kids, especially, don't need to know and aren't developmentally mature enough yet to handle all the details.

Be calm, reassuring, and positive. Be the caregiver. If you need to talk about your own thoughts and feelings about what happened, find another adult to talk to out of earshot of the kids. Never lie to children or hide the truth from them, but do limit their exposure.

Older kids, especially teens, may, like many adults, work through their thoughts and feelings by engaging with the national media and conversation about the shooting. Try watching the news together with these teens and talking about what you see. Be careful not to reverse roles. Don't display your own grief so much that the child is forced to take care of you instead of the other way around. Seek outside support for yourself if you need it.

Search for meaning...together

As we all struggle to understand what can never be understood, we naturally turn to rituals and faith. If you attend a place of worship and there is a message about the shooting during the service, this may be helpful for your older child to hear.

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NAN ZASTROW
Co-Founder,
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EDITOR'S JOURNAL

3 Keys to a Bright and Satisfying New Year

Many years ago, my mother died on New Year's Day. I was almost eight months pregnant with my first child, and her death came as a surprise. Immediately, we took down all the Christmas decorations. The holiday was over with, and this tradition has continued all these years since.

I delivered my first child prematurely, a girl, within the week following my mother's death. She was born with special needs. I found myself entering the New Year with so many new emotions including grief and uncertainty. It was actually scary! New Year's, from that time on, always came with hesitancy on my part. It brought back that familiar anticipation of "What will next year bring?"

When my son, Chad, died I remember the following New Year was also very difficult. I felt like I was leaving him behind (in the old year), and feared that I might forget how he looked, and how much he meant in our lives. I was hesitant to move forward.

I almost have to chuckle at my reluctance to start a new year because I'm "The Planner" who has my calendar events decided and recorded nearly a year in advance (referring to my Wings

programs, classes etc.). I even begin working on the theme for my next Holiday workshop within a week after concluding last years' program. I also tend to have "vacations" in mind and other events for the coming year that I want to do. So why the hesitancy when a new year begins?

I don't really know the answer to that question, but I do know that I accept each New Year and the calendar-turning event as a positive ritual. It is a time of renewal—new beginnings, fresh starts, and second chances to finish all I committed to do last year, and didn't accomplish. I remind myself that planning and attitude are essential to making this new year a successful one. By the first of February, I've set my sails in the right direction and it's full speed ahead.



There are basically 3 Keys to making each New Year a bright one. The essentials don't change, although how you carry them out may change. If you use these to get yourself going and keep you on track in 2013, I'm sure you will be satisfied with the outcome. The 3 Keys are mentioned in this quote:

"Three grand essentials to happiness in life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for."

Joseph Addison

- 1. Have a Purpose:** For some people, "purpose" exists within their careers; but if that is not the "passion in your life", seek and find something that gives your life meaning. This equates to something to do. Evaluate what your strong skills are (God-given or acquired through experiences), your interests, and what tugs at your heart. What is it outside of your job that gets you up in the morning; encourages you to go the extra mile; or gives you pride and a sense of "belonging"? Find something in your community to do where you can apply at least one of your skills to help someone else. It's likely that your interests and your passions will lead to purpose—a reason for living.

- 2. Everyone needs someone or something to love.** What or who gives you that warm sense of joy? Perhaps it is

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What goes around comes around...

An Inspirational Story ~ Author Unknown

One day a man saw an old lady, stranded on the side of the road, but even in the dim light of day, he could see she needed help. So he pulled up in front of her Mercedes and got out. His Pontiac was still sputtering when he approached her.

Even with the smile on his face, she was worried. No one had stopped to help for the last hour or so. Was he going to hurt her? He didn't look safe; he looked poor and hungry.

He could see that she was frightened, standing out there in the cold. He knew how she felt. It was that chill which only fear can put in you.

He said, 'I'm here to help you, ma'am. Why don't you wait in the car where it's warm? By the way, my name is Bryan Anderson.'

Well, all she had was a flat tire, but for an old lady, that was bad enough. Bryan crawled under the car looking for a place to put the jack, skinning his knuckles a time or two. Soon he was able to change the tire. But he had to get dirty and his hands hurt.

As he was tightening up the lug nuts, she rolled down the window and began to talk to him. She told him that she was from St. Louis and was only just passing through. She couldn't thank him enough for coming to her aid.

Bryan just smiled as he closed her trunk. The lady asked how much she owed him. Any amount would have been all right with her. She already imagined all the awful things that could have happened had he not stopped. Bryan never thought twice about being paid. This was not a job to him. This



was helping someone in need, and God knows there were plenty, who had given him a hand in the past. He had lived his whole life that way, and it never occurred to him to act any other way.

He told her that if she really wanted to pay him back, the next time she saw someone who needed help, she could give that person the assistance they needed, and Bryan added, 'And think of me..'

He waited until she started her car and drove off. It had been a cold and depressing day, but he felt good as he headed for home, disappearing into the twilight.

A few miles down the road the lady saw a small cafe. She went in to grab a bite to eat, and take the chill off before she made the last leg of her trip home. It was a dingy looking restaurant. Outside were two old gas pumps. The whole scene was unfamiliar to her. The waitress came over and brought a clean towel to wipe her wet hair. She had a sweet smile, one that even being on her feet for the whole day couldn't erase. The lady noticed that the waitress was nearly eight months pregnant, but she never let the strain and aches change her attitude. The old lady wondered how someone who had so little could be so giving to a stranger. Then she remembered Bryan.

After the lady finished her meal, she paid with a hundred dollar bill. The waitress quickly went to get change for her hundred dollar bill, but the old lady had slipped right out the door. She was gone by the time the waitress came back. The waitress wondered where the lady could be. Then she noticed something written on the napkin.

There were tears in her eyes when she read what the lady wrote: 'You don't owe me anything. I have been there too. Somebody once helped me out, the way I'm helping you. If you really want to pay me back, here is what you do: Do not let this chain of love end with you.'

Under the napkin were four more \$100 bills.

Well, there were tables to clear, sugar bowls to fill, and people to serve, but the waitress made it through another day. That night when she got home from work and climbed into bed, she was thinking about the money and what the lady had written. How could the lady have known how much she and her husband needed it? With the baby due next month, it was going to be hard....

She knew how worried her husband was, and as he lay sleeping next to her, she gave him a soft kiss and whispered soft and low, 'Everything's going to be all right. I love you, Bryan Anderson.'

There is an old saying 'What goes around comes around.' God works in mysterious ways and sometimes puts people in our lives for a reason. Remember this story and pass on the kindness to someone else.

How to Talk to the Children and Teens . . . from page 2

Model prayer, meditation, singing, spending time in nature or whichever activities are helpful to you in connecting to your spirituality. Attending a service or candle-lighting in memory of the children who died may be helpful for your family.

Participating in activities that connect us as humans can also be meaningful at this time. Children of all ages can participate in activities like making cards to send to the surviving children at Sandy Hook Elementary or supporting children in need in your own community through volunteer efforts like food or toy drives.

If a child wants to talk about where the children who died “went,” be honest with her about your beliefs and ask her about hers. Encourage this conversation without feeling you need to know all the answers.

Thank you for being an adult who is committed to helping children learn to navigate our challenging times and emerge as resilient, communicative,

and compassionate adults themselves. The world needs more communicators and compassion-givers. Perhaps if we work on these learned skills together, one day we will have no more need of articles like this one.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School’s Department of Family Medicine. A father of three, Dr. Wolfelt has written many bestselling books for and about grieving children and teens, including *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids*, *Healing A Child’s Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends, and Caregivers*, and *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens*. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about helping children in grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.

Editor’s Journal ...

Continued from page 3

a person or persons such as grandchildren or a child. Maybe it’s someone disadvantaged that depends upon your support. It could be a parent or friend. Maybe it’s a lasting or renewed relationship with your spouse. And, then maybe that something to love is nature, a pet, an appreciation of art or craftsmanship, music, or reading. Take your pick of one of many and find joy in the happiness it gives you. When we have someone or something to love, we feel satisfied, content, and ready for each day to begin.

3. **Everyone needs something to hope for.** Hope is a promise that tomorrow will be better. It’s an idea or

anticipation of something you can look forward to. What is it you hope for? And what can you do to make it happen? Maybe you hope for a day without pain, correspondence with a friend, a better job, a healed relationship, freedom from grief, a healthier self, a happier home, and the list goes on. What is it you can do to make the things you hope for happen? Sometimes a little bit of action on your part begins the process and makes the possibility a reality. Each day is a new beginning; and it’s yours!

As essential as these 3 things are to a bright and happy New Year, they are only possible through a positive attitude. The

calendar has turned to January and the New Year has begun.

A New Year’s Resolution for the Bereaved:

In the New Year,
I have a chance to forgive,
To do better
To do more,
To give more,
To love more.
I’ll stop worrying about
“what if” and
Start embracing
what could be.

A Dozen Roses

By Alan Pedersen

If I had a dozen roses,
I know just what I'd do.
I'd give each one a name that
reminded me of you.

The first rose I'd call sunshine,
because you brighten everyday.

The second would be beauty,
the kind that never goes away



The third rose would be priceless,
like those hugs you gave to me.
I'd name the fourth rose silly,
oh how funny you could be.
Rose five of course is patience,
something you have helped me find.
The sixth rose would be memories,
the gift you left behind.



The seventh and the eighth rose
would for sure be faith and grace.
Nine would be unique because
no one can take your place.
The tenth rose well that's easy,
I'd simply name it love.
Eleven would be Angel,
I know you're watching from above.



I'd think about that twelfth rose,
and I'd really take my time.
After all these roses are
for you my Valentine.
I'm sending them to heaven
in every color that I know.
So rose twelve will be forever,
that's how long I'll love you so.



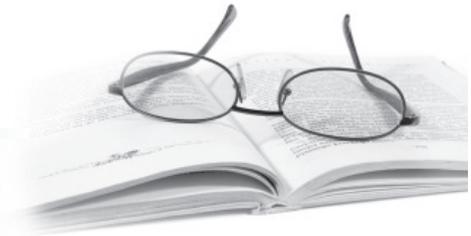
Be Good to Yourself *A Care Tip*

Ask for Help...It's Okay

Don't be afraid to ask for help. You have the advantage of advice or assistance from a variety of people who have experience and are willing to assist. Everyone needs help at some time. Asking for help allows you the privilege of learning from others with experience or gaining assistance from someone who is eager to offer a helping hand. Someday you may be able to pay back the good deed to another person who asks you for help. Consider asking as though you are borrowing. Today you need the help, tomorrow you will give help to someone else.

From the Archives

Stories worth repeating



by Nan Zastrow

What Do You Think?

Our readers share their thoughts on Healing Grief in 2013

In our original series of the Wings magazine, we posted a question to our readers and asked them to send a short response about their feelings, regarding the question. We'd like to pull that idea out of our archives and make it active again....only electronically, this time! It is always helpful to share thoughts, experiences, and actions that can help others heal. We hope that you will take part whenever you feel you have something to share.

Email your response to wings1@charter.net.

Selected responses will be printed in the following quarterly ELetter. Names will be withheld on request. Some responses may be edited for length and content.

Here is the first question we would like your response to:

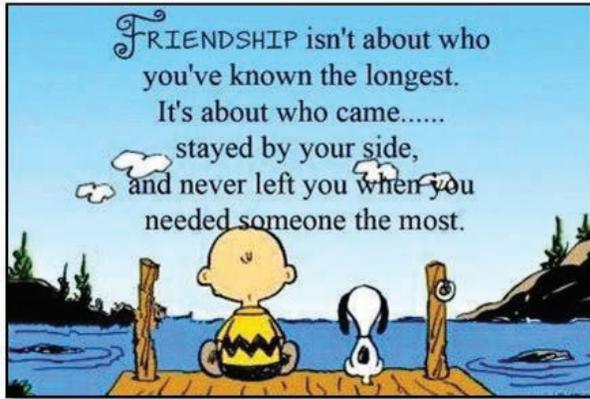
Struggling with grief before and after the holidays, is almost always difficult, regardless of how long it has been since your loss. For some people, holiday sadness continues to linger early in to January and beyond. For others, the New Year encourages them to move forward with healing their grief.

What are you willing to commit to in 2013 to help you heal your grief?

Would you like to share your story or poem?

If you would like to submit a short story, poem, or article, we welcome it. The material does not need to be original, but if it isn't, please include the author or credits that can be printed along with the material.

We are looking for articles that inspire the bereaved, teach, and offer hope which is the focus of our ministry of Wings-a Grief Education Ministry. Poems or material may be submitted *In Memory* of your special loved one.



Courtesy of BP/USA Journeying Through Grief

How To Connect With Wings:

- Email: wings1@charter.net
- Postal: P.O. Box 1051, Wausau, WI 54401
- Phone: 715-845-4159
- Follow the EVENTS calendar posted at the website
- Subscribe to the free online ELetter sent quarterly.
- Visit our website: www.wingsgrief.org
- Order a Free copy of Grief Digest at www.centeringcorp.com
- Visit Wings on **Facebook**

Wings is a non-profit, charitable organization dedicated to grief awareness through education. We welcome your donations, in any amount, to support the ministry of Wings.



Donations Accepted With Appreciation

Once a year, we ask our readers to consider a donation to Wings-a Grief Education Ministry. In 2013, we will be entering our 20th year of grief education through our magazine/online ELetter (we've evolved over the years!), grief education/support classes, Holiday program, and Spring Seminar. Our non-profit continues because of those who care about grief education and awareness.

We appreciate and will wisely use any and all donations for the continuation of our ministry to the bereaved and to those caregivers who support them. We are a non-profit corporation; your donation is tax deductible.

Maybe we've made you smile or pause to remember something beautiful. Maybe we've given you hope on a day when hope seemed elusive. Maybe our articles have inspired you to give yourself permission to grieve. We hope that we have played some small role in your grief journey.

In our March-April issue, we will proudly list the names of those who donate (unless asked to withhold the name) as well as the names of our loyal sponsors who help support our Events. If you would like to give a donation IN MEMORY OF your loved one who died, please include that information.

Thank you for considering a gift to Wings. If you can spare a few dollars, we would appreciate your support. Your entire donation supports the ministry of Wings. There are no paid staff. You may donate by mailing a check to P.O. Box 1051, Wausau, WI 54402-1051, or by donating to Wings through your PayPal account.

HEALING GRIEF Education Programs

GETTING BACK TO LIFE—AFTER LOSS (2013)

A Six-Week Series: Education and Support for Grief, Loss and Transition

"Grief is not a disease. It's an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity...the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is grieving." This quote sums up the content of our six week series. When you understand the relationships; how men and women grieve; how social media affects grief; normal anger and guilt, and your search for meaning, you will be better prepared to handle the journey ahead.

Come and learn, share feelings, and ask questions to gather hints about picking up the pieces after loss. This group is an education and support series. It is open to anyone who is grieving the loss of a loved one regardless of the circumstances of death. We do not advise or counsel. We listen, teach, and share grief experiences. Getting back to life is not about forgetting, but rather about finding a way to go on without your loved one who died.

2013 Spring Series:

Meets Tuesdays: February 12, 19, 26
and March 5, 12, 19

2013 Fall Series:

Meets Tuesdays: September 17, 24
and October, 1, 8, 15, 22

Facilitators: Nan & Gary Zastrow since 1997

Time: 6:30—8:00 p.m. No Charge. | Place: Conference Room A-1, Quality Services, Aspirus Wausau Hospital

16TH ANNUAL UNDERSTANDING GRIEF SPRING CONFERENCE

Our Presenter: BEN WOLFE-M.Ed., LICSW-Program Manager, Grief Counselor, St. Mary's Medical Center, Duluth, MN. ADEC-Death Educator of the Year 2011



A Community Seminar for the Bereaved and Caregivers

How Death Changes a Family Thru Grief, Loss & New Beginnings

Date: Thursday, April 11, 2013 | Time: 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm | Holiday Inn Conference Center at Cedar Creek

A Seminar for Professionals and the Bereaved | **Iceberg Theory: Counseling Way Below the Surface**

Date: Friday, April 12, 2013 | Time: 9:00 am – Noon | Holiday Inn Conference Center - at Cedar Creek

FINDING THE OTHER SIDE OF SADNESS - MOVING FROM GRIEF TO MOURNING

Many of us grieve, but not all of us mourn. What is the difference? How do we get unstuck from our feelings of intense grief and move towards a state of "new normal"? It begins with grief work. Family and friends may have considered your grief as "finished", but you may feel uncertain about facing life without your loved one. This four-week series is designed for those who feel they are ready to move forward in their grief. It offers strategies for transforming your grief by actively participating in activities that encourage grief work, building a new identity, and making positive choices for healing.

Meets Tuesdays: May 14, 21, 28 and June 4

Facilitators: Nan & Gary Zastrow Call: 715-845-4159

Time: 6:30-8:30 p.m. No Charge. Group size is limited. Pre-registration required.

Place: Conference Room A-1, Quality Services, Aspirus Wausau Hospital

17TH ANNUAL HOLIDAY REMEMBRANCE PROGRAM

When the Holidays Hurt—for the Bereaved

Each year, a theme-based program is presented with fresh ideas and personal insight about coping with grief during the holidays. When someone loved dies, the holidays can be a source of anxiety and added grief. Join us for this inspirational program that helps families cope by giving them options and suggestions for managing their traditions and emotions. Discover ideas for ritual, celebration, and remembrance.

Topic title to be announced.

Presented by: Nan & Gary Zastrow

Tuesday, December 3, 2013 | Time: 7—9 p.m. | Place: TBD

Wings
A Grief Education Ministry

For more information on any of these programs, contact Nan or Gary Zastrow at 715-845-4159, Wings—a Grief Education Ministry or visit our website www.wingsgrief.org or email wings1@charter.net. Groups facilitated by: Nan & Gary Zastrow, Certified Grief Educators. Pre-registration recommended.