The Pathway Through the Grieving Process

Being a Loss Manager

Coping

Understanding

Anger Out ——— Anger In (Depression)

Anger

Bargaining (Hoping or Praying for a Miracle)

Shock / Denial

Health ——— Self-Esteem ——— Significant Others

LOSS
The Pathway Through the Grieving Process: Being a Loss Manager

Helping Children with Loss and Grief

The “The Pathway Through the Grieving Process” is one of the most important “best practices tools” used in the PRIDE Model of Practice to develop and support resource (foster and adoptive) parents as team members in child protection. (PRIDE is an acronym for Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education, published by the Child Welfare League of America – www.cwla.org). “Resource Parent” recognizes that foster and adoptive families make a 24-hour a day contribution to the well-being of the children who join their families. A model of practice means that resource parents and staff work together to achieve the same vision, mission, goal, objectives, and outcomes. This is achieved by using “best practices tools” such as this “Pathway Through the Grieving Process.” Here is how it works:

Imagine that your family has completed the licensing, certification, or approval process and you are ready to have a child join your family. Your agency contacts you about a little girl, Amanda (not her real name), not quite five years old, and living on the streets with her teen-age mother, who was hospitalized for mental distress. With no known relatives to take Amanda, your family’s “Map” and “Clock” (other PRIDE tools) determine that Amanda could be protected and nurtured (the first PRIDE competency category) by your family. You also have discussed what was known about Amanda from the “Jigsaw Puzzle” perspective (another PRIDE tool). Based on these initial assessments, it is decided by your family and the agency that your family and Amanda are a good match.

The next step is to think about how to gain Amanda’s trust and help her attach to your family (another PRIDE tool), because attachment is so important. Here is where the “Pathway Through the Grieving Process” comes in and how it works. You read it from the bottom up.

Look for the word LOSS at the bottom of the diagram and then, above it, HEALTH, SELF-ESTEEM, SIGNIFICANT OTHERS. This shows that there are three kinds of losses that children and adults can experience. Amanda has experienced all three kinds of losses. On the left, she had health losses because of neglect (not enough food, no medical or dental care, and physical pain from what might be burns from playing with cigarettes and matches.) On the right, she had significant others losses because she was separated from her mother to whom she is attached, even though her mother was not able to protect her and keep her safe. The middle word, self-esteem, is another typical loss: Amanda feels bad about herself because she thinks she did something wrong when she was separated from her mother. At her little girl age of just four years, she cannot understand all the strangers who have come into her life.

When Amanda comes to your family, she may be quiet and withdrawn. This can be the SHOCK/DENIAL stage; children can be confused by what is happening and all the changes. Next they may move to BARGAINING, or HOPING OR PRAYING FOR A MIRACLE. She may believe that if she is on her best behavior her mother will come for her. It is not that she does not like your family, but she does not know you. Even though your family may try hard to comfort and reassure Amanda that she is safe
with you and you want to take care of her, she may not believe you. When her mother does not come for her, she may begin to express her anger. She may begin to “test” your family and see if you will keep her even when she misbehaves.

When Amanda travels the “pathway” to the **ANGER** stage, this can go to the outward expression of feelings or the inward expression. Outward might be that Amanda has temper tantrums, refuses to follow directions, perhaps she stops getting along with other children. Or Amanda may withdraw, turning her angry feelings on herself; she may be depressed, cry, whine, act fearful, and have trouble sleeping and eating. Fortunately, your family is learning that your foster parenting task is to help her, first, feel protected and nurtured. You must talk gently with her and be consistent. You will let her know that it is okay to feel mad, bad, and sad because she misses her mother and it is okay to feel angry, too. Amanda may need play therapy to **UNDERSTAND** at her young age that grown-ups are trying to help her mother and her. Meanwhile, she is safe and welcomed with your family.

With support from your agency’s social worker, your family can show Amanda some “okay ways” to express sad, bad, mad feelings. The next step on the “Pathway” is to help Amanda **COPE** with the losses in her young life. This is different for each child and requires teamwork between all the members of Amanda’s child welfare team: the Resource Family and the social worker, along with others, perhaps a play therapist. They will show her some okay ways to express those feelings. Eventually, hopefully, Amanda may become what is known as a **LOSS MANAGER**. She becomes a survivor from abuse and neglect, even as a little girl.

Here are several additional important points to think about regarding the “Pathway.”

1. See how the arrows go up and down. This is because none of us travel the “Pathway” just once. We can go back and forth from **UNDERSTANDING** to **ANGER** to **BARGAINING** to **DENIAL**, and then start over again. This can be caused by another loss of health, significant others, or self-esteem especially – when people hurt our feelings and let us down. Also, we do not travel the “pathway” in a particular order. We can experience the reactions to loss in any order.

2. Resource Parents and agency staff must talk together about **LOSS**. Like most pathways, this is best traveled together, as a team.

3. The **PRIDE Model of Practice** has an expression known as “parallel process.” This means that what children experience, we as adults experience, too. Your Family Development Specialist will talk with you about your own experiences with LOSS and how you may have traveled the **Pathway Through the Grieving Process** and perhaps become a loss manager yourself.