

The Impact of Grief

By Margaret Evans

This article was written by one of the original founders of Healing Circles and appears here in a modified version of the one published in the Boulder Daily Camera on January 4, 2004.

It has been over two years since Sept. 11, 2001 and the devastation of that tragedy has had a far-reaching impact. The same is true of the Iraq war, where the full impact has yet to be seen. We reflect on the effects on the economy, of course, because money is what drives this country. And we reflect to some extent on the incredible grief felt by those who have lost loved ones. These events have caused loss at many levels, and one level where we should be directing our attention, I believe, is being forgotten. Children and teens have been called the “forgotten mourners” for good reason. Adults can be so caught up in their own grief that it is difficult for them to be available to help children with their grief. Adults may also think that children are doing fine because they “appear” to be. I have heard this so many times, and it is not true. Superficially, kids appear to be “doing fine” because they do not know how to express their grief and they may not want to upset their parents further. They may also not know how to ask for help. It can be more difficult for boys to express their grief because of the expectations of our culture that men be more stoical than women. Grief can be very confusing for children and especially for teens, who are already at a confusing stage in life. Let me tell you that there is a lot going on in the mind of a child when it comes to grief. I know. I was a forgotten mourner. My life was indelibly scarred by my experience of early loss, and at the age of 62, I am still feeling the effects of some unresolved grief.

When I was four years old my father died in World War II. I still have a very clear picture of my mother receiving the telegram bearing the awful news. We were living with my grandparents at the time. The house went into mourning but I was not included. I was lonely, sad and very afraid. As I tell this story, the feelings return. They are never very far away from my consciousness. In no time at all, the British stiff upper lip became evident and to all intents and purposes my father was forgotten. At least that was my interpretation. I knew that my father was a kind and loving man and he cared deeply for me. I still have letters that he wrote to me from Germany. The fact that my grief was never recognized meant that it was suppressed and I was unable to heal. My life was impacted in many ways as I grew up. The teenage years and early adulthood were the worst, when my self-esteem was low and I took comfort in alcohol. Relationships were difficult for me to sustain. It is usually another loss that makes way for old grief to surface and it was when my marriage dissolved that my grief surfaced. I was 47 years of age. So many years of my life had been compromised because my grief had never been addressed. Since that time, I have worked hard on my grief in many different ways and my life has taken on a new meaning and purpose.

It is clear from my story that the impact of my loss was far reaching and had a major influence on my life. I tell the story not to find sympathy, but to illustrate what happens to countless children

in our society when it is not recognized that they need to process their grief. Grief does not go away — ever. It is always a part of who we are, but it can be processed so that it is integrated into our lives in a healthy way. It must be processed when the death occurs or it is left to fester and becomes unhealthy.

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