



FOSTER CARERS AND LOSS

**Irish
Foster Care
Association**

What is this brochure about?

This brochure has been developed to provide helpful information to foster carers who may have experienced loss or may do so in the future. It provides a brief exploration of change, grief and loss as often experienced by foster carers and considers how foster carers can care for themselves following such losses.

What is loss?

Loss is the fact or process of losing someone or something we were attached to, and **grief** is the natural response to a loss. Each person's loss is as unique as they are themselves but as we are all human, loss is also a universal experience. A loss inevitably requires that some part of the individual be left behind and grieved for, and grief is the pain and suffering experienced after loss.

Loss is often accompanied by public rituals and expressions of sympathy. The loss is accepted as such and usually this is the start of the grieving process. The change that relates to the specific loss is clear and can be mourned.

Sometimes, however, losses are **ambiguous**, in other words, they are harder to describe or identify. People may not know how to respond or what to say. Without acceptance or validation by wider society, ambiguous losses can lead to **disenfranchised grief**. This is grief that people feel when they experience a loss that goes unrecognised, sometimes even by themselves, and is not adequately supported.

Disenfranchised grief is a **hidden** grief and this 'hiddenness' can paradoxically increase the reaction to loss. Neimeyer and Jordan (2002) characterise disenfranchisement of grief as a form of 'empathic failure', i.e. a failure to understand the gravity of what has happened for the bereaved or to appreciate the resultant suffering, hurt and anguish. This brochure includes examples of this kind of grief.

As well as carrying their own grief, foster carers can carry other people's grief, for example the grief of their foster children's birth parents; the grief of their own family members, including their own children, if the foster child leaves.

Children who are fostered may be grieving too because of their own losses, for example their loss of a home, siblings, pets and feelings of safety and security, and paradoxically the loss of chaos. Foster carers may find themselves

managing these losses too.

“Many foster carers form significant attachments with the children in their care, attachments that will be mourned if they are broken. Recognising this fact is essential to developing services that support foster carers as people who provide love to children in a statutory context.” (Riggs and Willsmore, 2012:57-66)

These are some experiences of loss that foster carers have shared with us:

- Loss when a child moves to another placement, planned or unplanned, or a short-term placement ends, or a child is re-unified with birth parents. Even if the move is expected or indicates a positive change, it may still be experienced as a loss
- Loss to aftercare when a child turns 18
- Loss of independence and autonomy. This may be particularly in respect of decision-making and parenting issues
- Loss of time with birth children and less time for pursuing personal interests
- Loss of own family routine and the change in family dynamics
- Loss of control and predictability
- Losses associated with the incidence of allegations against foster carers: the loss of relationships, role, dignity and reputation, income, sense of self and purpose
- Loss of the caring world and caring identity once fostering is over
- Loss associated with having to give up work or a career
- Loss of privacy.

Managing loss

Sometimes a person may want to know “Will I get over my loss and when?”

This is a natural question for anyone who is experiencing a loss to ask, however, there is no one single answer to this question. Every loss is different and affects each person uniquely. The following are some suggestions you may find helpful:

- **Sometimes feelings re-surface** in response to a particular memory or a special date; such feelings are **triggered**. Again, this is natural and does not mean that you should try to erase these memories or forget these times. Marking the transitions and changes of life acknowledges these attachments, and memories can be a source of solace and comfort. It is also worth stating that sometimes a loss event triggers memories and feelings of prior losses. You may be aware of this happening but sometimes you may not because these past losses were in their turn not recognised or acknowledged.

- **Take the time out to regroup with your loved ones and others in your circle of support who may have been affected by the same losses.**
Sometimes there is a wide range of grief reactions and emotions within the family. Exploring these and getting support from each other can be helpful. Remember; there is no right or wrong way to grieve.
- **Accept support when offered.** It can be of benefit to accept help and support on all levels: social, physical, philosophical, psychological and spiritual, and to actively seek help if that feels right. Some people find that the simple act of talking to someone can help.
- **Grief can be exhausting because it depletes your resources.** Like stress, grief is draining and many of the methods used to combat stress can be useful when grieving. If you have a particular strategy or technique that helps you when you are feeling stressed or worried, use it to support you now. It may be a walk, going to an exercise class, knitting, or socialising with friends.
- **Shift your attention to right now.** If you find yourself jumping ahead and worrying about the future, doing something that takes all your attention in the present can be helpful. Doing one thing at a time – monotasking – can help relieve the pressure of an active mind. Pushing your own “pause” button can be as simple as taking calm, quiet and slow deep breaths.
- **Grief is personal.** There are no ‘should’s’, ‘must’s’, ‘ought to’s’ with grief. Being self-compassionate is helpful. It is not selfish to be kind to yourself. If you find this tough, imagine what you would say to a friend who needed your support and say this to yourself.

Next steps

Remember that you have found ways to manage life’s losses up to this point and these skills and this innate knowledge is still with you even if you may feel you need extra support at times.

Your Link Social Worker is there to offer support and information on the availability of any services or resources that may be of assistance to you in the event that you are experiencing challenges or difficulties of this nature.

In addition, IFCA's National Helpline Service is available Mon - Fri from 11am - 3pm. Phone: 01 458 5123 or email support@ifca.ie. The service offers independent and professional support in all fostering situations. This may include any or all of the following services: advocacy; emotional support, a listening ear or further assistance in sourcing potential avenues of support. Members can also access IFCA's Counselling Service through a referral from the Advocacy Service. IFCA offers six sessions with an accredited and experienced counsellor, access to this service is included as part of your IFCA membership.

Further information, as well as contact details of various related organisations can be found on www.ifca.ie.

References

- Neimeyer, R. and Jordan, J. (2002) 'Disenfranchised as empathic failure: Grief therapy and the co-construction of meaning' in Doka, K. (ed.) *Disenfranchised grief: New directions, challenges and strategies for practice*. Champaign, IL: Research Press
- Riggs, D. W. and Willmore, S. (2012) 'Experiences of Disenfranchised Grief Arising from the Unplanned Termination of a Foster Placement: An Exploratory South Australian Study' in *Adoption & Fostering* 36, 2, pp 57-66.



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