Introducing Julia Samuel MBE

Julia Samuel, MBE, was psychotherapist for paediatrics at St Mary’s hospital in Paddington, a post she established in 1992 where her role involved seeing families who had children or babies who died and where she trained and supported staff. In 1994 Julia helped launch the charity Child Bereavement UK and as founder patron has been involved in many aspects of the charity. Awarded an MBE in 2016 for services to bereaved children, Julia was also awarded an honorary doctorate from Middlesex University in 2017. Also in 2017, Julia’s book ‘Grief Works’ was published in 17 countries and became a best seller.

Top Twelve Take-Aways from Get a Grip Blog with Julia Samuel MBE

1. A helpful metaphor for thinking about grief with children is to liken grief to jumping in and out of puddles. One moment we can be in a puddle (when the grief is triggered and feels all around) and the next we are out of the puddle (carrying on with life, even laughing and joking with friends).

2. Adults will often try and protect children from news that someone is dying or has died, but children will sense that something is wrong. What children don’t know they makeup and what they makeup is much more frightening than the truth. Protection and not being told is very often experienced by children as exclusion and can conclude they haven’t been told because they are not important enough or they don’t matter enough to be told. Children need to be told the truth about death or dying in age appropriate language.

3. Adults often try and soften the reality by using vague language about death ‘we have lost your grandma’ or ‘he has gone to heaven’ but this can be confusing and doesn’t help. For example children lose things all the time and then they come back. We should use plain language e.g. ‘Grandma has died. This means she looks asleep and her body doesn’t work anymore’.

4. We should be open with children when a loved one is ill and we know they will die soon, this is pre-bereavement. Again, we might want to protect our children from the pain and keep this from them, however, they will know something is wrong and will invent an explanation causing them lots of worry and concern. It is much better to be open and collaborative. Ask the children what they’ve noticed, tell them what you know e.g. ‘Granny is poorly and she won’t be getting better. We think she is going to die soon, but we don’t know when’. Ask them what their worries are and what their top worry is. Younger children could be worried that it is somehow their fault. Together think about ways they can make and keep memories.

5. The task of mourning includes accepting the reality of death and being supported in that. To accept the reality it helps to be part of the funeral or have some sort of experience that marks the death. To help children prepare for attending a funeral you could visit the venue with them beforehand and describe to them what they will see and what will happen. Reading a poem or saying something at the funeral can help a grieving child as it creates a special memory of something they did for the person they loved.
6. After a death we are not trying to help a child to forget the person they loved but help them find a way to remember that person and create a rich image of the dead person’s identity created through stories, memories, objects, mementoes.

7. A recommended activity for a grieving family is to create a memory box, tin, book or envelope in which you ask people to write their favourite memories of the deceased. On a regular basis look at those memories together to promote connection and communication. The death of a family member can disrupt the family system. If you think of the family system like a child’s toy mobile over a cot, when a family member dies it is like a figure being removed from the mobile and it is unbalanced. Through communication and connection the family need to find a way to re-balance and recalibrate.

8. Another practical tip would be to take regular walks as a family after a bereavement. During the walks you can talk about the deceased but also share moments of silence. Being outside, the movement of your bodies, being side by side but not needing eye contact is all helpful. Afterwards go for a comforting and connecting activity together – share a meal or go for a coffee/hot chocolate.

9. Children learn how to grieve from observing the adults around them. If we don’t share our feelings children may think they shouldn’t share theirs. We don’t want our children to learn that it is not ok to cry and it is not ok to be sad. Instead if we let our children see that at times we cry and that we feel sad but we also carry on, children will learn that in the process of grieving we jump in and out of puddles and they can too.

10. It’s incredibly hard for grieving adults to also be able to support grieving children. If possible the adults should secure support for themselves to better enable them to support their children.

11. To support grieving children at school, before the child returns to school there should be a meeting involving the grieving child, the parent(s)/carer(s) and the school teacher(s). At the meeting discuss and agree how to tell the rest of the class / school about the death; agree a teacher the child would like to go to if they feel upset and require support and agree a signal (like giving the teacher a small Lego block) to indicate they are feeling overwhelmed and need support. Children need to know who they can speak to and where they can feel safe to be open with their feelings. Teachers should be aware how the content of some lessons may be a trigger and speak to the child before the lesson to forewarn them and offer support. School can provide a break from grief and also a safe place and someone to talk to if needed. Children often want adults to know that even though they might seem ok, they are struggling and might need support or some adjustment.

12. Grief is embodied and creates conditions in our physiology similar to anxiety. Just as exercise can really help with the physiological aspects of anxiety, it can also help with grief, promoting physiological changes in our bodies to soothe and calm. Many activities can help the grieving process (see the Pillars of Strength at the end of Julia’s book - Grief Works); however, if you can only do one thing Julia recommends exercise and encourages grieving children to exercise.

Resources Signposted by Julia Samuel

Book:  **Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving**, By Julia Samuel

Websites:  [www.griefworks.co.uk](http://www.griefworks.co.uk) – see the section ‘What Helps’ which has links to other organisations.

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk) - see the support and information section for resources for parents/carers and there is also a whole section for schools.