



## **DISCUSSION GUIDE**

### **THE SHARED GRIEF PROJECT**

[www.SharedGrief.org](http://www.SharedGrief.org)

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## ABOUT THE SHARED GRIEF PROJECT

Childhood bereavement is more common than people realize. In 2014 researchers estimated that more than one out of twenty children in the United States experienced the death of a parent or sibling before the age of eighteen. This is approximately 5.5% of children in the United States, or over 4 million nationally. When youth up to the age of twenty-five are factored in, this estimate climbs to more than 10 million young people nationally. Children and families often struggle under the burden of grief, facing social, academic, behavioral, and psychological challenges as a result.

Unfortunately, in our death-averse society, people do not want to talk about the painful topic of death and bereavement, especially to children and teens. Many adults think that children are too young to understand, or that they will say “the wrong thing” to a grieving child. Finally, there are those who believe that children and teens are so resilient that they’ll “get over it.” As a result, children who have lost a loved one may grieve in silence and isolation, with scarce opportunities to share their feelings. This means that the difficult and complex emotions that they feel – including sadness, anger, loneliness, confusion, and even guilt – remain unvoiced and unshared much of the time. As a result, many grieving children and, in turn, their families do not receive the care and support from others that they so desperately need.

The simple fact is that bereaved children and teens are not alone; there are other young people who have also lost an important person in their lives. Once children realize that they are not alone, they can learn from this shared experience. This is a powerful and very important message for grieving children. The Shared Grief Project hopes to communicate this message through the personal narratives of public figures who, as children and teens, have lost someone close to them. They can offer a sense of empathy, solidarity, and optimism. Grieving children and their families can get to “know” these messengers of courage and resilience. They will realize “I can get through this; I will be okay”.

This guide provides suggestions for how to use these videos with young people, families, and teachers. Get to know each of these individuals. Consider them friends who have “been there.” Their stories are powerful, listen closely, share your own thoughts and watch the videos several times. You will learn something new each time.

## LISTENING TO YOUNG VOICES

The authentic voices and narratives of children and teens are all too rare in today's world. Especially when it comes to one of the most difficult challenges they face in their lives, mourning the death of a family member or friend. Often adults want to protect young people. But bereaved children want to know how other children have coped with the events of personal loss.

While young people have many occasions to talk with each other, their teachers and parents, they may not feel comfortable talking about their fears and painful emotions. Yet it is the act of talking and expressing feelings with those who have been through the same or similar experiences that can provide new opportunities for growth. Young people learn they are not alone.

The Shared Grief Project introduces children and teens to others who have not only survived but also thrived after the death of someone close to them. In one sense these individuals grieve like other young people their age, but unlike most of us they are in the public spotlight. Books, stories and videos allow us to share the experiences of others. Through the power of video interviews, The Shared Grief Project allows us to meet individuals like Kyrie Irving, the NBA superstar with the Cleveland Cavaliers. Kyrie's mother died when he was just four years old. He takes us on a journey back to that time in his life and tells us his thoughts and feelings, what helped him and what he wished he had done just a bit differently. His story is an inspiration to all of us. He has not only coped but has also grown from his experience. His strengths are awe-inspiring; he has the ability to connect with us, and shows us the importance of support from the adults in his life.

It is important to remember that seeing the videos of Kyrie Irving or Brian Griese or Gabrielle Reece and talking about death and bereavement can stir up feelings that we thought were securely stowed away. Young people may find that the videos help them continue a dialogue they've been having with their parents, siblings, peers, teachers or coaches. Parents and teachers have a new opportunity to see the life-altering event of grieving a loss through a very different lens, that of their son, daughter or student.

## Screening the Video and Inspiring Conversation

*Prior to screening a video, it is recommended that you set the stage to minimize distractions – turning off cell phones, TVs, and social media.*

Talking about the impact of death, loss or other catastrophic events offers an opportunity to discuss how young people respond and help each other, not just in the immediate aftermath but also in the months and years that lie ahead.

*Here are sample questions and prompts to begin the conversation:*

1. What thoughts did you have as you watched the video and listened to the person tell his or her story?
2. As you think about the video, what moment particularly stands out?
  - Give a reason why you identified that particular moment.
3. What is your overall feeling/mood after watching the video?
4. Did anything you hear surprise you? If so, what was it?
5. What did you learn from viewing this video that you did *not* know before?
  - What did you learn about resilience?
  - What did you learn about hope?
6. What would you say to the person in the video if he or she were your friend?
7. How might this video help other kids/teens learn about loss, families and support?

Encourage adults to talk about the video and discuss it with their children.

Remember that any of these videos may have an ‘afterlife’ that might cause us think more deeply about the people in our own lives.

## For Educators and Clinicians: The Power of Film

"They are going to come away feeling what happened. I don't think you really can know something, really know it in your heart as well as your mind, unless you feel it. That's the power of this medium."

David McCullough, Historian, 2009

Watching a film gives us opportunities to talk about topics in ways that no other medium can. A film can bring us into the lives and experiences of others and allows us to witness history. Documentaries are used to open conversations on important topics, increasing awareness of current issues. *The Cove* put out a call to action to stop dolphin hunting and on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1911 factory fire in New York City, the film, *Triangle: Remembering the Fire*, allowed us to appreciate the history of labor reform. David McCullough, upon seeing his book, *John Adams*, come to the screen, offered his thoughts about the experience, "...knowing what happened in one's heart as well as one's mind facilitates understanding" and compassion (2009). Historical and activist films embolden us to take action. However, there are other films that allow us to explore some of life's most painful moments. *Rebirth* is a documentary following five people profoundly altered by the events of September 11, 2001. We share their pain and perhaps relive our own losses but we also recognize the healing and hope that accompanies grief. Even animated films offer us valuable and moving lessons in life: *Big Hero 6*, *The Lion King*, *Inside Out* and so many others.

Too often the voices of our youngest citizens are lost in the clamor of adult voices. Human beings, including children and teens, are natural story-tellers (McAdams, 1993). As we connect to other people, we make sense of challenging situations by sharing our stories. This is particularly important when talking about difficult topics. Our personal stories, or narratives, are more than a way to describe our lives; these stories also provide a way of ordering our experiences and connecting to others.

What can we learn from watching a film and then talking about it? The narrator in a film emerges as a friend, role model, storyteller or even advisor. There is an opportunity to gain insight, problem solving skills and support. Connections are made between the viewer and the people in the film. It is a powerful educational tool. Children and teens may become inspired to write, paint, photograph or film *their own* experiences. When young people watch a film together, it may become easier to discuss and even debate important issues (Dewey, 1934, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009).

This educational discussion guide gives teachers and clinicians the tools and strategies they need to achieve all they can from *The Shared Grief Project*.

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# Strategies for Viewing and Discussion in the Classroom

## Preparation for Using Shared Grief Videos in the Classroom

Determine your purpose and goals for using the video in your class. Be very clear, identifying teaching points (earlier in this guide) and how the video and discussion will relate to your overall lesson plan or discussion. Consider how your students will relate to the content of the video and determine if anyone has had a personal grief/loss experience before discussions begin.

Preparing for screening the video:

- View the video at least 2-3 *times* before you use it in the classroom;
  - The first screening should be from a holistic standpoint in which you allow yourself to experience it in much the same way as your students, openly and without any pre-conceived ideas.
  - The second time you watch the video take brief notes at critical or provocative points.
  - The third time, consider what aspects you will want to focus on with your class; what questions you will ask them after they see the video and any learning activities you can develop afterwards.

## Preparing the Class for the Video and the Discussion

Briefly describe what the students are about to see, a short synopsis. For example, talk about Kyrie Irving's experience and what he does now, as an adult. Although the video is very short, tell the students if anyone needs a break, they can quietly leave the room. Consider having another person at the back of the room or in the hallway to assist anyone who wants to leave the room.

## Viewing the Video

Observe the students, be mindful of those who may be reacting with discomfort. Position yourself in a location where you can see faces and body language.

After showing the video allow for a minute or two of silence, slowly raise the lights in the room and tell your students to take a few deep breaths. The class will start to move around in their seats, consider having them stand and move in place for a moment or two.

## Discussion

There are a number of ways teachers can 'debrief' or discuss the video in the classroom. They can lead a group discussion using open-ended questions, or they can facilitate discussion using a framework of prompts that reveals key teaching points in the video (see additional pages in this guide).

The *framework* approach to group discussion is appropriate for older students and courses that focus on psychology, sociology and human behavior.

Although you will be asking your students about the person who is the subject of the video and his or her personal loss and grief, young people will undoubtedly bring up their own reactions as well; this is expected and very common. At the conclusion of the discussion make note of their comments and mention how we all react personally to others' traumatic experiences, this is the essence of empathy. You may want to talk about empathy and compassion at this point as well.

**Suggestions and Strategies:**

You must gently urge, prod, and nudge to move the discussion forward. At times young people may be hesitant, especially discussing such difficult topics. After one person raises his/her hand, ask "anyone else?" "Who else?" "What else?"

If they share a personal loss experience, tell them you are sorry for their loss. Give positive reinforcement for their candor, honesty, sensitivity, and courage to share with the group.

Be alert for students who are having difficulty, becoming uncomfortable or thinking of people in their own lives.



## Questions for Discussion, Conversation and Journaling

1. What thoughts did you have as you watched the video and listened to the subject of the video tell his/her story?
2. As you think about the video, what stands out? Give a reason why you identified that particular moment.
3. What is your overall feeling/mood after watching the video?
4. What did you learn from viewing this video that you did *not* know before?
  - What did you learn about resilience?
    - o What is resilience and how do you know you have it? Can you develop resilience?
  - What did you learn about hope?
  - What did you learn about grief?
  - Did anything surprise you?
5. What did you learn about families? Especially during difficult times?
6. How can you relate what you've learned to losses in your life or those around you?
7. What would you say to the person in the video?  
What question(s) would you ask him/her?  
What would you say to encourage or comfort him/her?

**Potential Activity: Write a letter to the person who is the subject of the video.**

### **Small Group Topics and Questions**

Encourage students to talk about the video and discuss it with their families

- Develop questions for family members.
- Ask family members to talk about losses they may have experienced in their own lives, when they were younger or as an adult.

## For Young Adults

The following section offers some ideas for discussion, journaling and writing with senior high school or college students. Remember to determine, in advance, if anyone has had a personal experience with loss and death before the discussions begin.

- Explore how the students responded to the video.
  - How did they react -- physically, emotionally, and cognitively?
- Ask students to share their impressions and reactions to the person in the video.
  - Talk with their families and have parents/grandparents tell the story of their own difficult times of loss and grief.
- Ask them to identify themes relevant to their own experiences.
  - How does the experience of the person in the video differ from experiences they may have had in their own lives?
  - Capture their thoughts through writing, drawing or talking.
- Describe the healing, hopeful and self-care strategies the person in the video speaks about.
  - What works for them, what doesn't?
  - What worked for the person in the video, what didn't?
  - Who can they go to for help, support, and a listening ear?
  - What suggestions would they have for the person in the video?
  - What keeps them going?
- Ask what they have learned from the video.
  - About themselves.
  - About their families.
  - About their friends.
  - About grief in general.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Donna A. Gaffney, DNSc, PMHCNS-BC, FAAN**

Dr. Gaffney has long addressed the issues of trauma, loss and grief in the lives of children and their families. As a psychotherapist she has counseled bereaved children and their families, and consulted with students and educators following national disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Dr. Gaffney is the author of *The Seasons of Grief, Helping Children Grow Through Loss*. She consulted with Cricket Books and authored the professional guide that accompanied the young adult book, *911: The Book of Help*. Dr. Gaffney developed educational guides for the films *Rebirth* and *The Second Day* and co-produced the award winning *Remembering September 11, A Guide for Schools*. Dr. Gaffney holds masters degrees from Teachers College, Columbia University and Rutgers University and received a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. Her post-doctoral work includes the Prudential Fellowship for Children and the News at Columbia Journalism School and a certificate from the International Trauma Studies Program. In addition to her role as Advisor for Research and Content Development at the National Alliance for Grieving Children she consults with families and professionals affected by trauma, loss and violence.