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Grief, Anger and the Rise of Youth Affected by the Juvenile System

By Lisa R. Rhodes
September 2024



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Nationwide, news reports and concerns about juvenile crime have led some areas of the country, such as Washington, D.C.; Memphis, Tennessee; New Smyrna Beach, Florida; and Prince George's County, Maryland, to declare or reinstate curfews for young people. In 2022, Philadelphia, Chicago and Fulton County, Georgia, announced that their curfews for youth would remain in place.

Public officials, law enforcement and community groups continue to question the causes behind young people's unlawful behavior. A 2023 New York Times article reported that grief and anger from the death of loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts with peers on social media and increase gun violence may be underlying factors behind the rise in serious crimes by youth in New York City. **Karla Sapp, EdD, LPC-S, LMHC-S**, says the New York Times article may have shed some light on the mindset and emotional health of many of the youth who are currently entering the juvenile justice system nationwide.

"Unprocessed grief over the loss of parents, caregivers, family members and friends during the early stages of the pandemic as well as long-held anger about gun violence and social media conflicts may be contributing factors to the recent spike in crimes from a trauma-informed perspective," says Sapp, who specializes in offending populations and correctional psychology.

Sapp, who has counseled youth in the juvenile system for more than 19 years, says feelings of grief and anger can be particularly intense for youth affected by the juvenile system. "They either have never had a safe space to process their emotions and learn how to cope with uncomfortable feelings in a healthy manner or suppressing their emotions have become a means of survival based on the environments they currently live in," she says.

Kevin R. Mack, LPC, owner of **Mack Counseling** in Houston, has worked with youth in the juvenile system for 15 years. He says when it comes to this clientele, both grief and anger are significant catalysts for criminal behavior. "Unresolved grief from losses or traumas can lead to emotional turmoil, while unchecked anger can fuel impulsive actions," he explains. "Both emotions can impair judgement, making juveniles more susceptible to engaging in criminal acts as a way to cope or exert control."

Under the Surface

Grief and anger often build over time and simmer in a person's psyche until a trigger, such as the death of a person or a perceived personal insult or attack, brings the emotions to light. While grief and anger are common emotions for youth in the juvenile system, other feelings, such as disappointment, loneliness, hurt, helplessness, frustration, insecurity, stress and shame are also a part of the anguish they experience, Mack says. He often uses the iceberg analogy — where visible behaviors represent only the tip of the iceberg and the underlying factors remain largely hidden beneath the surface — to illustrate this concept to his clients.

"Even though counselors observe young clients' behaviors, it's crucial to recognize the deeper emotions and experiences driving those behaviors," Mack says.

Sapp says grieving losses may adversely impact young people's mental health and may be correlated with recent offending behaviors. Some of those losses include having incarcerated parents or parents who are absent because of their work, being raised in a one-parent household, experiencing a loss of identity and belonging, having an unstable family dynamic, being placed in foster care and not having

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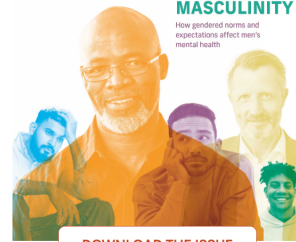
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"Grief also impacts our ability to access the parts of the brain that assist in emotion regulation and processing," says Samantha Anthony, LPC, a senior clinician with the Uplift Center for Grieving Children in Philadelphia.

"Some studies on grief and youth in the justice system have identified feelings like guilt and anger as a prevalent grief response," says Anthony, who counsels young people who are held in detention centers while waiting for trial or sentencing. "While we may not be able to draw a direct cause-effect relationship between the two, what we do know is that people who have experienced traumatic events may engage in behaviors that are more likely to be against the law, such as hurting someone else."

Logan Taylor, LPC, a senior clinician at Counseling and Forensic Services Inc. in Woodbridge, Virginia, treats male adolescents who are on probation and enrolled in a community program that provides anger management and trauma-informed mental health services. He says anger management and lapses in emotional regulation can lead to unhealthy behavior that is not illegal offending behavior. For example, anger and a lack of control over one's emotions can lead to interpersonal conflict with friends, family or other significant people in the person's life.

While a primary goal of grief counseling and anger management for youth in the juvenile system is to reduce the likelihood of reoffending, Mack says helping young people process complex feelings, develop resilience, identify triggers and regulate their emotions are also goals of treatment. Most importantly, Anthony says therapy can help youth learn healthy ways to cope with stress and express themselves without resorting to maladaptive and potentially harmful behaviors.

Helping Youth Process Unresolved Emotions

Several therapeutic modalities, including trauma-focused cognitive behavior therapy and narrative therapy, can be effective in treating this population. Taylor and Mack ask their clients to write letters to the victim or from the victim to the client to help them develop empathy for people they have hurt and to release any buried feelings they may have about a loss they have experienced. These letters are not mailed and are only used as a part of a client's treatment.

"The purpose of this homework is to allow the clients to place themselves in their victims' shoes and imagine exactly how their behavior could have impacted the victim in order to promote a better empathetic understanding," Taylor says. "Sometimes clients struggle with the letter to the victim because it can be hard to take full responsibility for their behavior, with no minimization or justification."

Mack uses a tool called the goodbye letter to aid clients in confronting and processing emotions about the loss of a loved one. He says the tool can also be useful for clients who have experienced any kind of loss, such as friends, pets or anything else that was important to them. This exercise creates a safe space for young people to authentically express their feelings, Mack says. For example, sample goodbye letters show how clients may be asked to describe who they are grieving, what favorite memories they have of the person and if they have learned any lessons from the relationship.

"This process facilitates a more efficient progression through the grieving journey, as opposed to suppressing or avoiding difficult emotions," Mack says. "Ultimately, the goal is to empower young people to honor their loved one's memory with a sense of closure."

Mack says the goal for young people who are grieving the loss of a person, thing or an experience is to be able to come back to a "level of equilibrium without undue prolonged negative emotions." He says part of the healing process is to create memories that are purposeful and being able to see the loss as the natural development of a bigger picture.

Anthony and her colleagues at Uplift adapt **Worden's tasks of mourning** to teach youth in the juvenile system about grief and its role in the sadness people feel after a loss. The adaptation is based on the work of J. William Worden, a psychologist, who developed four basic tasks for people to complete as they work their way through healing after a loss:

1. Accept the reality of loss
2. Process the pain of grief
3. Adjust to the world without the deceased
4. Find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life

Anthony uses the following five questions based on Worden's tasks to begin the conversation:

- **Grief:** Ask clients to describe what grief means to them.
- **Feelings:** Ask clients to describe how they first felt when they experienced the loss and how they currently feel about the loss.
- **Coping Skills:** Ask clients what they have done to cope with these feelings from the time the loss first occurred to the present.
- **Memories:** Ask clients what special memories they have of the person who died and what makes those memories special.
- **Connections:** Ask clients what they can do to stay connected to the person and how they can move forward in life.

This approach invites young people to come to their own acceptance of a loss, develop ways to cope with the loss and find ways to stay connected to the person or thing that they are grieving, Anthony says.

The clinicians at Anthony's practice also work with juvenile probation officers through the Philadelphia Family Court to connect juveniles on probation with Uplift's grief support groups for members of the community so they can continue or start working on alleviating feelings of loss.

Advocating for Youth in the Juvenile System

Sapp says counselors can also work to improve the well-being of youth in the juvenile system outside of therapy by "amplifying the voices of at-risk youth, advocating for systemic change and promoting equity and access to resources."

This can include participating in public education campaigns, advocating for cultural competency training in the professions that impact the lives of young people and being committed to social justice initiatives.

Counselors can also play a vital role in creating a more supporting and inclusive environment for vulnerable youth in their practices to help young people overcome challenges and thrive in society, Sapp says.

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