

FILLER



The “lonely predicament”

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As a child psychologist I am sometimes asked to see children in families where a death is anticipated. The assumption is that I will help them understand more about the illness and provide a safe space in which they can express their feelings about what is happening. But surprisingly often my young patients have made it quite clear that this is not something they want to do.

Occasionally they go on to talk more openly, but more commonly they keep off the very subject everyone assumes we are discussing, although I have had the powerful sense that they are already grieving and that our conversations have been fulfilling an important unmet need.

Initially I could find little of relevance to these observations in the literature. But then I found a paper that struck a chord. It described the helplessness, apprehension, and loneliness of the children of a dying parent—hence the use of the phrase “lonely predicament” in its title.¹ The children these researchers studied chose to talk mainly about their lives in general rather than their parent’s illness and were subsequently found to be doing better than a comparison group, who had not had the chance to talk to someone.

So I continue to find myself engaged in lively discussions with children in this situation, about their passions: researching how

to care for kittens, hunting for cartoons of mermaids on the internet, and listening to their dreams of making it as a rock star. In doing so I believe I am providing something precious: a steady focus on their lives and dreams while the world around them feels so uncertain.

C S Lewis described the death of his mother poignantly: “It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.”² But he also made the valuable point that his loss was a gradual thing that began some time before she died. This paper suggests that we may all potentially have a useful role to play in a child’s world at such a time: that of helping them hold on to who they are in spite of what is happening. We may not be able to replace “the great continent” but we can sometimes be a port in a storm.

I have read and understood BMJ’s policy on declaration of interests and declare the following interests: None.

- 1 Rosenheim E, Reicher R. Children in anticipatory grief: the lonely predicament. *J Clin Child Psychol* 1986;15:115-9.
- 2 Lewis CS. *Surprised by joy*. Fontana Books, 1959.

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