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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/lumenphs.2017.0501.05

Covered in:
CEEOL, Index Copernicus, Ideas
RePeC, EconPapers, SocioNet

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How to cite: Buşu, V. & Teodorescu, B. (2017). Therapeutic Tales and Psychotrauma in the State of Mourning to Children. Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty, Section: Philosophy and Humanistic Sciences, V(1), 57-67. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/lumenphs.2017.0501.05
Therapeutic Tales and Psychotrauma in the State of Mourning to Children

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Abstract: The article is an analysis of the effects generated by the theraupeutic tales within the process of overcoming the trauma experienced by a child whose parent passed away. The aim of the article is to explain how children can get over the trauma produced during the period of mourning, by means of psychotherapy and the creation of therapeutic fairy tales, according to each patient. The research methods we have resorted to are the meta-analysis and the experiment. By the thorough study of several specialty studies belonging to some well-known psychologists and psychotherapists, we have tried to underline the importance of the therapeutic fairy tales when we deal with a child’s recovery after the end of the period of mourning. In order to bring the experiment to an end, relying on various rigorous scientific studies, we have shaped two therapeutic fairy tales, appropriate for both boys and girls. The theme of these tales is the comprehension of death by children. Consequently, we have put the two fairy tales into practice in the case of five children that have recently experienced the period of mourning. We have succeeded in obtaining a positive change for four of them. As to the subjects’ selection, we have often encountered difficulties concerned with the custodians’ refusal to allow us to apply the test to some of the children. Our intention is to perform the experiment on a larger group of children that have lost one of the parents, with a view to obtaining even more relevant results.

Keywords: death; mourning; psychotrauma; therapeutic tales; psychotherapy; emotional management.

Introduction

By the present article, we aim to emphasize the importance of explaining and making children understand in good time the meaning of the period of mourning and implicitly of death. Helping them to comprehend death as the end of life leads to the avoidance of self-victimisation. The children will avoid being the victims of erroneous regrets or considering themselves responsible for the parent’s death.

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Death represents the only certitude we have in life. The period of mourning, caused by death, afflicts both the adults and the children. Hiding the truth on the sudden disappearance of one of the parents brings into the child’s mind a series of unanswerable questions. Furthermore, the child comes to victimize himself for the absence of one of the parents. As time passes by and the child finds out the truth, he will suffer from traumatic disorders, that can only be cured by psychotherapy and the therapeutical tales. The child needs empathy during the whole period of mourning, avoiding thus the emergence of behaviour difficulties in the future.

Literature review

The theme concerned with the therapeutic tales and psychotrauma during the period of mourning to children has been previously investigated by John Bowlby, an English psychotherapist, in the paper entitled “The making and breaking of affectional bonds. II. Some principles of psychotherapy. The fiftieth Maudsley Lecture.” John Bowlby considers that the states of anxiety or depression experienced by a patient are related to certain ill-fated moments in his childhood or adolescence and that these problems can be managed by means of a series of psychotherapy sessions. Thus, the psychotherapist must carry out several sessions with his patient, assuring him that he is in a safe space, where he can confront his past fears (Bowlby, 1977).

“Treatment of complicated mourning” is the first book that focuses especially on the period of mourning, considering it to be a pathological grief. The book is written by the psychologist Therese A. Rando and it identifies all the states of mourning experienced by a person, managing to shape a lot of useful information necessary for the development of an efficient treatment for the affected patient (Rando, 1993). At the same time, Norman L. Paul and George H. Grosser carry out their research entitled “Operational mourning and its role in conjoint family therapy,” showing that the family that experiences death can get over the difficulties caused by the death of one of the members by means of the so-called operational mourning, that aims at the comprehension of the trauma (Norman & Grosser, 1965).

Another interesting research is concerned with the therapeutic fairy tales. It is included in the book called “The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy: Practice, Theory and Research.” The book contains a series of specific pieces of research, meant to describe how the stories can
influence the patient’s state of health, changing his perception on his own anxieties (Angus & McLeod, 2004).

In our opinion, the death of a parent can cause different emotional states inside a child, that can affect him and consequently his social life for a longer period of time. Psychotherapy helps the child that has experienced the trauma generated by the death of a parent to get over the psychological shock quicker. Moreover, by resorting to the therapeutic fairy tales, he may have the chance to settle different past fears and the opportunity to say goodbye to the deceased parent.

Death is more than a transition, it is the only constant of life. Regardless of our actions, we all die. The adults understand the notion of death and its meaning, which does not mean that they also accept it easily. How could children accept death, if the adults themselves refuse to accept it as the end of life? People often hide the death of a parent from small children, in order not to make them suffer. The problem appears when the child grows up and starts to ask questions on the disappearance of one of his parents. The more mature the child becomes, the more he realizes that death was the cause of his parent’s disappearance. He regrets not having had the opportunity to say goodbye (Mitrofan, 2003). Emotionally closed off, emotionally unavailable, the child starts to manifest a strange behaviour, which affects his life at all levels. These children grow up with the feeling that the deceased parent left them intentionally and the adults must realize that, in order to prevent the children from hiding their feelings during the period of mourning.

The experiment

A child that suffers after the death of one of his parents may start to experience big difficulties at school, stop communicating with the others, feel depressed, anxious, etc. He will isolate himself from reality, asking questions whose answers he will never find (Antony & Bhana, 1988-1989). The child cannot understand death as the end of life, coming to blame himself for the disappearance of his parent. This is also due to the fact that the adults hide the truth from him, whereas the child, who does not understand what is going on, will manifest the wish to see his deceased parent (Axelrod, 2016). From the moment the child finds out the truth, he will feel himself guilty for the death of his parent. He will remember all the moments spent together with his parent and he will judge his behaviour, realizing that he had not had the opportunity to say goodbye. Consequently,
the child must understand since childhood that we cannot defeat death (Adams & Berzonsky, 2009).

The period of mourning is traumatizing for the child whose parent has not explained him the meaning of death. During that period, the child may believe that the deceased parent is left for the time being, but he will be back soon. As time passes by, the child will notice that his parent does not come back and he starts asking himself a lot of questions concerned with the disappearance from his life of his beloved parent. The child experiences a painful process divided into three phases: initial, acute and subsidiary (Wass, 1991). During the first phase, the child will be faced with the negation, the concern and the panic, which give shape to a state of stress and irritability. Death will become part of his life, thinking that he will die, such as his parent died. This period of mourning totally changes the life of a child, making him believe that he has been left alone and that he is the only one to blame for the death of the beloved parent (Axelrod, 2016). This is the reason why the child will find it ever more difficult to cope with the scholastic activities and consequently his marks will be affected. The period of mourning affects the communication between the child and the other parent, as well as the social relations with the other relatives, the colleagues, friends, etc. (Popescu & Stefan, 2014)

A child can overcome such a traumatic experience by means of the therapeutic tales that consist of stories similar to his own stories.

Here is an example of such a therapeutic fairy tale:

"Once upon a time there was a little lion that was living together with his family in a wonderful jungle. His parents loved him very much and they protected him against all the bad things. His life was amazing, he enjoyed the most interesting toys and the most fascinating games. His father was working hard to support his family, whereas the mother lioness was always preparing the most delicious food. The little lion was playing all day long with his friends and in the evening with his father, once he was back home. He loved to play with his father! In the weekends, the Lion family was embarking on wonderful adventures, where they discovered numerous fascinating places, enjoying the gifts of nature. At the end of the last weekend spent together with his family, on his first day at work, father Lion learnt that he was going to receive a new job. He was going to work in Heaven. Noticing that father Lion was so hard-working, God decided to take him in Heaven. The lion could better watch over his family from there. Thus, when he found out about that, father Lion returned home and woke up the little lion. He told him:"
Son! I was promoted. I will do a new job in Heaven. I want you to know that, although I will go far away from you, I will be able to protect both you and your mother.

But, father, I want to come with you!

No, son! That is not possible! Listen to me! This is how we will proceed! Each time you feel the need to talk to me, call me without delay!

But how will we talk? You will take the phone in Heaven with you, won’t you? We will communicate on Skype!

We will talk, yes, but not on the phone. We will talk by means of the most efficient and amazing device in this world. Do you know which the device is?

Which? asked the son.

It is our heart, my son! Each time you feel the need to talk to me, I will be by your side. My heart, son, is your heart. If you encounter difficulties, please, just call my name and I will protect you against all the bad things in your life! My mission, son, is to make you happy!

Should I understand that you are in my heart?

Yes, you are! I will always love you! I want you to promise me that you will behave yourself, you will play and study hard in order to become the most powerful lion in this jungle. I have to go now!! Remember! Each time your mother will be sad, go and tell her the two most important words. Do you know which they are?

I love you?

Yes, my son! I love you, too! I must go now! Always remember to call me with your heart!

That is what I will do, father!

Father lion left for his new job in Heaven. It is from there that he watched over his family, being happy to know them healthy. After his father left for Heaven, seeing that his mother was sad, the little lion went and told her:

Mother! I love you! Do not be sad! My father told me that he would take care of us from Heaven and each time we missed him, we should call him by our magic device:

Which device, son?

Our heart, mother!

Mother lion embraced her child and they lived happily ever after. The little lion turned into the most powerful lion of the jungle, as his father had wished. The little lion understood that although his father had left forever, he would always love him and protect him.
During the period of mourning, the child must understand that he is not guilty of what happened and that it is not his behaviour that caused his parent’s death. Some children will experience mixed feelings, from anxiety, sadness to self-victimization (Wass, 1991; Smarandache & Vlăduţescu, 2014). The children are the future adolescents that will encounter different behavioural problems, if they are not able to get over the trauma generated by the death of one parent. The period of mourning is difficult for everybody, but for the children that do not understand what is going on, it can turn into a real trauma, that brings about behavioural problems.

Another example of therapeutic fairy tale that can help the child get over the trauma produced is the following one:

In a very, very remote country, there lived happily a lamb together with his family. His father was working outside the town, but his mother was always with him. Every day she was cooking for him the most delicious food and sweets. She was also playing with him after he came back from school. His mother helped him do his homework and she congratulated the lamb each time he got high marks at school. Everything went fine, until one day. The little was coming back from school when he noticed his father in front of the door:

- Father! You came back earlier today! Now both you and mother can help me do my homework! Today the schoolmistress gave me a 10!
- Son, please, come and sit next to me! I want to tell you something….
- What happened, father? Where is my mother?
- We will move in with your aunt for a while.
- Why? Where is my mother?
- Son! Unfortunately, she passed away….
- Dis she leave? Where did she leave?
- No, my son! Your mother, unfortunately had an accident on her way home and nobody could anything to save her.

The little lamb started to cry. He wanted to see his mother. Although he was just a little lamb, he knew the meaning of death. His mother had explained him the notion of death.

- Son! I want you to remember that your mother loved you very much and she always will! I love you, too, very much! He embraced his child!

That night, the little lamb could not sleep and while crying, he called his mother.

At midnight, he fell asleep. He dreamt of his mother while she was cooking happily.

- Son, you came back earlier from school today! Would you like to eat?
- Mother!!! You are here! How glad I am to see you!
- But I will always be with you! I promised you I would never leave you!
- But father told me that...
- Yes, son! I know what your father told you! I also know that suffers a lot. I want you to take great care of him! I will leave soon and I want you to promise me that you will be happy! I will always be with you!
- But how will this be possible, mother?
- I want you to know one thing! Each time you will miss me, just take a look of yourself in the mirror and you will see me! You will see my eyes and smile. I am you! Now promise me you will live a beautiful life!
- I promise you, mother! The little lamb embraced his mother.

The next morning, the little lion, optimistic, went to his father and told him:

- Father! We will be happy!

The little lamb understood that although his mother was far away, she would always be with him, as she was her creation.

In this case, when mother is the one that spends most of her time with her child and she eventually loses her life in an accident, the little one will find it very difficult to understand and accept her death. Thus, it is important for the child’s family to comprehend the gravity of the situation and support him, making him understand that his sadness is normal and that he is not responsible for what happened. The child must know that at a given moment we all die, but this will not happen now. He must not feel the presence of death in his life. (Vlăduţescu, Siminică & Dumitru, 2015; Ślusarczyk, Baryń & Kot, 2016)

If in a family, one of the members (the father, the mother, or a relative) is ill and he or she will most likely die, the child will better understand the notion of death. He will suffer a lot after the death of a parent, but it will be an expected loss. Furthermore, he will have the opportunity to say goodbye to the sick person. However, things are totally different when it comes to the unexpected losses, when the child is put under pressure, without being able to understand what happened with the beloved person (Legare, Evans, Rosengren & Harris, 2012; Frunză & Sandu, 2015). The unexpected losses can bring about real traumas in the life of a child, who finds it extremely difficult to get used to his new life during the period of mourning, but also after the end of this period. By means of the therapeutic tales, a child will overcome traumatic stress caused by the death of one parent more easily. For example, if a child is told the tale of the little lion, he will better understand the disappearance of his father. (Todahl, Smith, Barnes & Pereira, 1998; Colhon, Cerban, Becheru & Teodorescu, 2016).
We have resorted to the help of the local authorities, such the Municipal Police, the City Hall and the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection Dolj, in order to find out the cases of those children that have recently experienced a trauma caused by the period of mourning. With the help of these institutions, we have found 10 children with such a trauma. However, we could not work with all of them. The parents of five of these children refused to allow them to participate. Thus, we have started to work with the other five children, trying to help them become familiar with the therapeutic fairy tales created by us, with a view to demonstrating their effect. Each child had to experience once again the period of mourning that had caused the death of one of his parents and consequently a trauma that prevented him from communicating naturally with the others around him, due to the behavioural difficulties. We have intended to discover the role played by the therapeutic fairy tales in the process of getting over the trauma. After we have discussed with each of the children individually and managed to hold their attention by stories similar to their own stories, we have tried to explain them the death of a parent as a normal mechanism of life, where they are not responsible for what happened. At the beginning, the children have felt part of the therapeutic tales, acknowledging the similarity between those tales and their own stories (Vlăduţescu, 2015). Subsequently, we have met the children again one week later, in order to see if they had made any progresses concerned with the period of mourning. The therapeutic tales had had positive effects on four of the children, thus proving that the sudden death of a parent can be understood. By the introduction of each child into the atmosphere of a story, in our case of the therapeutic tales, he will be able to realize that death is part of our lives and we cannot avoid it.

**Discussions on the experiment**

This experiment tested on the five children has shown that the children could get over the period of mourning successfully, whereas the trauma has been almost settled. Unfortunately, we have had little time to demonstrate this phenomenon at length, the number of the children that have taken part in the process of using and testing the efficiency of the treatment by therapeutic fairy tales being small. However, we intend to elaborate our experiment through a longer period of time and notice the evolution of a bigger number of children. We would also like to demonstrate that the effects of the therapeutic fairy tales are really useful for the settlement of the children’s behavioural difficulties. After the
implementation of our little experiment, we have observed a significant evolution in the behaviour of the four children. More precisely, they have started to understand the phenomenon of death, but they feel the same for their parents. The comprehension of death during the period of mourning is necessary for each child, avoiding thus their bad behaviour. We also mean to resort to more therapeutic fairy tales and at the same time find the necessary healing resources within the children stories belonging to the Romanian literature.

Conclusion

The period of mourning represents a trauma for each child, no matter whether we deal with expected or unexpected losses. The trauma produced by the death of a parent brings about behavioural changes, affecting the child's health, education, social and moral life, etc. The need to understand what happens during the period of mourning generates anxiety, that the child can overcome with the help of his family and by psychotherapy. If these problems will not be settled down, the teenager will find it more and more difficult to communicate and he will manifest disorders of behaviour, becoming emotionally unstable. The family should explain the child the phenomenon of death; the therapeutic fairy tales represent a solution to the problems caused by mourning.

We have shaped two therapeutic fairy tales that we have tested on the five children that had experienced the period of mourning, managing to obtain positive feedback in four of the cases. Although the experiment has come off during a short period of time, it has stimulated us to go on with our research, in order to demonstrate on a larger scale which are the real effects of the therapeutic fairy tales on the children and notice if they represent a viable treatment.

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