

Someone I Love Died

A book to help young people deal with death



Heather J Ferris



When your father or mother dies it is hard to believe that you can go on with your life, but I found out that you can. It was all because of a support group for teens where I met others who had lost someone they love. Our group leader, Angel, helped us to heal. She listened and taught us to listen to each other (and ourselves) in a special way. We started to feel better and get on with our lives. By introducing you to my friends at Khululeka I think you can learn a lot that will help you to heal from your grief. I hope so!

Heather Ferris is a writer, counsellor, and trainer who specializes in supporting people affected by death and trauma. She has led many youth bereavement groups over the last 20 years. In Southern Africa she works with communities affected by HIV/AIDS and in Canada she teaches counselling (Grief and Culture and Diversity) at City University.

Corianna Heise is a photographer from Canada, who resides in South Africa. She works in a variety of photographic mediums including travel, portraiture, fine art and promotional photography, with publications in leading magazines. Corianna is a volunteer for the Drakenstein Hospice and works weekly with HIV/AIDS patients doing arts and crafts.

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Written by Heather J. Ferris

Photography and Design by Corianna Heise

Second Edition

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Dedicated to Masiwa, “the one who was left”, from Rusape, Zimbabwe
and to all the children everywhere who have lost someone they love.

These stories are real, but they are not the stories of the children, or their
families, in the pictures.

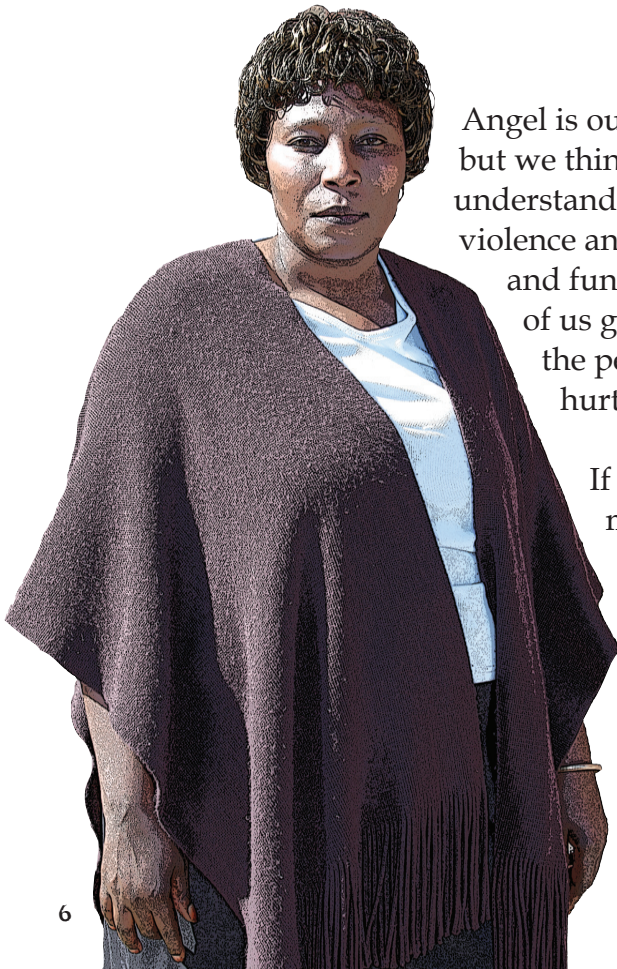
Khululeka - our support group

Hello my name is Nosiswe. A terrible thing is happening. It happened to me. My mother and father have died from AIDS. It is happening to many, many families. Sometimes it is the brother or sister, sometimes the mother or father or other relative. I am here because I want to help all the children out there who are suffering with this thing, death.

We can't stop death when it comes, whether from AIDS or another disease, or an accident, or violence. It is still death which leaves the children sad and lonely.

Meet some of my friends in Khululeka, our support group. A woman at the church said to me she heard of this group where children can go to get help. I didn't think it was possible to be helped after your parent dies, but we stick together and support each other and I feel a lot better than I did before I came here.





Angel - our leader

Angel is our group leader. I am not sure if that is her real name but we think she is an angel sent from God to help us. She understands us because she lost her husband and her baby to violence and disease. She is always there for us with food, ideas and fun things to do. Gossip really bothers Angel. In fact if any of us gossip, even if we don't realize we are doing it, she asks the person to sit in the circle and explain why we want to hurt our friends by talking about their business.

If it happens more than once we decided that the person must not come back because we have lost trust. It is hard because the people in our communities are always gossiping, even our parents sometimes. The only thing is I sometimes like to gossip, but I DON'T like people gossiping about me! Angel says we must treat others like we want to be treated.

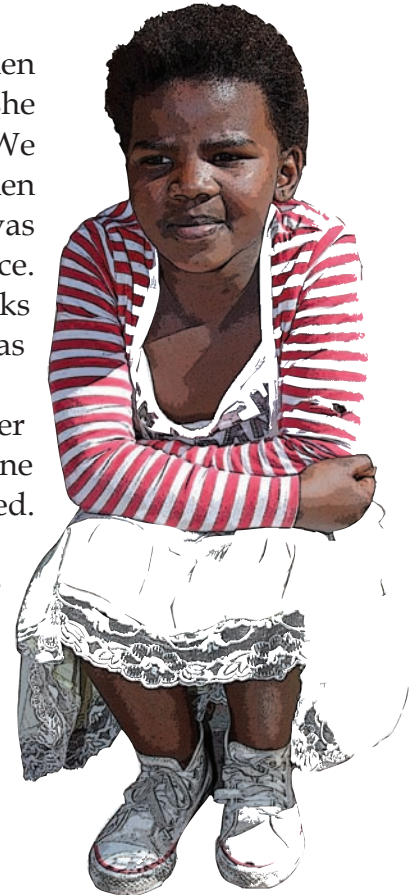
shock, anger, and fear

Nomsa is twelve. Her father died six months ago. He was shot. When she came to the group she was so quiet and looked at us as if she didn't like us. It was as if she was cross with everyone, even God. We all told our stories. Nomsa always crossed her arms very tight when she was speaking. She was trying to protect herself because she was very scared. Angel said she was still in shock because of the violence. How can someone shoot and kill your daddy? After a few weeks she seemed to loosen up and one day she told us that she wasn't as scared anymore.

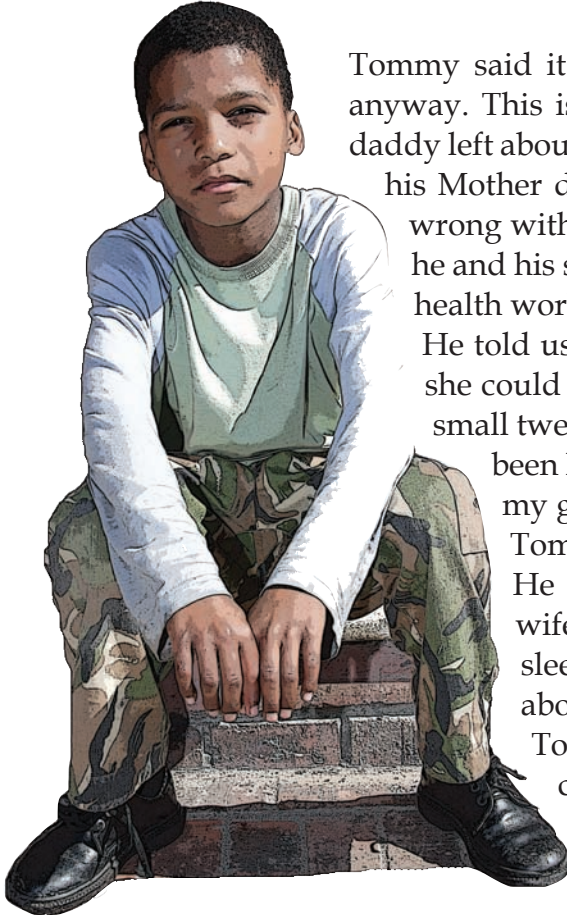
She also said she felt like murdering the tsotsis who killed her father. Angel told us that anger is a normal feeling after someone you love has died. You feel so helpless. At that point we all nodded. It was good to know that we could all understand one another.

Angel also did a relaxation exercise where we all lay on the floor on cushions. We breathed into our bodies and pretended the fear and anger was grey in colour.

Every time we breathed out we watched, in our minds, how it left us and floated away into the sky. When we breathed in it was pink for me and it meant love and care. It filled up the holes left by the anger and fear.



I can't concentrate



Tommy said it was stupid to be lying on the floor but he did it anyway. This is Tommy. Sho, he has been through a lot. First his daddy left about three years ago and they never saw him again. Then his Mother died about one year ago. He didn't know what was wrong with her. He said she was very weak for a long time and he and his sisters had to wash her and find food for her from the health workers.

He told us how they would help each other lift her up so that she could go to the toilet in the bucket next to the bed. He is a small twelve year old and his sisters ten and nine. It must have been hard. At least I had my brother who is seventeen and my grannie.

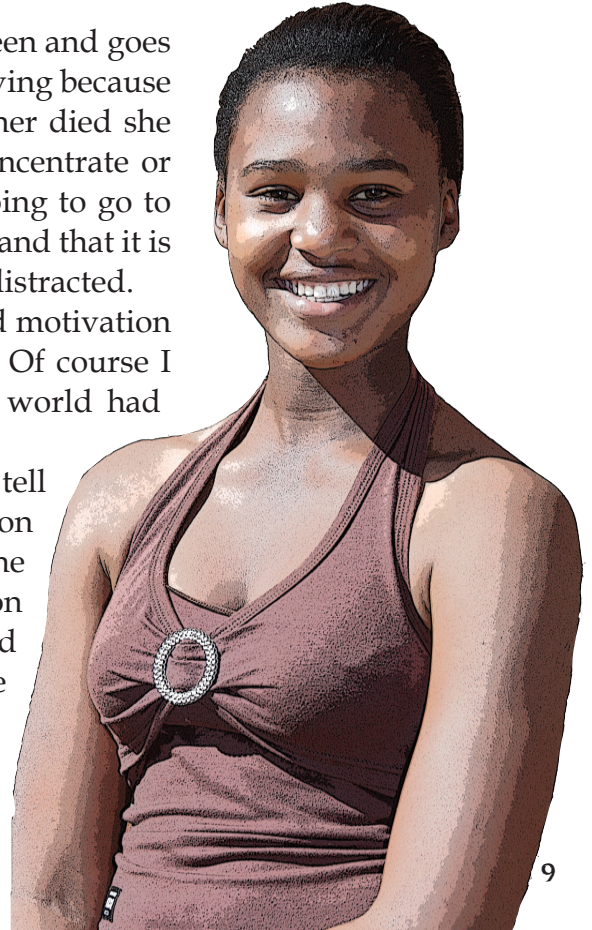
Tommy said that he is very lonely without his mother. He and his sisters are living with their uncle and his wife and children. They (Tommy and his sisters) are all sleeping on the same bed. His teacher has been worried about him because he doesn't get his homework done.

Tommy says what do they expect when the house is so crowded and you have to work for these people who have taken you in.

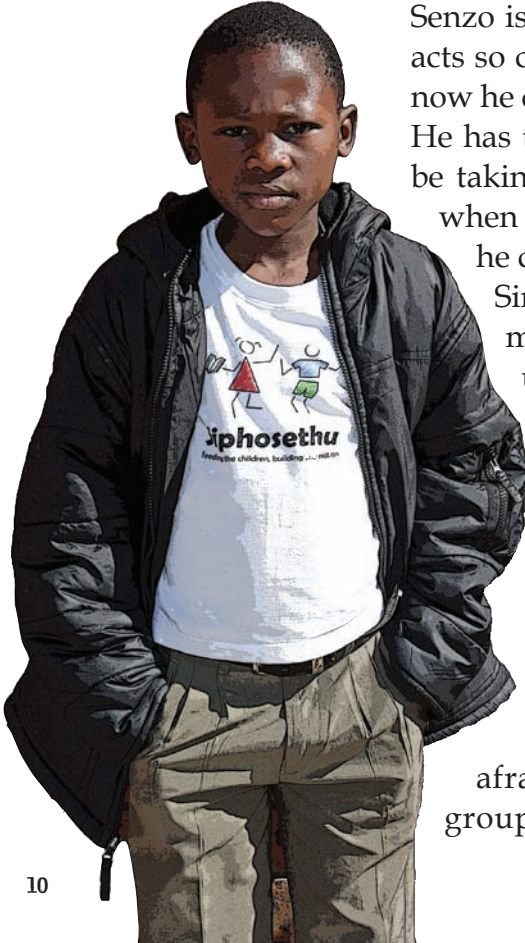
This is Alice. She is the oldest in our group. She is fourteen and goes to the high school. She understood what Tommy was saying because she used to be at the top of her class but since her father died she may as well be sent back to grade seven. She can't concentrate or finish projects never mind remember facts. Angel is going to go to the school and speak to the teachers so that they understand that it is normal when you are grieving to forget things and get distracted.

I remember after my parents died I had no energy and motivation (that was what my teacher said, as if it was my fault). Of course I couldn't care less about schoolwork when my whole world had fallen apart.

The good thing about the support group is that I could tell Alice that it gets better. You get back your concentration and interest in other things once you start to heal from the deaths. She could believe it coming from another person her age, who has had the same experience. She seemed happier when I told her that, because she really does like school. She wants to be a pilot when she grows up.



stress



Senzo is only twelve but you would think he is sixteen the way he acts so cool. He says he has changed since his mother died because now he doesn't have to go home at night. No one cares what he does. He has two brothers who are older than him who are supposed to be taking care of him. All they do is eat the food from the house when their grandmother brings it and then get angry with him if he complains.

Since he has been coming to the group he has started spending more time with his grandmother, who is kind to him. He is using drugs with his friends. He says at least he doesn't feel sad that way. When he comes to the group he comes in the back way so his friends don't see him. I am glad that he keeps coming because underneath he is a sensitive and caring person. In some way I think we are like a family for him.

feelings come and go

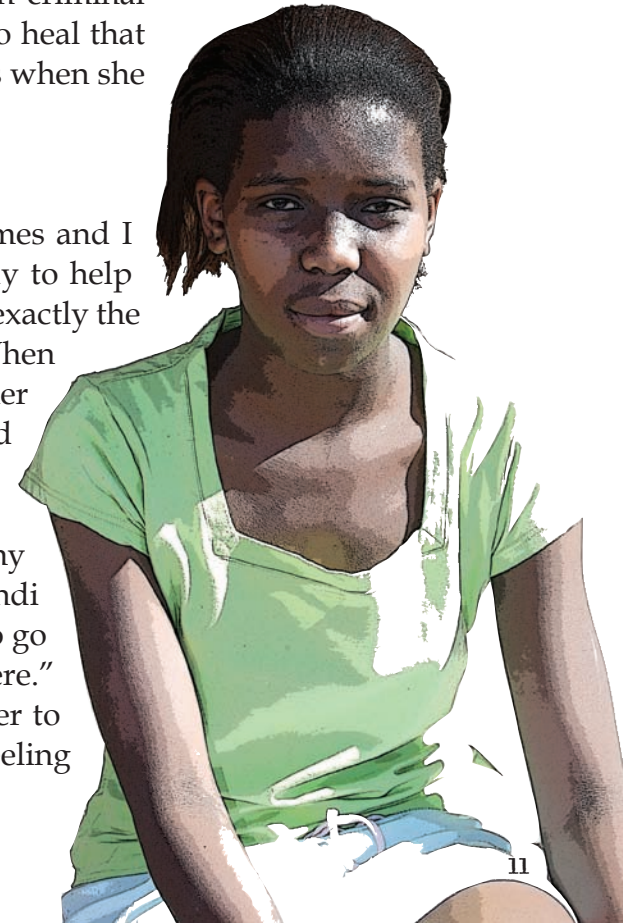
Angel doesn't tell us how to live, she teaches us to not be afraid of our feelings. "Just be yourself, particularly in this group," she says. "Each day feel the sadness, if it comes, and

don't run away from it. It is very sad to have a parent die, but you can still have a happy life in the end. You have to be careful that you don't mess up your life (with drugs or smoking or even criminal activity) while you are grieving, because then you have to heal that as well." She was looking at Senzo and a few of the others when she said that.

stigma is terrible

I can already feel my sadness coming and going at times and I am starting to feel stronger inside (that's why I am ready to help others now). Let me tell you about Lungi. Lungi is almost exactly the same age as me. We will both be fourteen in December. When she talks about her mother dying and how sick her father is, I can tell that it is AIDS. She won't use the word and seems terrified when we talk about AIDS in the group. It is because there is such a stigma.

I remember one time at school when the mother of my best friend, Londi, came to school to see the teacher. Londi saw her outside and ran to the teacher yelling, "Tell her to go home. Look at her, she has AIDS. Tell her not to come here." She was upset and the teacher was very kind. He took her to an office. They both met with her mother and she was feeling much better when I saw her later.



Stigma is terrible. People are scared and say things that aren't true. Even some clinic staff thought they could catch AIDS from my father just by touching him. People in the community would call my mother terrible names after my father died because she had AIDS. They say she had boyfriends and that's how she got AIDS. I didn't think that people in the church would do that, but sometimes they do.

Angel says that many people are very scared of AIDS. Some don't know if they have the virus HIV and they are even scared to be tested. In South Africa, before, there was no medicine so people felt very helpless. Now there are anti-retrovirals in some clinics. I wish my parents had been given tablets. I know it does not cure AIDS but you can live longer with the medicine.

Just so you know, you can only get the HIV virus from unprotected sex, from blood, from breast milk or a baby getting it from its mother before it's born. Maybe there will be a cure some day so we should never give up living or loving.

depression and suicide

Sometimes after your mother or father has died you feel like killing yourself. I am not making this up. I thought there was no point in living

anymore, especially after my mother died as well. You don't really want to die, it just feels like that would end the pain.

Thabo talked a lot about his feelings of suicide in our group. He said, "This is a terrible life. It is like hell and I am going to jump in front of a train one day soon. It will be the end." It scared us to hear him talking like that and we told him, "Don't do it we will miss you. Who will look after your sisters? They will have no-one." As you can see he is still full of life and I think he likes Alice. She is older than him by a few months. We went to the beach and he wanted to sit by her all the time. Maybe he is now seeing a good reason to live!

His story is also very sad because first his baby sister died, then his auntie who was his mother's sister and then his mother. He doesn't talk about his father, just his Aunt Rose who took him and his two sisters in.

He is also getting involved in the youth group doing plays. He is very good and will probably be a film star one day. He worries that there will be no money for his education. I think his talk about suicide was good for us because we could talk about our own feelings of hopelessness.





funerals

My cousin Reggie's father died the other day and I travelled to the funeral with my grannie, because he was her son. It was sad for me not only because he was my uncle, but because all my sadness about my own parents came back. I even wondered if I felt like going back to the group.

Angel came to see me and encouraged me to come and tell the others about what was going on. I cried all over again and it was good to be supported by my friends. We spent a lot of time talking about funerals in the group that day. Some people never went to the

funerals of their parents. One wasn't allowed to and the other ran away, he was too scared.

My cousin Reggie was dressed in his best clothes and he seemed really lost. In his family the children are not allowed to ask any questions about the person who died. Normally the children don't go to the funeral, but he was allowed. His mother had a very sad face but she didn't cry because she had to greet all the guests. There were lots of people because his father was an important man in the community. I didn't know anyone except my family but they seemed to know my parents and my grandmother.

I tried to talk to Reggie and tell him it was okay to cry, but he wouldn't. When I told Angel, she said it is often the case that you don't cry in the first few days, only later when it hits you that they are gone and not coming back.

In the group for the next few weeks we talked about funerals and burials. Did you know that some of our group had never been to a funeral? When my mother was alive she took me to all sorts of funerals. Sometimes I think she went because she could see her friends (and there was always good food). She also liked to cry and there was a lot of crying. She told me she had a sad life so she had lots to cry about. Once she got sick she stopped going to funerals. I think she knew her time was coming. I still get really sad when I remember her getting sicker and sicker.

Another thing about funerals is that they sometimes burn the body and all that is buried is the ashes. Tommie's grandma has his grandpa's ashes in the living room in a box. Can you imagine? We teased him about the ancestors listening to everything that is going on in the house. He better not steal any money from his grandma or swear under his breath. We all laughed but it seemed a bit scary.

In our group Angel said we should have a funeral ritual for all those who had died because it is helpful to say goodbye. Sometimes the real funeral is too soon for you to get your thoughts together. I think some of us were scared what would happen. Some of the boys said it was stupid, but when the day came everyone was there, even Johannes, Eric, Rosie and Elsa (who you haven't yet met). We were all carrying our papers with letters we had written and some small thing that could be left.

We walked up to a small hill about twenty minutes walk where it was private. I wouldn't want anyone to know what we were doing. It was just a bit embarrassing that's all.

It was quite a windy day so we stood close together. Some of us read our letters out loud, others read them to themselves. When we had all read our letters and placed our symbol on the ground we said some prayers and sang two songs, one in isiXhosa and one in English. "We must never give up," became our chant as we walked

back down the hill. We were all quieter on the way home and I think feeling lighter. I think God was there and speaking to us on the wind.

saying good bye

My father,

You were the head of my family. You are gone now. What am I supposed to do? I buried my mother and now Bubele and I are living with our grannie. We have food to eat. We are the lucky ones. Some have no food. I wish you did not die. You are still my father. I hope you are with my mother in Heaven. We have a real live angel here who helps all the children in our support group.

I am your daughter,

Nosiswe

My mother,

My heart is broken since you have been gone, but I know that I must live a good life because you will be proud. Your brother also died and I went to the funeral. Gogo is very sad that her children are gone before her. I am going well at school, but there are many times when my heart is very sad. Angel is my friend and the leader of our support group. I think you sent her from God to help all of us. I love you always.

Your daughter,

Nosiswe

guilt

Elsa is nearly thirteen. She came to the group because her older sister was killed on the way home from work. She was hit by a car as she was crossing the road. Elsa said her sister was so beautiful and she helped her mother bring food to the table because she was the only one working. Elsa said one day that she felt guilty after her sister died. "If it was me instead of her, my mother would have money for food. Now we have many worries. Also she helped my mother and also looked after the other seven brothers and sisters. I am naughty a lot and my mother gets very angry with me."

Angel asked us to talk about guilt because this feeling also sometimes comes when we are grieving. I feel guilty sometimes when my grandmother is very tired. She must also use her whole pension just to give us food and pay for my school fees. Angel asked us if we ever tell anyone in our family that we are feeling guilty. She said we should try and see what happens.

I decided to tell my feelings to my gogo. We were sitting at the table having tea. I said, "Gogo sometimes I feel bad because you have to spend all your money on food for us." (I didn't use the word guilty because she does not know that word). Gogo laughed and shook her head. "I am your mother also. You are now my daughter." She told me a story of the

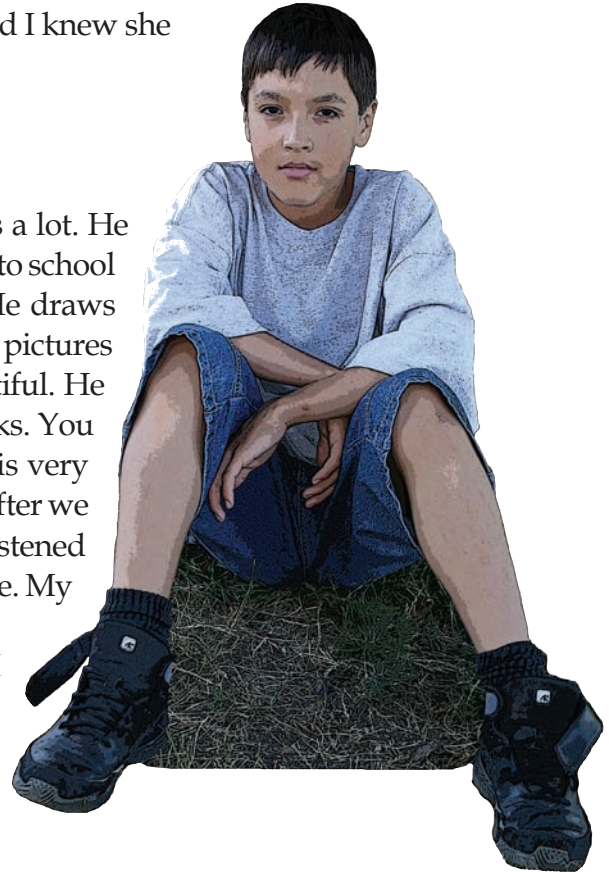


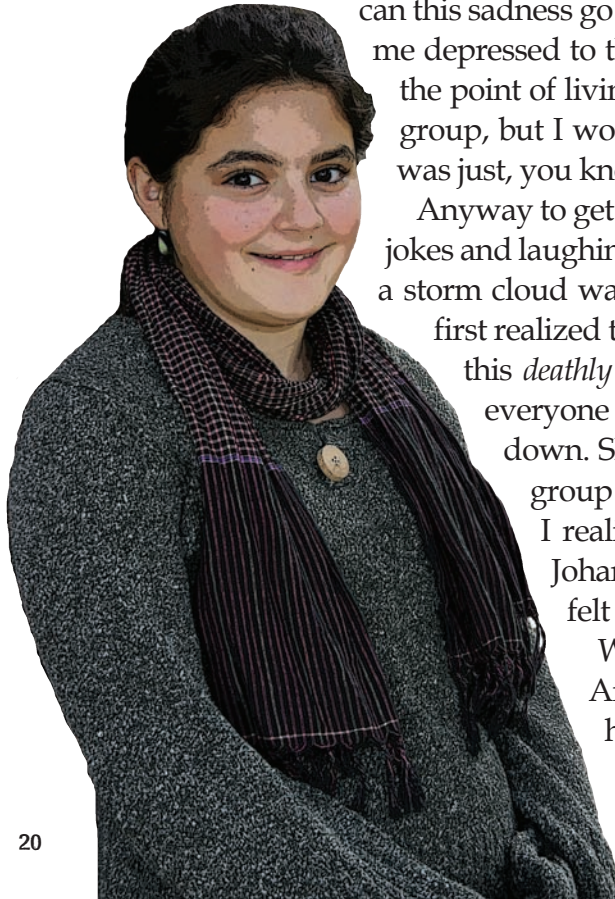
orphaned young lion who travels with all the other lions and their young. When there is a hunt and a kill the meat is shared with all the young, not just the babies of the hunter. She hugged me and I knew she was happy I was with her.

friends and support

Johannes has a big problem. He is very thin and coughs a lot. He also is an orphan. He lives at a children's home, but he goes to school with some of us. He didn't talk much about his family. He draws and paints and we hear his story in his art. Sometimes his pictures are dark and stormy. Other times they are clear and beautiful. He doesn't want people to make comments about how he looks. You would look the same if you didn't always have food. He is very kind and never misses a week of the group. The other day after we had been talking about AIDS he started to speak and we listened as if we knew what he was going to say. "I have that disease. My mother died. My father died. One day I will die also."

There was no speaking and I felt tears in my eyes. I looked for tissue and saw that even Senzo was sniffing and coughing. I hoped that Angel would help us but she also had tears in her eyes. We all loved Johannes and we didn't want him to die.





An amazing thing is happening with Rosie. She was really depressed for so long after her mother died. It was actually five years ago when she was eight years old. I was worried when I first met her because I thought, “How can this sadness go on for so long. I even thought ‘get over it now’.” It made me depressed to think that maybe you never get over a death, so what is the point of living? Her mom died of TB. At first I never said this in the group, but I wondered how come a white woman has TB? I thought it was just, you know, the rest of us. I mean, maybe she had AIDS as well!

Anyway to get back to the story, what is so amazing is that she is telling jokes and laughing. You should have seen her before. Her face looked like a storm cloud was just hanging over her head ready to burst. When we first realized that she was laughing and having fun with us, there was this *deathly* silence (excuse the word!) She looked up surprised as everyone stared at her, and then she sort of apologized for being so down. She said, “I woke up differently on Wednesday after the group we had with Johannes telling us about his HIV status. I realized I really care about my life and, compared to you Johannes, I am lucky.” She then said she felt bad that she had felt sorry for herself for so long.

We hugged her, especially Johannes. Do you know what Angel said? She said Johannes’s courage has brought about healing. He smiled. We hugged him too. This group is getting so close, almost like family.

refugees lose so much

Eric comes from Rwanda. He is tall and quite shy. He only came to the group for the first time after we had been together for about four weeks. He said he heard about us from the social worker who works with refugees. At first when he came, a couple of people were whispering that he isn't from here and they closed up and wouldn't talk in front of him. It was the first time Angel spoke strongly to the group. She was reminding us about the agreements we made on the first day about respecting one another. She encouraged Eric to speak and for us to learn about refugees.

Eric said it happens all the time that refugees and immigrants are treated harshly. He told us that his mother has stuff taken from her house and things broken. They push her around and tell her to go back home where she came from. They don't understand that you can't just go home; you don't have a home. It was burned to the ground and the people were murdered.

After that outburst he was quiet for quite a while. He seemed embarrassed and uncomfortable. We just all sat there not saying anything. Angel asked us quietly to say our feelings. The talking piece in our group is this tortoise from Zimbabwe carved from rock. It went around



the circle slowly as we admitted we didn't trust a new person, as this group was personal. Angel reminded us that the feeling was probably fear.

She asked us to close our eyes and think about something that really made us scared and to let all the energy of that roll out of our minds, down our arms and into our hands where we must hold it. Then she said, "Open your eyes and look at your hands." We were all holding our fists really tight.

Then she said for us to close our eyes and think about something we loved and let the energy of that roll down our arms and into our hands. When we opened our eyes and looked at our hands they were open and loose.

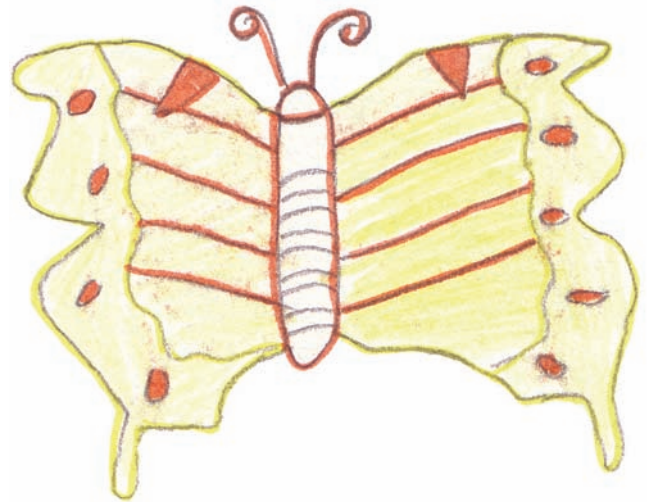
The point, Angel told us, was that if we fear something we close off and get tight. That tightness can make us sick, because it is not only our fists that are tight, our stomachs also. She said that if we are open to new people we could find love rather than fear. I am sure Eric blushed. He told us that South Africa is racist just like where he comes from in Rwanda. Senzo asked what it was like and that got Eric talking. We asked lots of questions, but when Alice asked why they left he first closed his lips tight and then said, "They killed my father."

Angel said that he is not only grieving the loss of his father, but also his country. Eric agreed. Actually when we all looked at our lives we found that we also had many losses.

the struggle can make us strong

This week we talked about butterflies. We painted some that were made out of clay as a symbol of how our feelings of grief were being freed. It all happened because of this story about this man who was watching this butterfly come out of its cocoon (this is the place where the caterpillar changes into a butterfly). It was struggling to break open the cocoon so that it could get out.

The man couldn't stand to watch the struggle anymore. He wanted to help so he took a small scissors from his pocket and carefully cut the corner of the cocoon. He thought he was helping the butterfly. He watched it push its way out and try to open its blue and yellow wings, but it couldn't fly. It tried but the one wing seemed to be weaker than the other. You should have seen our faces as Angel was telling us the story, you would think she was talking about us not being able to walk or something. "Was it born disabled or what?" asked someone. She asked us what we all thought.



We agreed it was probably born disabled.

“Do you know what probably caused its disability?” She asked. “A butterfly builds its muscles as it is struggling to get out of the cocoon. Although the man had a kind heart he interfered in the process and disabled the butterfly.”

So the struggle makes you strong. We didn’t think about it that way, but we started to talk about how our struggles have made us strong. Elsa said her sister’s death had made her realize she needed to grow up and care about others more. I am telling this story. Who would have thought of me doing that? Others talked about how much they had learned about AIDS. Johannes said when you know you are going to die sometime soon you have a choice: to be kinder to other people or to be cool. Alice and Rosie both felt that they could help other people who were grieving.

Eric seemed to be glad to be in our group. He said, “It is good to have friends.” Yes, it is like you are together dealing with your problems, you are no longer alone and that really helps.

Connie came to the group because I told her it was really helping me to make friends. You see, when you speak about the really important things in life with friends you trust, they feel closer to you. Connie was pretending to be so happy and yet she said later in the group

that she felt only half a person. Her father died eleven years ago when she was two and a half years.

She said, "I don't know my father well, but that doesn't mean that I'm not hurt. Yes I am because my friends have fathers and I don't."

She told us also that her brother died three years ago and this leaves her very sad because they used to talk together and laugh at one another's jokes. She said, "I still wonder why God took him and left me lonely. Every time when I am thinking about him I cry because I miss him so much it's like a half part of my body is gone." After being in the group for about four weeks one day she said that she thinks God is doing something special to her to make her feel better.

We all nodded our heads because after telling our stories and learning that it is good to feel your feelings, we are all feeling better. Yes, it still hurts, but we are together and we know that this experience of death does not have to hold us back in life.



If someone you love has died (or is dying) I hope you will find someone to talk to or a group where you can share the pain. Even if you can't I want you to know that I care and my friends in Khululeka care about you very much. Imagine you are part of our group and try some of the ways Angel taught us and even teach them to your friends who are sad about death. It is possible to be happy again.

*Names and photos of people in this story have been changed to protect their privacy
(so no-one can gossip!)*



Facts About Grieving

Grieving is the way we feel after someone has died

- We all experience death sometime in our lives.
- Feelings like shock, anger, fear, sadness, loneliness, guilt and sometimes relief are normal feelings when someone you care about dies.
- If you hold these feelings tight inside you it can make you sick and you will take much longer to heal.
- Taking deep breaths and making space inside for the feelings can make you cry, but you feel better afterwards.
- Talking about your feelings also can make you cry but you get support and that helps too. Just say I feelAlso say what you need from others. Sometimes it is an ear to listen, sometimes a hug, sometimes to be left alone or for people to understand why you aren't doing what you normally would do.

- If you like to draw or write you can express your feelings in that way. It can help to write to someone who has died if you want to speak to them. You can put the letter on the grave or burn it when you are finished. You might have dreams in which the person comes to visit you. Don't be scared.
- Find out what you believe happens when someone dies by asking people you trust for their ideas, then think whether you agree. No-one knows for sure so you have to know for yourself.
- Grieving and crying can make you tired so get enough sleep and drink lots of water.
- Ask questions about things you want to know or understand.
- Talk to other youth if they have also lost someone.
- Just remember even if your parent has died, we are all children of God or Allah or whatever you call the creator, so we are all related. If we stick together and help each other we can still be happy.

A Message for Parents, Caregivers or Teachers

How can you help?

- We want you to listen to us and not tell us how to feel or what to believe.
- We would like you to answer our questions honestly without protecting us from the truth.
- We want you to try to understand the way we feel even though we might not understand ourselves. Sometimes we are confused and trying to make sense of our lives.
- We want you to tell us your feelings also because we learn by listening to how you are feeling. We want to know about our families.
- We want to know that you love us and care about us and you will be there for us.

- We need to be able to trust you, just as you would like to trust us. If we share our feelings truthfully and learn to say what we need from one another, I think we will build more trust.
- We need to be kids sometimes because with so many people dying some of us have a lot of responsibility. We need to play.
- We need help when our parents or brothers and sisters get sick.
- We need food and shelter.
- Sometimes we are scared and lonely and one friendly word is enough for us to know we are not alone.
- We want to remember our parents who have died. It doesn't mean we won't trust and love you when we are ready. Just give us time.
- Thank-you for caring about us.

Thanks

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For information or for free copies of Someone I Love Died in English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa, or isiZulu, contact Khululeka Bereavement Support for Children and Youth at

Phone : 021 633 5287 or Fax : 021 637 3487

Khululeka is a not-for-profit organization in Cape Town, South Africa.

www.khululeka.org

khululeka@ipages.co.za

Contact Heather Ferris : siyafunda@yahoo.ca

Contact Corianna Heise : coriannaheise@yahoo.ca