

Grief and Loss Displayed in the Movie Dear Zoe

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Grief Movie Analysis

Introduction

The movie I decided to watch that illustrated death and loss was the movie *Dear Zoe*, watched via youtube. *Dear Zoe* is an upcoming film that explores the journey of a 16-year-old female who just witnessed the loss of her three-year-old baby sister. In this film, the main character Tessie is out playing with her baby sister Zoe when she steps inside to watch the TV since it is 9/11 and a plane has just collided with the world trade center. While Tessie is inside Zoe runs out into the street where she is struck by a vehicle and ultimately passes away. In the film, we follow Tessie's journey with grief as well as the pressure and guilt placed on her by her parents.

Tessie blames herself for the loss of her sister. She argues if she did not run inside to watch the news her sister would have not been left alone and ultimately not struck by the car. The guilt in bereavement experienced by Tessie is talked about in the article *Guilt in Bereavement: the role of self-blame and regret in coping with loss and how guilt and blame on oneself if a very common reaction to the loss of an individual* (Stroebe 2014). The article states, "Guilt in the bereavement context has been defined as "a remorseful emotional reaction in bereavement, with recognition of having failed to live up to one's own inner standards and expectations in relation to the deceased and/or the death"" (Stroebe 2014). Tessie feels she has not only failed in her big sister role but also has failed her parents and her sister. Tessie not only has to experience the blame of herself but also the blame of her mother and stepdad. Through their own grief process, they begin to shut down, act out towards Tessie, and blame their substance abuse on the 16-year-old. In a study that researched complicated grief among parents who lost

their children, a trend in the outcome of the study showed that parents who had multiple children tended to have difficulties with their children in the aftermath of one child passing (Zetturner 2015). The attitude of the passing of Zoe takes the strongest of Tessie, with lacking support from her mother and stepdad, and blame being placed on her by them, she makes the decision to escape to her biological dad leaving her parents behind and her other little sister. In order for Tessie to heal she decided she needs to do this to escape the environment, she is in to aid in her grief process.

When Tessie leaves it leaves a large impact on her family. When the loss and bereavement of an adolescent are experienced in these critical years of development psychological distress is more common (Stikkelbroek 2016). The article Mental health of adolescents before and after the death of a parent or sibling states, “The majority of bereaved adolescents exhibit acute grief reactions, sleep problems, anger, irritability, and behavioral problems and lower self-esteem” (Stikkelbroeck 2016). Tessie can acknowledge the psychological distress she is facing. She is losing passion for what she loves, having difficulties with parental figures, guilt, blame, depression, and anxiety. In order to heal when she leaves to attempt to make herself better she deals with the loss of her parents. Her parents do not support her decision even though the household she is in is causing more stress. Her 7-year-old sister feels saddened as she has already lost one sister and feels as though she is losing another. Tessie's grief also impacts the family as her mother attempts suicide after calling Tessie and asking her to come home. Tessie once again feels responsible for this action and is left feeling helpless in her own grieving process.

Course of Grief

Analyzing Tessie's grief process I would say her course of grief is unique but expected. Freud's grief work theory states that an individual needs to work through grief. Instead of just sitting with the thought of losing one must work through their grief and form new relationships and learn to live life without the individual (Hamilton 2016). In this film, Tessie works through her grief. At the beginning of the film, it shows the hardships Tessie is facing. As she deals with these hardships she understands that she cannot be around the influences in her home as they are not processing their grief. When she leaves to go to her biological dad's house she mentioned how it is easier to forget about what has happened when she is there. There are different faces, different relationships, and different support being offered to her there. While Tessie is with her dad she does not feel reminded of the terrible events that have happened to Zoe. As she begins to build this new life during the summer while rekindling the relationship with her father she feels as though she is finally healing and living again. In Tessie's process, she has forgotten about what has happened and doesn't realize this until it all pours out. She becomes vulnerable with her new boyfriend explaining everything and how she has felt and how she had to silently struggle. She breaks down completely and is hysterical. After she processes her feelings at this moment she decides to return home and begin her real healing process the correct way. She shows gratitude to those who have helped her but acknowledges that she needs to go home to be able to heal as a family to process the tragic events that have taken place.

Rewinding to the beginning of the movie, after the tragic death of Zoe Tessie's family tries family therapy. At this moment, Tessie is stubborn, she does not want to do counseling and feels like nothing in the world could help her. She stops the car, tosses the notebook the

counselor gave her, and decides that she is no help. She feels she can handle this on her own in reality she is unable to as we find out later in the film. The notebook is symbolic to the film as when Tessie breaks down in the end, she reveals that she has drawn in her notebook and actually took the advice of the counselor. Drawing is her outlet as we learn in the movie so this is important in Tessie's understanding of how to handle her grief.

Conclusion

Tessie benefited from the resources given to her but could have benefited more from the support of her family. The blame that was placed on her caused her an immense amount of guilt that made her growing process more difficult. When Tessie listened to the advice of others she was reluctant to follow but ultimately made it through to be able to allow herself to heal. Tessie knew what was best for her as she had to endure this difficult tragedy. In the article Self-blame, other blame, and desire for revenge: Factors in recovery from bereavement, states “People who were grieving a death from natural causes (illnesses) realized better recoveries than did those who were grieving deaths from unnatural causes (murders, suicides., or accidents)” (Weinberg 1994). Because Zoe's death was an accident it was unexpected to Tessie. She would wonder what if this was different, what if I never went inside, what if you never ran into the road, but because it was so unexpected she could not help but ask herself these things. Tessie might have to address the blame she feels going forward in her process. Although the movie leaves where it looks like she is on the right path she will face other challenges going forward in a real situation. As milestones approach Tessie will have to deal with the thoughts and blame as she mourns the loss. Overall this movie displayed grief in a very interesting way that was easy to follow and analyze.

It showed a complex situation where an adolescent had to grieve the loss of her sister after a tragic accident she blames herself for.

Resources

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