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**PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR A CHILD EXPERIENCING THE LOSS OF A
CLOSE PERSON**

Анотація. У статті піднімається важлива проблема допомоги дітям, які переживають втрату близької людини. Здійснено теоретичний аналіз проблеми психологічної допомоги дітям, які переживають важку втрату, в умовах сучасних соціальних викликів та воєнних подій в Україні. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена різким зростанням кількості дітей, які втратили батьків, родичів або друзів унаслідок війни, що спричиняє глибокі психоемоційні переживання та потребує професійного психологічного супроводу. Наголошено, що смерть близької людини є однією з найбільш травматичних подій у житті дитини, яка може мати довготривалі наслідки для психічного, емоційного та соціального розвитку особистості.

У роботі висвітлено основні теоретичні підходи до розуміння дитячого горювання та психотравми. Проаналізовано наукові погляди закордонних і вітчизняних дослідників.

Визначено, що дитяче горювання має індивідуальний характер і може проявлятися через емоційні, поведінкові, когнітивні та соматичні симптоми. Особливу увагу приділено феномену дитячого травматичного горя, при якому симптоми посттравматичного стресового розладу блокують природний процес проживання втрати.

Розкрито сутність понять «горювання», «переживання» та «скорбота», охарактеризовано їх спільні та відмінні ознаки. Встановлено, що горювання є динамічним процесом адаптації до втрати, який супроводжується змінами у поведінці, мисленні, фізичному та емоційному стані дитини. Описано основні симптоми нормального горювання у дітей різного віку, серед яких тривога, страх, депресивні реакції, агресія, соматичні порушення, труднощі у навчанні та соціальній взаємодії. Підкреслено, що відсутність своєчасної психологічної допомоги може призводити до розвитку хронічної депресії, тривожних розладів, посттравматичного стресового розладу та соціальної дезадаптації.

У статті обґрунтовано значення психологічного супроводу дитини, яка переживає втрату близької людини. Психологічний супровід визначено як комплекс психологічних, педагогічних та соціально-емоційних заходів, спрямованих на створення безпечного середовища для проживання горя, стабілізацію емоційного стану, розвиток ресурсів дитини та підтримку її адаптації до нових життєвих умов. Окреслено ефективні методи психологічної допомоги дітям, серед яких арттерапія, ігрова терапія, написання листів померлому, створення книг пам'яті, групи психологічної підтримки та ритуали вшанування пам'яті. Акцентовано увагу на необхідності врахування вікових особливостей дітей та важливості участі дорослих у процесі підтримки дитини.

Визначено перспективи подальших досліджень, пов'язаних із вивченням впливу ранньої втрати на формування особистості дитини, розвиток прив'язаності, самооцінки, резильєнтності та міжособистісних стосунків. Перспективним напрямом є також дослідження ефективності сучасних психотерапевтичних програм і методів психологічної допомоги дітям, які переживають втрату в умовах війни.

Ключові слова: втрата, скорбота, горювання, дитяча психотравма, психологічний супровід.

Abstract. The article addresses the important issue of providing assistance to children experiencing the loss of a loved one. A theoretical analysis of the problem of psychological support for children undergoing severe loss in the context of contemporary social challenges and wartime events in Ukraine has been carried out. The relevance of the study is обусловлена the sharp increase in the number of children who have lost parents, relatives, or friends as a result of the war, which causes profound psycho-emotional experiences and requires professional psychological support. It is emphasized that the death of a loved one is one of the most traumatic events in a child's life and may have long-term consequences for the individual's mental, emotional, and social development.

The paper highlights the main theoretical approaches to understanding children's grief and psychological trauma. Scientific views of both foreign and Ukrainian researchers are analyzed.

It has been determined that children's grief is individual in nature and may manifest through emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and somatic symptoms. Particular attention is paid to the phenomenon of childhood traumatic grief, in which symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder block the natural process of coping with loss.

The essence of the concepts of "grief," "experiencing," and "mourning" is revealed, and their common and distinctive features are characterized. It has been established that grief is a dynamic process of adaptation to loss accompanied by changes in the child's behavior, thinking, physical, and emotional state. The main symptoms of normal grief in children of different ages are described, including anxiety, fear, depressive reactions, aggression, somatic disorders, difficulties in learning, and social interaction. It is emphasized that the absence of timely psychological assistance may lead to chronic depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and social maladaptation.

The article substantiates the importance of psychological support for a child experiencing the loss of a loved one. Psychological support is defined as a complex of psychological, pedagogical, and socio-emotional measures aimed at creating a safe environment for experiencing grief, stabilizing the emotional state, developing the child's internal resources, and supporting adaptation to new life conditions. Effective methods of psychological assistance for children are outlined, including art therapy, play therapy, writing letters to the deceased, creating memory books, psychological support groups, and remembrance rituals. Attention is focused on the need to consider children's age characteristics and the importance of adult participation in the process of supporting the child.

Prospects for further research related to the study of the impact of early loss on the formation of a child's personality, the development of attachment, self-esteem, resilience, and interpersonal relationships are identified. Another promising direction is the study of the effectiveness of modern psychotherapeutic programs and methods of psychological assistance for children experiencing loss in wartime conditions.

Key words: loss, bereavement, grieving, childhood psychological trauma, psychological support.

Introduction. The relevance of studying psychological assistance for children who are experiencing the loss of a close person is determined by profound socio-psychological changes and current challenges. The war in Ukraine has caused a sharp increase in the number of orphans and children who have lost parents, relatives, or friends. The death of a close person is considered one of the most stressful events in a child's life and requires support from specialists, as well as from family members and loved ones, in order to cope with this experience of loss.

Analysis of the problem and the essence of the study. Children perceive and express loss differently from adults, often through behavioral disturbances, somatic symptoms, or aggression. Without timely support, a severe loss may develop into chronic depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or anxiety conditions. Trauma of loss without appropriate therapy disrupts the cognitive, emotional, and social development of the forming personality. At the same time, there is a lack of Ukrainian-language, validated grief therapy programs that take into account the realities of the contemporary wartime experience.

Theoretical foundations of the study. The issues of psychological trauma and children's experience of loss (grief) have been extensively studied by a large number of international and Ukrainian scholars.



John Bowlby, the founder of attachment theory, thoroughly described how the disruption of the bond with a mother or close caregiver undermines a child's basic sense of security and causes deep psychological trauma. In his work "Mourning and Melancholia", Sigmund Freud laid the theoretical foundation for understanding the mechanisms of psychological processing of loss. Anna Freud studied children's reactions to separation from parents and loss of home during World War II, focusing on children's defense mechanisms.

In the 1980s, international researchers of childhood trauma and complicated grief, Robert S. Pynoos and Spencer Eth, were among the first to comprehensively describe the phenomenon of traumatic grief in children, where PTSD symptoms block the normal grieving process. Christopher Lane is known for his research on trauma and grief in adolescents who experienced war (particularly in Bosnia). Judith Cohen, Anthony Mannarino, and Esther Deblinger developed the widely recognized evidence-based TF-CBT (Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy), specifically adapted for children who have experienced traumatic loss. William Worden proposed the concept of the "four tasks of mourning," which is widely used in child psychotherapy to support adaptation after the death of a loved one.

David Brent and Nadine Melhem conducted extensive longitudinal studies on the impact of sudden parental loss on the development of depression and PTSD in children [6].

In Ukrainian psychology, the concept of childhood psychological trauma is currently studied by Oleh Romanchuk, Viktoriia Horbunova, Vitalii Klymchuk, Viktoriia Nazarevych, Olena Voznesenska, Mykhailo Tomchuk, and Mariia Yatsiuk.

Psychiatrist and psychotherapist Oleh Romanchuk, director of the Institute of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, notes that life experience does not always allow individuals to understand how to cope with their own grief or support others in experiencing loss. In contemporary psychology, grief is viewed as a natural human response to loss, manifested on both emotional and physical levels. Awareness and understanding of these manifestations contribute to a more adaptive processing of grief and help individuals pass through this difficult state without serious consequences for mental and physical health [4].

Vitalii Klymchuk and Viktoriia Horbunova are actively involved in developing and adapting evidence-based methods of psychological assistance and mental health management for children in wartime conditions.

Liudmyla Tsarenko focuses on childhood psychological trauma, crisis counseling, and psychological support for families in acute grief.

Olena Voznesenska researches the use of art therapy methods for overcoming childhood trauma caused by war and loss.

Viktoriia Nazarevych develops art therapy techniques for assisting children experiencing psychological trauma.

Mykhailo Tomchuk and Mariia Yatsiuk are authors of a model of socio-psychological support for children experiencing parental loss.

Numerous studies on childhood trauma related to the loss of a loved one show that children experience grief in a complex way and require the presence of a reliable adult who can provide emotional support, a sense of safety, and psychological stability.

Presentation of the main material. Psychological support for a child experiencing the loss of a close person is a complex system of professional psychological, pedagogical, and socio-emotional interventions aimed at supporting the child in the process of grieving, adapting to changed life circumstances, preserving mental health, and restoring a sense of safety, stability, and emotional balance.

Psychological support involves creating a safe environment for expressing feelings, assisting in understanding and accepting the loss, developing effective coping strategies for emotional stress, as well as strengthening the child's personal resources and social connections. Its goal is to prevent long-term psychological disturbances and to promote gradual adaptation to life after loss.

In a child's psyche, deep emotional pain related to the experience of loss is often preserved and accompanied by fear and a sense of loneliness.

Irvin Yalom refers to the death of a parent as a catastrophe in a child's life.

Edith Mayes noted that "when a person you love dies, feelings of numbness, sadness, and inner protest arise. It feels as if part of oneself has been lost; the person feels disoriented and often cries."

American psychotherapist Linda Goldman, author of the book "Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children," emphasizes that children should be able to enjoy life, dream, believe, and make plans for the future. However, in order to move forward, they must work through the burden of grief and loss [2, P. 11].

The concepts of “grieving,” “mourning,” and “bereavement” are closely interconnected, yet they carry different meanings.

Grieving is a natural psychological, emotional, and physical process of experiencing the loss of a significant person, relationship, important life values, or a familiar way of life. It is accompanied by a wide range of emotions: sadness, pain, anxiety, fear, anger, loneliness, and helplessness. Grieving is a dynamic process of adaptation to the loss of a loved one, meaningful relationships, safety, or a previously stable lifestyle.

In psychology, grieving is understood as a process of adaptation to loss during which a person gradually accepts a new life reality. The experience of grief may manifest not only emotionally but also through changes in behavior, thinking patterns, and physical condition.

For both children and adults, grieving is an individual process: its duration, intensity, and forms of expression depend on personality traits, age, the nature of the loss, and the availability of social support.

“Experience” is a broader concept referring to an internal emotional state or the process of a person’s interpretation of a particular event. Experiences can be both negative and positive and are not necessarily related to loss.

“Bereavement” refers to deep sadness, sorrow, and emotional pain that arise as a result of loss. Bereavement is primarily an emotional manifestation of grieving and is often externally expressed through crying, mourning, and a depressed mood.

Thus, summarizing the key concepts related to loss, it should be noted that grieving is an emotional response to the loss of a close person, an object, or an idea. The experience of severe loss is a state, while bereavement is what we do—it is the external expression of our grieving in actions [1, P. 15].

A child experiencing bereavement expends a significant amount of energy and therefore depletes their emotional and psychological resources. Sandra Fox identified four key tasks for children of any age related to loss: 1) understanding, 2) grieving, 3) commemorating, and 4) continuing life [2, P. 81].

Within the grieving process, Eberling proposes the following phases: 1) shock and disbelief, 2) searching and longing, 3) disorganization and despair, 4) reorganization and healing. According to Oleh Romanchuk, research on the processual nature of traumatic experiences is very important, and the current scientific consensus suggests that there are no strict sequential stages or phases; instead, grieving is a highly individual journey [4].

Symptoms of grief in children can take various forms and manifest differently in each child (see Table 1).

Table 1

Symptoms of normal grieving (according to L. Goldman)

Behaviour		
insomnia	Lack of apitite	poor grades at school
weeping	nigtmare	dreams about the deceased person
sighing	lethargy	absent-mindedness
heckling	excessive activity	social withdrawal
verbal attacks	fighting	excessive calmness
bedwetting	excessive touching	excessive huggings
Thinking characteristics		
inability to concentrate	difficulties with decision making	self-destructive thoughts
low self-esteem	preoccupation	confusion
despair		
Feelings		
anger	guilt	sadness
mood swings	anger	depression
panic	relief	helplessness
fear	intense feelings	loneliness
enxiety	feeling of unreality	
Physical symptoms		

headache	fatigue	задишка
dry mouth	dizziness	rapid heartbeat
hot or cold flashes	heaviness in the body	skin sensitivity
increased susceptibility to illness	feeling of emptiness in the body	chest tightness
muscle weakness	lump in the throat	abdominal pain

In younger school-age children, psychopathological symptoms are often masked by pronounced manifestations of autonomic dysfunction, such as headaches, pain in the heart region, breathing disturbances, discomfort in the epigastric area, enuresis, encopresis, and others. Such manifestations are frequently accompanied by behavioral disorders.

An adolescent, like a younger child, requires socio-psychological support in the process of grieving. Given age-specific characteristics, adolescence is a transitional stage in which behavioral reactions may develop along either adaptive or maladaptive trajectories. Negative consequences of experienced loss may include social maladaptation, increased deviant behavior, worsening depressive states, and the development of psychopathological disorders.

Mykhailo Tomchuk and Mariia Yatsiuk note that after a severe psychotraumatic experience, a child may externally appear indifferent to the event. Parents often mistakenly believe that the child quickly forgets the experienced grief; however, this is not the case. In reality, children return to the traumatic situation in conversations, drawings, and other forms of self-expression, thereby attempting to cope with the emotions resulting from the experience. Traumatic experience is also reflected in role-play games, where the child symbolically reenacts the event and processes their experience. In this context, play serves an important function of reducing psychological tension. At the same time, a pathological pattern may be indicated by the compulsive repetition of the same unchanging game scenario [5].

An important role in children's grieving process is also played by toys and personal belongings. The loss of a close person as a significant attachment figure often leads to the formation of an attachment to a so-called transitional object—such as a toy, a gifted item, or a personal belonging of the deceased. An indicator of gradual recovery from the loss is the emergence of new attachments connected with the child's current relationships and environment.

During grief, children become especially sensitive to the emotional state of the surviving parent. They tend to “absorb” their feelings, emotions, and attitudes toward the world and themselves, as if being emotionally “contaminated” by them. Unusual or strange behavior in this period often serves as a way of expressing internal pain and lived experience.

Methods of psychological assistance in cases of childhood loss of a close person. Psychological support for children experiencing the loss of a close person is based on creating a sense of safety, emotional stabilization, and sensitive processing of difficult feelings. A child's psyche differs from that of an adult; therefore, therapeutic methods are adapted to the child's specific age.

An important step in supporting children is that adults should first help themselves, as children inevitably adopt role models and are influenced by the extent to which adults are able to genuinely recognize and process their own losses and grief.

In addition, adults should be informed about ways to support the child and should be helped to dispel myths about loss and grieving. Such myths include: “grief and bereavement are the same experience,” “infants and young children are too small to grieve,” “grief has clear stages,” “adults should avoid topics that make a child cry,” “a child who is actively playing is not a grieving child,” “it is better for children not to attend funerals,” and others [2, P. 67].

An important task in grieving is commemorating the deceased. Linda Goldman distinguishes between formal and informal commemoration. Formal commemoration may take place in schools, camps, and communities that organize memorial events, create memorial boards, or include remembrance activities in yearbooks. Scholarship funds may be established, donations to charities organized, or memorial gardens planted. Informal commemoration may include children creating memorial videos about the deceased person, releasing balloons in their memory, baking cookies and bringing them to grieving friends, or staging performances and using the collected funds to establish a memorial fund in honor of a beloved teacher or classmate.

Projective diagnostic methods are often used to assess the intensity and complexity of emotional experiences. One such method is the “Person in the Rain” technique, which is aimed at assessing the strength of the ego, the individual's ability to cope with difficulties and withstand adverse circumstances.

It also allows for the identification of personal resources and the functioning of psychological defense mechanisms.

The purpose of the projective technique “Person in the Rain” is to determine a person’s behavioral characteristics in difficult life situations, their level of readiness to overcome difficulties, as well as to identify their characteristic psychological defense mechanisms. The research procedure involves asking the respondent to draw a person on a blank vertically oriented A4 sheet, and on another similar sheet to draw a person in the rain. The comparison of the two drawings makes it possible to identify the individual’s patterns of response to stressful and adverse circumstances, as well as to understand their emotional state and experiences in difficult life situations. The psychologist conducts an interview with the child, asking a series of questions, such as describing the person, their feelings and emotional state, whether the person feels comfortable in this situation, what mood they have, what they most want to do at that moment, and how they can be helped.

One effective way of grieving is a creative ritual through writing a letter to the deceased. The child should be encouraged to express their feelings. Adults should also talk about their own emotions. When we are able to talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less oppressive, and not as frightening. People we trust in such an important conversation can help us realize that we are not alone.

Adults should understand that they must not dictate to children how they should grieve; instead, we should allow them to tell us where they are in this process. Adults who are grieving should not emotionally distance themselves from the child, as the child may perceive this situation as a secondary loss. When we allow ourselves to grieve, we are helping the child who is experiencing a difficult loss. It is a myth that adults should avoid topics that make a child cry. In fact, crying is a way of connecting with one’s pain and a means of alleviating it.

In supporting a child through loss, age-specific characteristics must be taken into account when determining forms of psychological assistance. In this regard, Wolfelt noted that if a child is old enough to love, they are old enough to grieve. Any child who is capable of loving is also capable of grieving, regardless of whether they can fully understand the loss cognitively.

It is important to tell children the truth about the death of loved ones and to allow them to attend funerals. Otherwise, it creates an environment of denial that prevents them from actively participating in the grieving process. Funerals, writing letters, and placing personal belongings into the coffin during the ceremony are very concrete ways through which children can contribute to the process of saying goodbye.

Psychologists recommend that adults build a library of resources with information about prevention, support during traumatic events, and post-crisis assistance, in order to have ready responses to the many questions that may arise in children as a result of loss and grief.

One method of support is the creation of a photo album, collage (Fig. 1), or memorial mural about the loved one and the time spent together, as children often like to express their memories through art. [3, P. 39].



Figure 1. Memory collage of Eva (8 years old) about her father.

Even young children can take part in a memorial project. Making a simple heart, a decorated box or photo frame, or even a festive ornament, or releasing a balloon with a note can help them express memories.

A memory book is a very useful tool that allows children to express their feelings and share what remains unspoken.

It is important for children to have a “resource shelf” at home or at school. It should include age-appropriate children’s literature on grief and childhood trauma.

Children should be taught to identify their feelings—for example, by drawing their emotions, keeping a feelings journal, writing and drawing in it, completing emotion-based tasks, making lists of what makes them angry, sad, afraid, or disappointed, and expressing feelings through sand, clay, or puppets.

Significant practical experience was presented by American specialists K. Andersen, E. G. Røeckholt, and M. Rise, who worked at the Center for Psychological Support for People Who Have Experienced Bereavement at the University Clinic of Akershus County. They developed an eight-step psychological support program for adults, children, and adolescents who have experienced the death of a loved one. The researchers emphasized the importance of organizing support groups according to participants’ age characteristics.

This approach is also used in Ukraine, in particular at the Institute of Health Psychology, where Ukrainian psychologists provide training in this methodology and offer psychological assistance to people experiencing loss. The program for children includes eight group sessions for children and adolescents, eight meetings for their parents, and one joint session for children and parents. The core principles of the method are coping with loss through active engagement and awareness of emotional experiences, using family resources, and the ability to continue life despite changed circumstances [1, P. 11].

The aim of such groups is to create a sense of safety, provide knowledge about grief, support each participant in emotionally processing the loss and developing self-control; preserve meaningful memories that become the foundation for the future; and help the child’s close environment better understand the grieving process so that significant adults can more effectively support the child. Thus, adults need to create a supportive space for children’s grieving and help them experience the loss together.

An important final psychological task for children experiencing loss is not simply to move forward, but to continue living.

Understanding, grieving, commemorating, and continuing life are essential parts of a child’s experience of loss, change, and growth.

Psychological support and psycho-pedagogical assistance are aimed at creating conditions that help the child understand and accept the loss of parents or close people, maintain a continued emotional bond through memories and love, honor their memory, and move forward in life by developing and realizing their potential.

Prospects for further research. Our interest in studying the issue of childhood loss includes various grief reactions, particularly how early loss affects personality development, attachment, self-esteem, resilience, and interpersonal relationships.

Another relevant direction is the study of the effectiveness of psychological interventions: different forms of support, therapeutic programs, support groups, art therapy, and play-based methods. It is important to determine which interventions are most effective for different age groups.

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