



Lessons from Lions

Using children's media to teach about grief and mourning



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Introduction

In late summer, 2001, I was searching for an idea for how to talk to an elementary classroom of children about grief and mourning. There were and are many excellent children's books with themes of death and loss, but I needed something different and more interactive. Eventually, Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) surfaced in my pondering, and I wondered why I hadn't thought of this before. *The Lion King* is a great and entertaining movie, and it's essentially a story about grief. A boy's father dies, the boy deals with it poorly and the boy learns to adjust and cope in more healthy ways. (I realize that the characters are actually animals, but they are very anthropomorphic, so work with me here.) After I found the appropriate person at Disney to ask about obtaining slides from the movie and permission to use them, we were on our way.

Since that time, slides from *The Lion King* have been used in many school classrooms, grief support groups and education presentations for adults to help educate and open discussions about grief and mourning. The more I have used *The Lion King* story for grief education and support, the more respect I have for the creators of this very wise movie in terms of loss, grief and mourning. The response to the use of *The Lion King* has been so positive and the story and slides have been so user friendly that another idea made its way to the surface – the slides and a user's guide would be a great tool for other adults wanting to find a way to talk to groups of children about grief and mourning in a non-intimidating and effective way. Disney once again gave its gracious permission, and here we are.

This guide is intended to offer ideas to adults helping children understand grief and mourning. Suggestions are offered about how *The Lion King* story and slides have been used effectively, but you will bring your own ideas and creativity to the use of this story. Please feel free to follow the suggestions and to disregard them—whatever is needed to fit your particular group of children. It's all about helping the kids.

A special thanks to Stephanie Martinelli at Disney whose support and assistance made it possible for *Lessons from Lions* and for the original slides from *The Lion King* to be available for helping grieving children.



Orphan and Grief Stories in Children's Media

It seems that since the beginning of storytelling, we have told ourselves and our children stories of orphans — children missing one or both parents and having to find their way in the world. Examples of such stories in this and the past few generations include Little Orphan Annie, the *Star Wars* saga and the Harry Potter books and movies. Whatever else these stories may be, they are also grief stories with themes of loss, search for identity and family and coping.

Perhaps we tell these stories to our children to help them deal with the fear, “What would I do if I were on my own and had no one to take care of me?” Perhaps we tell them for ourselves as we fear, “What would happen to our children if we were not there to care for them?” Whatever the reason for the enduring popularity of such stories, they can provide us with opportunities to talk with children about heavy and important topics such as death, grief and mourning in accessible and creative ways.

One of the best orphan and grief stories told in recent years has been Disney's *The Lion King*. The film is extraordinarily popular with children and filled with attractive characters, beautiful animation and memorable songs. The fun of the story can even obscure its themes of death, grief and coping, and this can be an advantage for grief education as it is a non-threatening story for most young people to discuss.

The Lion King story illustrates three common but ultimately unhelpful reactions following a loss:

- Running away from the problem, the pain and those who know and love you the best.
- Pretending the bad thing never happened — living as if the past doesn't matter.
- Treating your feelings, experiences and story as a big secret — never telling anyone about it.

The story then offers an incredibly wise grief lesson for both young and old — *If we want to feel the person we lost in our hearts, we need to stop running away from the pain, pretending the loss never happened and treating our experience as a big secret.* To truly remember the person and feel them inside of us, we can't avoid the pain. Avoid the pain, lose the person even more. Experience the pain, experience the person's memory and presence inside us. It's a package deal.

Situations for use of *The Lion King* story and slides

The Lion King story and slides can be successfully used with groups of children in different kinds of situations. One situation would be general grief and coping education. Issues that can be discussed are things that help and things that don't help when something very sad happens and how to be a good friend to someone who is having a difficult time. One elementary school has used *The Lion King* story and slides each year for their fourth grade classes when they have their annual "wellness week" activities, which focus on ways to be physically, mentally and emotionally healthy. Both students and staff have responded very well to these presentations and discussions.

Another situation for *The Lion King* story and slides would be following a death that impacts a group of children. Using *The Lion King* story seems to fit better in the weeks or months following the death rather than in the crisis intervention period in the first days following the death. *The Lion King* story and slides have been used with good effect following the death of students, friends and teachers.

Grief support groups have also been an effective venue as *The Lion King* story and slides support grief concepts and coping suggestions found in many grief support group programs.

Third graders and above seem to do well with understanding the concepts and discussing the lessons found in *The Lion King* story and slides. Modifications would likely be needed to use the story and slides for groups younger than third grade. Adults who know the children well would be best suited to review the slides and sample script and decide about the appropriateness for a particular group of children.

The Lion King story and slides can also be used for grief education with adults particularly when the focus is on children's grief needs and how children's literature and media can be used to discuss issues of grief and mourning with children.



Sample script and outline

In the following sample script and outline, there are specific suggestions for how to introduce and use The Lion King story and slides with children in a group setting. This guide is based on clinical and practical experience with the use of The Lion King story and slides, but there are certainly other ways to creatively and effectively use the resource of the story and slides. Please feel free to pick and choose those parts that best fit your setting and group. If you are not familiar with The Lion King movie or it's been a long time since you've seen it, you will need to watch the movie to be prepared and feel comfortable to lead this activity.

Introduce yourself and the reason for talking with the children. Example: "I'm here to talk with you about how people feel and what to do when something really sad happens."

Affirm that they already know a lot about losses and grief because of their experiences, books they've read and movies they've seen. The following questions can be asked and responded to with the raising of hands. Especially for the questions about deaths experienced, it is important to emphasize that it's OK to not raise one's hand no matter what one's experiences have been.

- Ask the group to think of the last movie that they've seen and then ask how many saw a movie where no one died (usually a small percentage of the group will raise their hands). You may want to ask those who raise their hands what movie they saw and clarify that no one died—sometimes they have forgotten!
- Ask the group to think of the last book that they've read and then ask how many read a book where no one died (again, usually a small percentage of the group will raise their hands).
- Ask about their experiences with loss:
 - How many of you have had a special pet die?
 - How many of you have had a grandparent — a grandmother or grandfather die?
 - How many of you have had a relative — aunt, uncle or cousin die?
 - How many of you have ever been to a funeral?
 - How many of you have ever had a friend die? If you are meeting with the group in response to a friend's death, ask how many of you have had a friend die before this particular situation.
 - How many of you have had a parent die?
 - How many of you have had a brother or sister die?
 - If speaking to an adult group:
 - How many of you have had a child die?
 - How many of you have had a miscarriage?
 - How many of you have had a grandchild die?

Reaffirm that they know a lot about death, loss and grief because of their experiences.

Explain the terms “grief” and “mourning.” Grief is what happens to you on the inside when you lose something or someone — especially when someone special dies. You don’t get any choice about grief – it just comes. Mourning is what you do with how you feel on the inside, and you do have a choice about mourning (Wolfelt). The following illustration has been effective with both children and adult groups:

Grief comes when you have a big, deep hurt and it's like this: Let's say I walk out to my car and someone has left a broken bottle on the ground in the parking lot. I'm carrying a lot of stuff and trip and fall with my hand landing right on the broken bottle. I get up and have a big hunk of glass stuck deep down in my hand. This big, deep hurt is the grief. I didn't choose it, didn't want it, but it's there and I feel it — no choice about it. But now that it's happened, I do have a choice. What I choose to do about this big deep hurt is the mourning. I could just say, "I'm a big guy, this doesn't bother me," get in my car and drive away with the big hunk of glass still in my hand and with my hand still bleeding. Now what would happen then? (Ask the group – kids know that this is a bad idea and can give you good reasons why it would be bad to ignore this and pretend it didn't happen.) Ignoring this hurt is not a good idea for a variety of reasons. Maybe it's such a big, deep hurt that I have to get help to clean it out and stitch it up, and maybe I have to do exercises to help my hand learn to work again. But even if I do all those things and my hand works as well as it did before, I will always remember what happened because I'll have a scar. The scar will remind me of my big, deep hurt and it can also remind me of how I healed and got better (Reynolds).

If there has been a specific death, ask the group to tell you about the person who died. What was the person like? How did the person look? What did the person like to do? If the person was a student, what kind of student was he or she and what were the person’s favorite classes? What about extracurricular activities? Was this person religious or spiritual and how could you tell? What about this person’s family? Since no one is perfect, what were things about the person that weren’t perfect? What did the person do that was annoying or frustrating? Summarize how the group has described the person.

If there has been a specific death, ask about what they know about the death. It is helpful if you have talked to involved adults beforehand and know the facts of the situation. If possible, it is also helpful to have talked to a surviving family member to explain what you will be doing with the group, learn more about what happened and ask if



there is anything the family would like you to communicate to the group. Summarize the story as you go along and clarify when something is truly known and when something said is a guess, speculation or rumor. Ask about how the children learned about the death and what has been done by adults following the death.

Transition to talking about *The Lion King*. Ask how many of them have seen the movie. Tell them that *The Lion King* is a very good story about what not to do and what's helpful to do after something very sad has happened like when someone dies.



First slide: Young Simba with Mufasa — caption: “Life is good in the beginning...”

Life is good in the beginning of the story. Ask the group for the names of Simba and Mufasa and the other characters as they appear on the slides. (“Simba” means lion or courageous warrior in Swahili, and “Mufasa” was the name of the last king of Kenya.) Simba and his father, Mufasa, get along really well. Not all fathers are good fathers, but Simba has a good father who helps him if he gets into trouble and teaches him things. But it doesn’t last long because Mufasa dies.



Second slide: Simba standing by dead Mufasa — caption: “What do you think Simba is feeling?”

Discuss the question about what Simba might be feeling and stay away from the issue of how Scar plotted and tricked Simba — keep the focus on how Simba may be feeling. After brainstorming about feelings — scared, sad, angry, confused, guilty, etc. — say, “This terrible thing happened, so Simba goes back to his mother, his family and friends and all the people who love him the most, right?” Sometimes many will go along with this as they are supposed to agree with adults, but the answer is “no” or “wrong” — it’s not what Simba does. *Simba runs away. This is his first mistake as it would be better to be with the ones who know and love him best.* Simba, however, runs away, and in our language, he goes to live “on the streets.” And who does he find? Timon and Pumba.

Third slide: Timon, Pumba and Simba looking at the stars at night – caption: “What kind of friends are Timon and Pumba?”



You can tell from the slide that a lot of time has passed in the story because Simba is no longer a little cub, and he looks all grown up. The question for the group is, “Do you think Timon and Pumba were good friends or could they have been better friends?” Ask how many think they were good friends? (Raise hands). Ask how many think they could have been better friends? (Raise hands). Ask how they were good friends? Discuss the ways they were good friends — they helped him to survive, they helped him find food, they had fun together. Look at them — they are different kinds of animals from different kinds of families but they didn’t let that stop them from being friends (a cultural diversity lesson). So in many ways they were good friends, but they could have been better friends. Ask how Timon and Pumba could have been better friends and be prepared to provide some answers to this question: They could have been better friends because they just ask Simba one time what’s wrong. He doesn’t want to talk about it, and that’s OK, but a good friend would come back and ask again if someone still seems down. Also, as far as we can see in the story, they never ask him about his family or try to help him go back to his family. They also teach him that really fun song, “Hakuna Matata,” which means no worries — the past doesn’t matter. It is a fun song, but if the past doesn’t matter, then that means Simba’s father doesn’t matter. *So Simba makes his second mistake, which is pretending that nothing bad really happened — living like it never happened.* And then in this picture (slide) something else happens. They are all talking about what the stars in the sky might really be and Simba tells them about what his father taught him — that the stars are the kings of the past. He’s finally starting to tell them something serious and important, and what do they do? They laugh at him. When a friend is really being serious about something important, one of the worst things to do is laugh at him.



Fourth slide: Nala finds Simba — caption: “Simba is scared to say the words about what happened”

Now Simba is found by his old friend (“What’s her name?”). She is very happy to find him and says now he can come back and be with his family and friends again. Simba says he can’t go back, Nala asks why and he says she wouldn’t understand. She says how can she understand if he won’t tell her. Simba, this big ol’ strong lion, is afraid of saying some words. *He makes his third mistake as he treats what happened like a big secret that he can’t tell anyone. First he runs away, then he acts like it never happened and now he treats it like a big secret.* But now he will start to find a better way to deal with his father’s death.



Fifth slide: Rafiki and Simba — caption: “Simba finds a helper (or a helper finds Simba)”

Ask if they remember this part and the name of the baboon (Rafiki, which means “friend” in Swahili). Simba goes out into the night and yells, “You said you’d always be there for me but you’re not!” Who’s he yelling at? (Mufasa) Is it OK to be mad at the person who died? (Yes). In fact, when Simba is honest about feeling angry and upset, good things start to happen. Rafiki tells Simba he can help him find his father. Simba’s been pretending and acting like his father never lived or died, but he follows Rafiki. (Rafiki is my favorite character in the movie as he fills the role of the counselor or helpful adult.)



Sixth slide: Simba in the tangled roots — caption: “How do you think Simba feels now?”

Look where Rafiki wants to take him — it looks dark and scary, but Simba is not running away this time. Ask how Simba is feeling now and discuss this briefly.

You may reflect that Simba’s face reminds us of how he looked in that slide when Mufasa has just died. He feels a lot the same as he did when he was small. Confirm that Simba does look scared and it can be scary when you stop running away from something that really hurts.

Seventh slide: Simba looking into the water — caption: “What does he see at first? Rafiki says, ‘Look harder’”

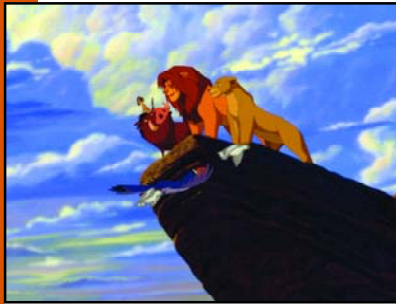


Rafiki takes Simba to the water and has him look in. Ask what does he see at first (himself — his own reflection). Rafiki says, “Look harder” (like a good counselor or therapist). Ask what does Simba see now (his father, Mufasa). Rafiki says, “See, he lives in you.” Next Simba goes out into the night and has this strange vision where Mufasa comes to him in the clouds. Mufasa tells Simba that Simba has forgotten him. Simba says no, but he has been living like Mufasa never existed — running away and keeping secrets. *Here Simba learns the biggest lesson about grief when someone dies: If you don’t run away and pretend it never happened, you can feel the person in your heart (point to your heart), but if you run away and pretend it never happened, you won’t feel the person here (point again to your heart) still with you. It’s a package deal — you can’t have the person “here” without feeling the pain, too.* Simba learns the lesson and decides to go back to his family.

Eighth slide: Simba and Scar — caption: “Scar is tricky, but Simba won’t be tricked this time”



Simba does go back and he meets up with Scar. Scar wants to trick him into running away again, but Simba won’t be tricked this time. He’s found his father inside himself and he’s not letting that slip away. You can remind the students that when you have a big, deep hurt it leaves a scar that reminds you of the hurt. Scar is like that for Simba — seeing him and thinking of him reminds him of that big, deep hurt when his father died. Even though Scar tries to get Simba to run away again, in a way he helps Simba. Ask the group if they can think of how Scar helps Simba. This is a hard question and groups don’t always come up with the answer: Scar tells Simba the truth about Mufasa’s death. Scar says that he (not Simba) killed Mufasa. Simba has been feeling guilty a long time because he thought it was his fault, but it wasn’t, and lots of kids feel guilty because they think it’s their fault when someone dies. Scar helps Simba by telling him the truth, and lots of times kids don’t know the truth of what happened — but they need to be told the truth.



Ninth slide: Simba with friends on Pride Rock — caption: “Simba didn’t do it alone”

Make the point that Simba didn’t do this alone. In fact, Timon and Pumba showed themselves to be even better friends because they didn’t even think it was a good idea to go back, but they went because Simba needed their help.

Ask who helped Simba and name the other animals in the slide. Ask the group to look even closer at the picture to see what else they can see. There are several white birds flying in the air. Some people think that white birds are symbolic of spiritual things. It’s almost like Simba might have been getting help that he didn’t even know about. (I don’t linger on this point, but I do like to make it, as spirituality is a factor in the lives of many young people.)



Tenth slide: Simba and Mufasa looking out over landscape — caption: “Is Simba’s father really dead?”

Tell the group that this is the last slide and the last question: Is Simba’s father, Mufasa, really dead? Ask how many think he’s really dead? (Raise hands).

Ask how many think he’s not really dead? (Raise hands). Ask how many think that both are true? (Raise hands). It’s a trick question because both are really true (this is why this works better with third grade and up — to have a better chance to grasp this concept). In some ways Mufasa is really dead. He was killed and he died. He won’t be there to teach Simba how to hunt anymore. He won’t be there to get Simba out of trouble and rescue him from the hyenas. He won’t be there to see Simba grow up and have a family of his own. He’s really dead. But in another way, he’s not dead. As long as Simba remembers him — doesn’t run away, pretend it never happened and keep it all a big secret — Mufasa will live in here (point to your heart) — in Simba’s heart. And that’s how it is when anyone special dies — they are really dead but we can have them with us in our hearts.

If this is a general grief education presentation, one option is to end with another story from Africa, *The Cow-Tail Switch*, from the book, *Some Folks Say: Stories of Life, Death, and Beyond*. This story would generally be too long to read in its entirety, but it can be shortened and told. The story ends with the lesson that one is not really dead unless one is forgotten.

For groups where there has been a particular death, it can work well to have a question and answer time. The questions can be about death and dying in general, grief, funerals and the particular death they have experienced. Have the group write their questions down on paper to turn in to you. This lets them be bolder with their questions and it allows you to decide which are appropriate questions to address in the group setting. It is not necessary to write one's name to go with the question, and do not identify a name with the question when you read or paraphrase the question to the group. It is helpful to have some information — often from the family — about what actually happened. Certainly you will not have all the answers, but that's OK. Some questions just don't have known or agreed upon answers such as "Why did she have to die?" or "What did he feel when he died?" or "What happens to a person after the person dies?" With these kinds of questions, "I (or we) don't know" may be the best answer. Affirm a question as a good question even if you don't have a good answer upon which everyone would agree. Refer spiritual questions to one's family or faith community. It's not a bad thing to model that even for adults. There are mysteries and questions without good answers.

Slides with and without captions are available on the CD-Rom at the back of this booklet.

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Center for Good Mourning Information

The Center for Good Mourning is a grief support and outreach program of Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock, Arkansas. The mission of the Center for Good Mourning is to provide, improve and increase support and assistance given to bereaved children and families in Arkansas through education, program development and grief support programs. The Center offers eight-week grief support groups for children and families in the spring and fall of each year, community education on grief and loss issues, and intervention and education in schools regarding grief and loss. An innovative grief and loss electronic newsletter (available only via e-mail), *The Mourning News*, is published four times a year and is available for both professionals and non-professionals with an e-mail address anywhere in the world. For more information about grief, children and the Center for Good Mourning, to subscribe to *The Mourning News* or to contact the Center for Good Mourning, please go to www.goodmourningcenter.org.

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