



CASE STUDY #17: JENNIFER (Losing a Friend)

Early in a session I noticed (to be any good as a counselor or group leader one must develop eyes in the back of your head and a sixth sense about a change seen in a group member) Jennifer's head was hanging down hiding what in prior sessions was always up-turned revealing an effervescent smile and a total involvement in all that occurred in the room. This evening was clearly different! I asked her if she would step into "my office" which is meant to lighten up the situation because, in this case, the office is the patio in front of our classroom.

Poor timing because as soon as we got out of sight and out of ear-shot the tears flowed...more of a dam break kinda deal. When I inquired about her emotional outburst she managed to stammer out "My bestest friend passed yesterday." The expression on my face and a patient interval resulted in the information that he drove his car into a guardrail while racing another speed demon. She kept saying: "I didn't get to say goodbye".

After a long discussion with Jennifer I asked: "Do you think he would have acted any differently had he known that yesterday was to be his "last day?" She thought about it for a while and said: I'm sure he would." Seizing on the old "teachable moment" I challenged her to spend the remainder of the session developing a worksheet on that very topic.) After group we tweaked it a bit and came up with the attached:

Last Day

Think about this for a minute. If you knew that today was the last day that you would be alive on the planet, would you do anything different when you got home tonight?

Would you still fight with your younger brother or sister? Would you get in your parent's face? What would you do with your last bit of energy? Are there people you might want to settle up with; you know, repay debts, mend fences? Do you think you might want to forgive the sins of others against you and maybe ask for Would there be anything that didn't seem so important now that you know you'll be gone tomorrow? forgiveness from some people you've messed over? How much different do you think the world would be if everyone lived their lives as if each day could be their last? Would you want your last day filled with: Hate or love? Anger or compassion? Lies or truth? Cheating or fairness?

As a group of people united to support each other to "get what we want" how could we make this "Last Day" thinking part of what we do for ourselves to help us reach our goals? Keep in mind that the best way to reach your own goals is to help others reach theirs.

Example: Your goal is to get a decent grade in class. Your teacher's goal is to see learning and improvement in her/his students. How do we get these two goals aligned? Wouldn't it be smart for you to talk to the teacher after school to inform her of your desire to do better? She might see you in a different light.

See how you both win if you get a better grade? (I once went from an “F” to a “B” in senior civics class because of a talk with my teacher. He thought I was a wise ass that didn’t care. I simply asked for help figuring out what information was most important to study because (confession and ownership) I was overwhelmed by the volume of new stuff to learn. We sat down a few times after school and I began to see what he thought was most important for us to know. (This also worked in college and even graduate school!))

He got to win by putting me in his “success” column. Rack one up for a great teacher!!!

And of course I went from an “F” to a “B” ...I won too. Not just for grade(s) more to my liking but also for a valuable life lesson. Helping others get what they want can get us what we want. Cool eh?

Back to “Last Day”

As a support group what can we do to make ourselves, our families, our schools and our communities more the way we want them to be? Think about it. Talk about it in your small group. Let’s do something to make a real difference... Together we CAN.

NOTE: Pretty cool exercise eh? Keep in mind that this was created and developed by a student who was flunking out of high school. We have used it for several years now and it never fails to elicit excellent discussions and sharing. It’s surprising and sad to see how many young people have lost close friends to relatives therefore making this a particularly emotional exercise. And, of course, suicide makes the tragedy much more unbearable! People consistently blame themselves for not doing more to be a better friend or whatever they feel might possibly have made a difference.

I always introduce it by saying: This exercise was designed by a former “I CARE” group member. A little, not so subtle, nudge toward creating an exercise of their own because we all have many opportunities to “Make lemonade out of the lemons life gives us!” (My experience shows that the best involvement in these kinds of exercises are the ones that students themselves suggest.)

NOTE: Grief counseling involves suggesting discussion around the positive memories of times spent with the deceased as well and conclusions of how to celebrate the quality of a life well lived. None of this seemed apropos in this situation. Jennifer just kept repeating: “But I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

NOTE: Unfortunately this incident happens more than you might think. Even in the “burbs” we have suicides, automobile “accidents” (when the victim is drunk or loaded or both; I would not call it an accident!). We’ve had two cases in “I CARE” where a total of four young lives were taken in drug related assignments. Young people may tend to romanticize the concept of making big bucks selling drugs to friends without understanding the violence connected with associating with drug dealers. The waste of those four lives sticks with me to this day. What might they have done with their lives? Any parent that hears this story should hug their children every night. We all think we know our kids and their friends but developmental psychologists tell us that the teen brain is not totally developed in the area of decision making especially with friends around.