

Grief themes

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IN IBSEN's play *Little Eyolf*,¹⁻³ Ibsen explored the deep emotions, conflicts, and resolutions of grieving for the drowning death of a crippled child. In addition to examining grieving, Ibsen also traced the family conflicts prior to the death of Eyolf. The play and its characters help to explore two extremely important aspects in counseling the dying person and family: (1) A dying person is a part of a family and cannot be viewed in isolation (as often tends to be the case), and (2) recurring themes or subjects throughout the family's life become exaggerated at the time of death. The author has developed the concept of grief themes as an effective way to assess a family in the death crisis. Themes are major family motifs that have appeared and reappeared throughout the family's history without apparent resolution. When a crisis such as death occurs, these themes are once again reenacted.

During the crisis of dying, it is important that these themes are understood and resolved, especially for the survivors. As

- 16 Mann said in his book, *The Magic Mountain*, "a man's dying is more the survivor's affair than his own."^{4(p32)} If the themes are not confronted and resolved, then they often become a deterrent to the future physical and mental health of the survivors.^{5,6} *Little Eyolf* offers an interesting account of the feelings, themes, and resolutions in the crisis of a child's death. These themes can also be observed and applied to the death of an adult. Themes offer the nurse a more complete and holistic approach to counseling the dying person and his or her family.

THE CLINICAL USE OF GRIEF THEMES

Themes are used to cope with the uncertainties, frustrations, and changes caused by death. Assessment and intervention relating to themes provides a more comprehensive framework for counseling the dying and their families. Because of time, effectiveness, and the stress on the family and the dying person, it is unrealistic to perform intensive treatment during the crisis of death.

Kübler-Ross' stages of grief provide a narrow framework for assessing dying persons and their families.⁷ Grief themes can be used to broaden, expand on, and connect her stages. For example, the theme of the conspiracy of silence was frequently used in *Little Eyolf* in the triangle relationship among Alfred (the husband), Rita (the wife), and Asta (Alfred's sister). Several of Kübler-Ross' stages are encompassed in this theme: denial of communication problems, anger over the insensitivity to each other as a result of the conspiracy of silence, and

depression over the struggle "to whom do I turn with my pain?" (See Fig 1.)

I have observed that past problems and family conflicts are reflected in the themes that become prevalent at the time of death or with threat of death. The assessment of themes permits a historical evaluation of past conflicts as they relate to the present crisis. The assessment of themes also becomes a predictor for resolution or for the need for preventive interventions to hinder potential physical or mental deterioration.

Thus, the exploration and diagnosis of themes provides the nurse clinician:

1. a historical perspective of key family dynamics that warrant consideration at the time of the crisis of death,
2. a broader understanding of the dynamics of Kübler-Ross' stages of grief, and
3. a basic knowledge of the family's ability to cope, so that the nurse can intervene and use preventive mental or physical health techniques.

CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

There are two interwoven reasons why the conspiracy of silence develops. First, death is a culturally taboo topic. Death is mysterious and painful for all involved. Second, our social background has taught us not to deal directly with death and

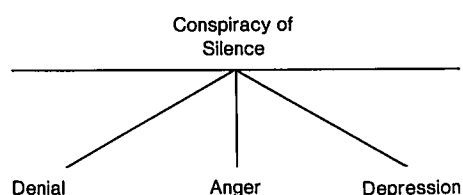


Fig 1. Conspiracy of silence.

dying^{8,9} or other painful topics. Society and culture dictate that death is to be avoided. For example, J. Hoffman reported that numerous studies reveal that 80% of cancer patients want to know if they are dying. However, 80% of their physicians wanted to withhold that information.¹⁰ A previous study by Oken indicated that 90% of the physicians surveyed preferred not to tell their patients that they were dying.¹¹

In *Little Eyolf*, Alfred, Asta, and Rita continually terminated conversations regarding painful topics by saying such things as:

Rita: Yes. I suppose so, but—You don't know what a dreadful time this has been for me, Asta. I haven't been able to bring myself to talk about it. And you've hardly ever been out to see me.^{3(p393)}

Another example comes from the following dialogue:

Asta: Alfred, you mustn't sit here staring at the fjord.

Alfred: On the surface, yes. But deep down, there is the undertow.

Asta: For God's sake, don't think of that!

Alfred: You think he lies out here, don't you Asta? But he doesn't. You needn't fear that. Remember how strong the current is here. Out to the open sea.

Asta: throws herself sobbing over the table, her hands covering her face. Oh God! God!

Alfred: That is why little Eyolf has been taken so far-far away from us now.

Asta: Don't talk like that, Alfred.^{3(p420)}

By the use of the conspiracy of silence, a fantasy develops: If one does not acknowledge and talk about the traumatic situation, it may go away.

The goal of the conspiracy of silence

becomes to avoid, at all costs, the topics of death, dying, and survivors. Silence possesses a different quality than denial and tends to be more of an isolation

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technique. If the family has used silence in preliminary painful situations, they will also tend to use it when confronted with the death crisis. As the plot of *Little Eyolf* develops, the history of the family unfolds. There had been little communication between Alfred and Rita. When Eyolf drowned, the conspiracy of silence was reenacted; Rita and Alfred found it difficult to communicate their sorrows, fantasies, and grief.

A conspiracy of silence grows when the message, verbally or nonverbally, becomes "don't talk about IT." Involved players may turn "their backs" on the topic, as Asta did when she covered her ears with her hands^{3(p420)}; they may change the topic, or request that others stop talking about it. A family member may rescue another by changing the topic or talking for another. For example, Eyolf asked if perhaps one day he would be strong enough to go to the mountains with his father. Alfred became uncomfortable, and Asta quickly changed the subject by saying how nice Eyolf looked that day.^{3(p396)} In another example, Eyolf was talking to Alfred about wanting to be a soldier. Asta rescued Alfred from this unrealistic fantasy by changing the subject.^{3(p397)} Rita also used this technique. She became uncom-

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fortable when her "gold and green forests" were mentioned. She even went to the extreme and said she would "smack" Alfred if he continued talking like that.^{3(p405)}

People comment that they feel great relief when the silence is broken. Yet, silence is a behavior that is continually used, even though it produces discomfort. In my practice, the following responses are the most common reasons why people put the conspiracy of silence into practice: (1) They do not know what to say to the significant others; (2) they are afraid of the emotional reactions, like crying, that might result; (3) they are frightened and worry about how others will react or what others will think if they really express their feelings; and (4) they have never learned how to talk about such emotionally charged issues.

Families who use the conspiracy of silence create a great deal of anxiety, frustration, and anger while attempting to keep the conspiracy functioning. Playwright Robert Anderson (*I Never Sang for My Father* and *Tea and Sympathy*) could never tell his wife she was dying of cancer, although he knew for 4 years. It is an exhausting task to keep such a painful secret for such a long time. He later said it would have been much easier and less lonely if she had known.¹² (For an account of the taboos for not talking about cancer and tuberculosis read *Illness as Metaphor* by Susan Sontag.¹³)

Alfred and Rita seem to have used the conspiracy theme throughout their married life. Rita finally admitted how much she hated Eyolf and Alfred.^{3(pp411-413)} Alfred's noninvolvement with Eyolf was

expressed only after Eyolf's death: "He was to fill my life with pride and joy . . ."^{3(p421)} Neither parent was able to talk about the hatred of Eyolf before his death. Symbolically, the Rat-Wife personified the conspiracy of silence. With powerfully simple and profound prose, she asked "Begging your pardon—have your honours any troublesome thing that gnaws here in this house?"^{3(p398)} The answer seemed to be yes. The "thing" was Eyolf, but the conspiracy was so intense that the "thing" could not be expressed; it just gnawed in silence.

To understand the conspiracy of silence, it is helpful to assess the following components:

1. What are the underlying anxieties and fantasies of the death situation or disease that propagate the conspiracy? In the 1907 translation¹ (less so in the Ellis-Fermor² and Meyer³ translations), Rita was convinced that Eyolf's death was caused by the evil eye of the Rat-Wife. Alfred suggested that it was Rita's wish.^{3(p430)} Alfred stated that the death was "haphazard," but his anxious laugh leads the reader to believe that he had another reason. Alfred alluded to the Rat-Wife luring little Eyolf.^{3(p421)} The variety of reasons suggested the desperate need to find the cause of little Eyolf's death. This need is a typical reaction to a death. On the other hand, the underlying anxieties and fantasies make people uncomfortable; they do not want to discuss or share these anxieties. Therefore, the need to find a cause or reason goes unfulfilled.

2. How does the family express its conspiracy of silence? What verbal and nonverbal gestures are used? If the nurse is

able to recognize these, he or she can intervene. For example, if an individual, such as Rita, changes the topic, it may be helpful to point out what happened. When someone, such as Alfred, says "I don't want to talk about it," it would be appropriate to pursue the reason.

3. What is the purpose of this conspiracy of silence theme to the family? The purpose is important to assess in order to discover how necessary this theme is and how much work needs to be done to change it, if appropriate. I find that people usually want to talk about their problems and feelings. They must be given the opportunity to talk about them with a professional nurse who has been taught how to encourage the expression of these problems and feelings. Obviously, it is difficult to deal with something that people are so effectively avoiding. I find it helpful to

- point out studies and statistics that support an open communication in the death crisis,
- be available to assist in the destruction of the conspiracy, and
- suggest that the person who is to break the conspiracy rehearse or practice what can be said. It is helpful if one person breaks the conspiracy. Otherwise, it may appear as though several people are conspiring against the others. It may be unrealistic for all members to change their behavior or belief about the need for the end to the conspiracy of silence. However, the opportunity to talk to at least one family member can be a great relief.

In conclusion, if the conspiracy of silence is prolonged, there tend to be regrets, guilt, and unresolved mourning.

DETACHMENT

The detachment of parents from each other is another typical grief theme that occurs, especially with the death of a child. The parents apparently are so entangled in their own grief and pain that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to care for or understand the grief of their spouse.

In *Little Eyolf*, especially in the second act, Alfred and Rita exist in their separate worlds. Five distinct phases can be identified in this parental detachment theme. Initially, the detachment seems to be due to the shock of the crisis; Alfred described this as a dreamlike state.^{3(p120)} It is obvious that the shock of Eyolf's death caused both Rita and Alfred to retreat into their own worlds.

Second, it seems paradoxical that there is a need for the parents to reach out to each other, but each one is afraid to do so. This reaction may be based on a previous family behavior to not reach out when one is in pain, or it may be because the person is in so much pain now that no amount of comfort could relieve it. Rita seems to react this way when she says:

Rita: Why are you all leaving me?

Asta: You said you wanted to be alone—

Rita: I know. But I don't. It's getting so dark. I seem to see great open eyes staring at me.^{3(p447)}

Alfred previously had said to Rita, "I prefer to be alone now."^{3(p128)} However, he continued talking.

Third, the parents reason and think a lot about the past, the death, and the future. Past memories and family secrets are disclosed that may be connected to the

reason or meaning for the death. Asta and Alfred discussed their childhood and family secrets; for example, Asta was only a half-sister to Alfred, Alfred used to call Asta "Little Eyolf," and Asta had kept her mother's letters. Asta said that "one quiet evening I will tell you something they contain."^{3(p403)} Alfred and Rita discussed that neither one loved or knew little Eyolf; he was a stranger to them both. Rita believed Eyolf stood in the way of their marriage.^{3(pp430-437)} Alfred confessed that he married Rita for her beauty and money, not love.^{3(p436,437)}

A confession such as Alfred's may lead to further detachments because it tests the essence of the relationship. Then again, it may help heal the past wounds in the family if the problems can be resolved. Alfred and Rita confessed a great deal. Little thought is given to the impact each statement would have on the other person.^{3(pp429-437)} The statements become persecuting and incriminating to both Alfred and Rita. It is critical that this phase of the detachment is resolved. Continual blaming will lead to further detachments and to possibly unhealthy results. As Alfred said: "And what we call our loss, our grief, is merely the gnawing of our conscience, nothing more."^{3(p433)}

The fourth phase of the detachment theme produces a need to find comfort from others. Initially, Alfred found comfort in Asta; Rita found comfort in Borgh-ejm. If these relationships continue, they may produce more detachment from the spouse and more attachment to the comforting person. Alfred said:

What a blessing I have in you, Asta. It gives me such joy. Joy in my sorrow—

Asta: Your greatest source of happiness should be Rita.

Alfred: Of course. But Rita is not my blood. It is not the same as having a sister.^{3(p428)}

Generally, this new attachment often becomes a reason for divorce. However, the hidden reason is unresolved detachment, expressed here by Rita and Alfred.

Thus, the ultimate result of detachment is separation or divorce. Alfred said he can no longer stay with Rita: "Rita and I cannot go on living together. . . . Living

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together makes us both evil and detestable."^{3(p438)} To Rita he said, "I think it would be best for both of us if we were to part."^{3(p451)} Toward the end of the play Rita said to Alfred: "Sooner or later you will leave me. I feel it. I can see it in your eyes. You will leave me."^{3(p453)}

During the detachment phase 98% of my clients with a terminally ill child or those who have experienced the death of a child have contemplated divorce. There seem to be two detachment phases in dealing with the terminally ill child: shortly after the diagnosis and then after the death of the child. To date 80% have divorced ($n = 30$). This is a small sample and by no means conclusive. Although not well documented, the detachment theme, and possibly guilt, may be related to the high divorce rate of parents who have lost a child.¹⁴ Therefore, detachment appears to have potent implications for nurses when counseling such parents.

The fifth and final phase of detachment theme occurs when the survivors' thoughts turn to "living issues." The beginning realization that life goes on usually occurs during the detachment stage. This is evident in *Little Eyolf* when Alfred and Asta were talking about their past life and Alfred realized that he was not thinking about little Eyolf. Asta's appropriate reply was, "You must have some rest from your grief."^{3(p424)} Alfred also stated that in his agony he found himself wondering what was for dinner.^{3(p425)} This typical response is healthy in terminating the detachment theme. Life *does* continue, and the needs, of oneself and others, must be met. Initially this change of behavior may produce guilt, since people have the fantasy that the griever should mourn continually.

In conclusion, the detachment theme is an appropriate, healthy, and normal reaction if it is not prolonged. It provides a means to sort out feelings and issues. However, it seems crucial that these issues be resolved. Otherwise, complete detachment tends to occur. It is difficult for a spouse, or significant others, to understand their behavior and accept it. As Alfred said, "Grief makes me cruel."^{3(p430)} The change of behavior will hinder the resolution of themes, and then complete detachment often occurs. Complete detachment may then lead to separation or divorce.

GUILT

In counseling dying people and their families, guilt has been found to be a predominant theme. This is also the most

prevalent theme in *Little Eyolf*. The major characters expressed a wide variety of guilt. Rita and Alfred discussed the guilt regarding little Eyolf's birth,^{3(pp412-431)} his crippling accident,^{3(pp430-437)} his death, Alfred's life work, their common guilt,^{3(p435)} their marriage, and Alfred and Asta's relationship.^{3(pp402-403,422-424,426-428,438-440)} An excellent example of their guilt comes in the second act:

Alfred: That's right. (Lowers his voice.) And then you came—and tempted me in to you.

Rita: (defiantly) Be a man and admit that you forgot the child and everything else!

Alfred: By God, you are right! I forgot the child. In your arms.

Rita: Alfred—that's vile!

Alfred: In that moment, you condemned little Eyolf to death.

Rita: You tool You tool If I am guilty, so are you!

Alfred: Oh, very well, if you wish. We are both guilty. So there was retribution in Eyolf's death after all.

Rita: Retribution?

Alfred: Yes. A judgment on you and me. Now we have what we deserve. While he lived, our cowardly, furtive consciences would not let us love him because we could not bear to look at the—thing he carried.

Rita: The crutch.^{3(p433)}

The guilt theme not only deals with the death of little Eyolf but with previously unresolved guilt experiences. Clinically, death guilt cannot be viewed exclusively. The nurse must assess and relate other guilts to death guilt. I define guilt as a self-blaming part of the normal grieving process. It is a learned, conscious, and resentful feeling for an unimagined or imagined act of commission or omission relative to the dead or dying person. It is helpful for the nurse to assess various components of guilt when attempting to

dissect the guilt behaviors. The components are ambivalence, projection, punishment, closing-off process, and usefulness of guilt.

Ambivalence

Klein wrote that guilt and anger follow an ambivalent relationship. The survivor places ambivalent feelings on himself or herself in the form of punishment or directs them toward another person who is at hand.¹⁵ Apparently both Alfred and Rita had ambivalent feelings toward Eyolf. Alfred accused Rita of never loving Eyolf.^{3(p431)} Rita said she loved and wanted Eyolf, but Asta stood in the way; she then admitted that they never loved him^{3(p431)} and that they were mourning a "stranger's death."^{3(p432)} On the other hand, they were not able to bear the thought of Eyolf being gone from them.^{3(p449)} These ambivalent love-hate feelings toward Eyolf produced guilt that needed to be understood and resolved.

Projection

Projection is often used when people, such as Alfred, have difficulty accepting the "human responsibility." After admitting that neither ever really loved him, Alfred violently stated that Rita was the guilty one for leaving Eyolf alone on the table, which resulted in a fall that crippled the child. Instead of taking partial responsibility, he placed all the blame on Rita.

It is ironic that Alfred has spent his life writing a book on *The Responsibility of Man*,^{3(p405)} since his behavior seemed to reflect irresponsibility. Was his book a reaction to his own unresponsive behavior? He projected the blame of Eyolf's fall

on Rita and thus freed himself of the feeling of responsibility. This projection is tied to an alluded sexual issue throughout the play. Rita seduced Alfred and forgot he was to watch Eyolf. Since Rita seduced Alfred, it becomes her fault that Eyolf falls.^{3(p433)} Ibsen implied that Alfred became impotent because of his guilt over the accident. This is alluded to in the beginning of the play^{3(p414,415)} when Rita described Alfred's homecoming from the mountains. She stated that she was dressed in white, had let her hair down, had "rose colored" shades over the lamps, and drank champagne. She mentioned several times that "The champagne stood there, but who raised his glass?"^{3(p414,415)} This statement is a literary expression of Alfred's attempted, but failed, sexual arousal. Alfred projected the blame to Rita, yet he suffered the consequences of his impotence.

Punishment

An integral part of guilt is the fear of punishment. This fear is based on the belief that there are powerful beings like God, parents, the police, or for Rita, the "Evil Eye." These beings hear all, see all, and know all. The guilty person feels bad, dirty, and unworthy because of something he or she did and then anticipates punishment from one or more of these powerful beings. Alfred's punishment may be his impotence. Alfred also realized that since he and Rita were both guilty of not loving Eyolf and forgetting the child for their own sexual pleasures, they were punished for their guilty behaviors by the death of their son.^{3(p433)}

The punishment issue is difficult to deal

with clinically. People tend to equate punishment with death. It is difficult for people to believe that death occurs to all and is not punishment for past deeds.

People believe there is usually an unrelated but underlying cause or reason for their death or a significant other's death, usually related to past sins or indiscretions. Abrams and Finesinger^{16(p482)} found that 56 out of 60 cancer patients felt guilty and were able to give a specific reason for their guilt. Thirty-one blamed themselves for their disease (eg, sin or misdeed, trauma sometime during life, venereal disease, negligence, or not being intelligent enough to recognize that the symptoms were serious). Twenty-five blamed others (eg, inheritance or contagious, strenuous care of sick marital partner or parent, blow dealt by relative, too frequent sexual demands, and failure of physician to make them aware of the seriousness of their condition). People tend to believe others will view "their own diagnoses" as silly, but they still believe in these diagnoses. It is helpful to ask dying persons why they think "this" is happening to them. Clearly, in addition to the actual reasons, they have a fantasized rationale.

Closing-off process

Lifton's classic, *Death in Life: The Survivors of Hiroshima*,¹⁷ explores the theory that the Hibakushas, the survivors, felt guilty because of a "closing-off" process they experienced. Closing off was a major defense against guilt and anxiety and helped the survivors function as normally as possible: "I feel nothing, then death is not taking place around me."^{17(pp33,34)} Lifton wrote: "It [closing-off]

was a way of creating emotional distance between himself and the intolerable world immediately around him."^{17(pp33,34)} This closing-off time is apparently needed to mourn previously resolved issues. Consequently, the present painful situation is closed off and remote grief is "re-mourned."

Bermann suggested that before a heart or lung transplant patient could mourn his or her own death, he or she must first properly mourn a significant other.¹⁸ This also applies to the guilt theme: The present guilt must be closed off, and previously unresolved guilt must be dealt with first. Then the difficult task of present mourning can be accomplished successfully.

The closing-off process was expressed by Didrik Arup Seip in Meyer's introduction to Ibsen's play.³ Seip believed that Alfred's guilt did not lie in Eyolf's lameness or in his relationship with Rita but in his relationship to Asta. The painful realization of this truth acted as a cure for him.^{3(p377)} This relationship was apparently Alfred's first and longest lasting guilt theme and needed to be resolved before he could deal with his relationship to Rita and Eyolf. He could never completely resolve his guilt over Eyolf's death because of previously unresolved guilt.

The usefulness of guilt

Guilt can be useful in the grieving process. At times it provides a way to formulate a structure for an illness or event within a framework of cause and effect. It gives reason or meaning to the crisis for some people. Alfred and Rita search for many reasons for the death of Eyolf.^{3(p420)} Alfred believed that Eyolf's death was

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caused by Rita's hatred for little Eyolf. Consequently, she wished him dead.^{3(pp430,431)} Another reason is also suggested: The Rat-Wife lured him. Alfred said maybe it was a "hap-hazard" occurrence.^{3(p421)} The search for the reason for the death leads to the conclusion that the death must not "lie unavenged"^{3(p454)} or that the child was not "born in vain."³⁽⁴⁵⁶⁾

Once the reason is found and believed in, it leads to altruistic behavior. It becomes a means of decreasing the intensity of guilt. Although further research is needed, guilt is a powerful theme that may hold the key to the survivors' state of mental and physical health after a death.

RESOLUTIONS

Confronting and dealing with themes is a necessary component to the termination of grief. Rita stated that they can never undo what has been done.^{3(p433)} That realization, as well as decisions regarding the previously discussed themes, leads to resolution decisions.

Child development studies have concluded that a person develops empathic distress with another as a result of having a similar experience. However, empathic distress is often difficult for parents to use because their own grief has made them detached from each other. Once the parents can recognize that their spouse has

different inner feelings and reactions, each parent's own sympathetic distress for the other can occur.¹⁹ For example, when Alfred and Rita recognized that both were guilty, several alternatives developed that relieved the sympathetic distress. At that point in the play, two choices were available: They could continue to deny the existence of their problems and run away or they could develop a new purpose in their lives.

If the existence of problems is continually denied, the sympathetic distress is prolonged and appropriate resolution cannot be made. In a death situation, behaviors are often found that reflect "running away." This behavior provides a *solution* but not a *resolution*. The solution may bring temporary comfort but not permanent resolution or comfort.

As discussed previously, the solution for Alfred and Rita was to part.^{3(pp438,451,453)} Alfred suggested that Asta live with him again.^{3(p438)} He also suggested that he could return to the solitude of the mountains. Rita replied, "But these are only daydreams, Alfred."^{3(p451)} For Rita, forgetting, traveling, or keeping the house open to people are possible solutions.^{3(p435)} An unhealthy solution was that Asta could come and live with Alfred and Rita. She could then become "our Eyolf, Asta. Eyolf, as you used to be."^{3(p448)} This solution suggested the need for a replacement child^{20,21} or substitute to allow them to worship the past images without resolving the death of Eyolf. This solution would also be the symbolic death for Asta. Rita suggested that religion may give her comfort, but Alfred has taken that away from her.^{3(p434)}

Another solution to relieve the distress is

to develop a new purpose or rejuvenate an old purpose. However, this can often become a continuation of previous themes without resolution. The nurse must be aware of why such a decision is made. It may perpetuate the previous themes without resolution. For example, Rita asked Alfred if he could start working again.^{3(p451)} Alfred relayed his experience in the mountains. He became lost and made a bargain with death: If he could find his way, he would go home and be a father to little Eyolf.^{3(p452,453)} This choice involved giving up his book and changing his behavior to encompass "human responsibility."

Rita's resolution, on the other hand, was more of an "undoing." She decided to be all that she could be (but was not to Eyolf) to other children. She would invite the poor, neglected children from the town to the house. "They shall live in Eyolf's room—look at his books—play with his toys."^{3(p455)} Alfred said that she was not suited for such a task. However, he realized that neither of them had done anything for these poor people, so there was no reason for the townspeople to have risked their lives to save Eyolf. By helping others, Alfred and Rita could rationalize that Eyolf was not born nor did he die in vain. This reasoning became the final resolution in the play. However, it still had the flavor of a solution, since Alfred and Rita did not seem to understand why they were choosing this direction. This choice echoes the replacement children theme. It does not seem as pathological as it could have been if Asta had become the replacement child. On the other hand, one wonders if Eyolf was the replacement child for Asta. After Eyolf's death she would replace Eyolf, and the cycle would

then be complete, although it is not a healthy resolution.

Nurses must be aware that healthy grieving takes time. In successful grieving, themes must be confronted and understood before resolutions, rather than solutions, can be made. Rita and Alfred seemed to resolve their grief too quickly. Between the second and third acts of the play, little time transpired—a few days, a few weeks, at the most. The one redeeming factor in this resolution was that Rita needed to teach herself to care for these children. She realized that she felt empty and needed to fill that emptiness with something, "something resembling love."^{3(p455)} Yet, in this time period, Rita and Alfred resolved, or thought they resolved, their feelings about Eyolf's death. Nurses must be cautious of such behavior, especially when the death has been tragic or the dead person was held in high social esteem by his or her peers.²² Such a quick resolution may cause future physical or mental deterioration of the survivors.

SUMMARY

Four grief themes that were developed in clinical practice have been explored. These themes were also prevalent in Ibsen's play *Little Eyolf*. The conspiracy of silence, detachment, guilt, and resolutions are themes that are prevalent in Rita and Alfred's life and, therefore, in their grieving of little Eyolf's death. These themes are family motifs present in the family's history. They must be brought into the open, in the hope of achieving a resolution at times of death. If not, future physical

and mental health might be affected. In counseling the dying and their families, the nurse must explore these developing themes. Previous themes must be understood before the present ones can be

confronted and resolved. These themes can then be used to gain a broader perspective into the needs, problems, and emotions of the dying and his or her family.

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