

PARENTING MY ADHD KID "IS KILLING ME"

by Dr. Martin Keller, Clinical Psychologist, Phoenix, and Scottsdale, Arizona

Numerous times a year a parent will consult with me about concerns related to raising their child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It is not uncommon for parents to bemoan "I feel like I'm dying from the pressure of keeping up with my kid." These parents often have a need to vent their feelings about struggles with homework, calls from the principal regarding fights on the playground and bus, tantrums over chores, getting ready for school on time, and the constant forgetting assignments. Perhaps most hurtful to parents is watching the sadness and helplessness in their child's facial expressions as their child cries "I'm trying the best I can."

Most parents now understand that ADHD is a brain disorder. Parents however still hope and yearn for the day when their child will be able to focus, attend, reduce impulsivity, and have better organizational skills. Chronic and persistent symptoms of ADHD often remain evident even with appropriate psychopharmacological interventions, behavioral therapy, parenting skills, and active educational strategies.

Parents of kids with disabilities often talk of feeling like "they are dying" or that "it feels like their child is killing them". These experiences are associated with hurt, sadness, and grief interspersed with anger and rage. Learning that our child is "imperfect" creates a profound sense of sadness. We have to grieve the dream of an ideal child. Dealing with loss of a fantasized perfect child can activate memories and feelings of prior losses in our lives. Deaths, loss of love, loss of status, separation, divorce, loss of health, and loss of self-esteem are commonly triggered by the grief reaction associated with acceptance of a child's disability.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a Swiss psychiatrist described the DABDA stages of grief. DABDA is an acronym for D-denial, A-anger, B-bargaining, D-depression and A-acceptance. Although research does not consistently support that the Kubler-Ross stages apply to all grief reactions, this paradigm can be empowering to parents. Understanding models of the grief process can help parents understand what they are feeling when they remark parenting my ADHD Kid "is killing me" or I feel like "I'm dying from the pressures of keeping up with my kid with my ADHD kid."

I routinely address grief issues in family therapy with parents of children

with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Most parents are eager to explore the dynamics of loss as it relates to accepting their child's disability. Discussion of prior losses and disappointments in parents' lives can free parent of chronic profound sadness, anger and helplessness. Parents are typically thankful that our therapeutic work encouraged them to understand how the grieving process relates to acceptance of disability.

Irvin D. Yalom in his book "Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death" challenges the folklore that staring into either the sun or death is toxic. Yalom recommends that we have the courage to stare into the possibility of our own death and to stare into our own grief as a way to freeing ourselves. The imagery associated with the title of Yalom's book is both haunting and powerful. Perhaps we have to stare at our complex and multi-layered feelings of grief about our sons and daughters disabilities in order to find meaning, acceptance, and joy in their lives as well as in our lives.

Dr. Martin E. Keller is a Diplomate in Clinical Psychology and a Fellow of the American Academy of Clinical Psychology. He is in private practice in Phoenix Arizona, where he specializes in counseling and psychotherapy for children, adolescents, adults and families. He has a particular interest in the emotional aspects of ADHD. Contact him via his site at: <http://www.psychologistscottsdale.com/>

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