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the blame game

When things go wrong in the family, from divorce to death or abuse, children may blame themselves – with serious consequences. Take steps to prevent it, writes GLYNIS HORNING.

When seven-year-old Hayley stopped eating and started acting out at school, her mother attributed it to grief for her late grandmother. She was shaken when a therapist said it was more than that. "Hayley actually blamed herself for Nana's death," says the Pietermaritzburg hairdresser. "She was eaten by guilt, sure that if she'd remembered to water Nana's pansies [a chore she'd neglected] and been a good girl, Nana wouldn't have had a heart attack and died."

Many children blame themselves when those they love fall ill or die, fight or divorce, neglect them or even abuse them, and it can affect them years later as adults. "Young children, especially, don't have access to the hard facts that we as adults do, or are unable to grasp them entirely," says Joburg clinical psychologist Liane Lurie. "The only tangible source they have is themselves, and so the cycle of self-blame begins."

A child's world is centred on the stability of structures around them, Lurie says. "Adults are seen as omnipotent and as only good, so if something goes horribly wrong, the only reasonable explanation is to attribute it to themselves. Children are also often asked to behave better or be quieter in the face of a potential crisis, and are prone to interpret this as a message that the ensuing chaos is their fault," she explains.

Self-blame is fed by children being naturally self-centred. At this stage of their development they believe that everything that happens to them is linked to them, and often believe that by thinking about or wishing for something, or by doing or not doing something, they can make things happen. If only they had watered the flowers, or not made Mom and Dad angry, or had been kinder or cleverer or somehow better, this would not have happened.

Magical thinking, as it's called, can sometimes offer a sense of control, which children crave. It's frightening to deal with the reality of being powerless in the face of traumatic events, explains Joburg educational psychologist June Manala. So it's preferable to believe that if they just try harder or become better, they can change things back – the dead person may come back to life, or Mom and Dad may get together again. "This is necessary for psychological survival, but beyond a certain period the repercussions can be considerable," she says.

"it's not your fault"

Self-blame can leave children weighed down by guilt for years, or wrapped in shame, preventing them from functioning fully and growing to their potential, Manala explains – more limiting self-beliefs are formed in childhood than at any other stage. They are also at risk of depression and anxiety disorders, and adolescents may attempt to escape in substance abuse and risky sexual, or other, behaviour (see "signs of self-blame in children" box).

It's essential to overcome self-blame in order to heal. And the best way a parent can help lift the burden is with the words

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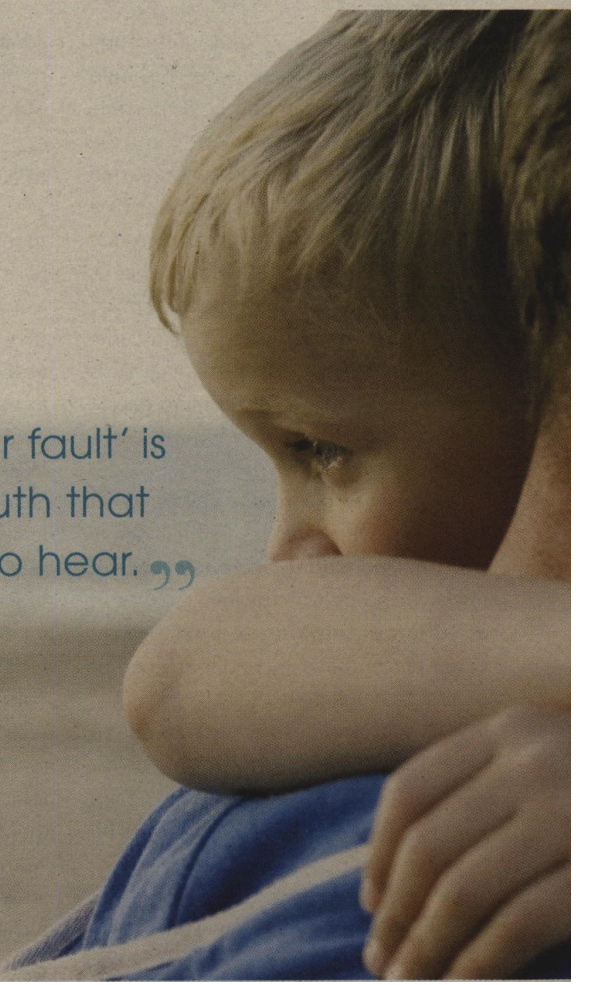
"It's not your fault". "These four words are truly one of the most powerful gifts an adult can give a child," says Sue Bohlin, contributing author to *Marriage, Family and Sexuality* (Kregel). "This is a powerful truth that children need to hear and they can't tell themselves; only an adult can." Be sure your body language reflects the words, adds Manala. "Younger children rely on nonverbal communication and can easily pick up inconsistencies, particularly in the facial expressions of adults."

If a child still doesn't respond, get professional help. "They must feel they are being taken seriously and that they are understood," says Manala. Play therapy can help them express their feelings and resolve psychosocial challenges. Or cognitive behavioural therapy can show them how their thinking patterns are colouring their views, and teach them to examine their views more objectively, so they feel and cope better.

Through therapy, Hayley has come to terms with her gran's death, and accepted it wasn't her fault. "We've planted more pansies for Nana," says her mom. "But she knows it's just a lovely way of helping keep our memories of Nana alive – nothing more." ➤



"'It's not your fault' is a powerful truth that children need to hear."

signs of self-blame in children

- Acting out (from anger, fear or subconsciously seeking punishment because they feel guilty)
- Withdrawing (from feeling overwhelmed, worthless, depressed)
- Complaining of aches or pains
- Change in sleep and eating patterns
- Regressing (bed-wetting, thumb-sucking)
- Dropping in school grades
- Engaging in risk-taking and sexual behaviour
- Using alcohol or drugs (to soothe uncomfortable emotions)
- Self-harming (chewing fingers, pulling out hair, cutting themselves)

Ask your doctor about counselling or contact Sadag: 0800 21 22 23 or sms 31393

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stopping self-blame

Self-blame can play out differently depending on its source, and should be addressed preemptively if possible "so the child can get on with the business of being a child, unburdened by it," says educational psychologist June Manala. "Provide children with as much information as possible about what is happening in age-appropriate terms," adds clinical psychologist Liane Lurie. "Remember that a child's imagination is vivid and will fill in any remaining gaps."

after divorce

When parents divorce, a child's world falls apart, with changes in their family structure and routine, and often in where they live and go to school.

Self-blame thinking: "If I'd been a better person/behaved better, my dad or mom might still be here."

What you (and your ex) need to say: "It's not your fault – it's about us. We won't be getting together again, but we both love you and will always be there for you."

Take care: "Avoid criticising each other in front of your child," says Lurie. "Any conflict a child has about which parent to choose, or fear of displeasing the other, will create more self-blame."

after illness or death

When someone a child loves gets seriously ill or dies, it can be too difficult to understand and too painful to accept, as can the fear it may bring that others they love could also get ill or die.

Self-blame thinking: "If I'd been a better person/behaved better, they might still be fine."

What you need to say: "Sometimes children think a sickness or death is their fault. Do you? It's sad, but nothing you said or did made this happen. Are you frightened I may get sick or die too? Even if I did one day, you would be well cared for by X."

Take care: "Be careful of amplifying your child's fears through incessant questioning," says Lurie. "Introduce the topic and see what their questions are. Let them know that if there's anything they're worried about, you will always try to answer it as best you can. Remember that a child's primary language may be play – they may be more prone to open up if the setting is more relaxed and you gradually introduce potentially emotional topics."

after physical or sexual abuse

When a child is abused, especially by a family member or adult in a position of trust, they often find it easier to blame themselves.

Self-blame thinking: "I must have made them want to do that to me; I let them do it. I must be wicked or worthless. If they're sent away, it's my fault for telling."

What you need to say: Sexual abuse can cause the most self-blame for numerous reasons, which you need to counter individually:

- They may feel guilty that they didn't fight: "It's not your fault, you don't yet have the mental or physical power of an adult – you could only do what you had to in order to survive."
- They let the abuse go on: "It's not your fault; you were confused (or led on, threatened or scared)."
- They were aroused: "It's not your fault; touch can feel nice or exciting, and our bodies respond automatically."
- They enjoyed feeling special: "It's not your fault – you deserve to feel loved and special, but adults must do it in an appropriate way."
- They were told by the abuser it was their fault: "It's not your fault. They said it because they knew what they were doing was wrong and they didn't want you to tell on them."
- The abuser was sent away because the child told on them: "It's not your fault. It was right to tell – they need help, and now they can get it."
- They have been abused before by different people: "It's not your fault. People who do these things often pick on people who have been hurt before. I will see that you are safe. We will manage together."

Take care: "A child will be especially prone to self-blame if they've been told by the abuser to be silent about what transpired," says Lurie. "This enhances their sense of shame. Self-blame is also amplified when there's been no appropriate adult intervention to stop the abuse. The child begins to believe they were not good enough for anyone to rescue them." C