

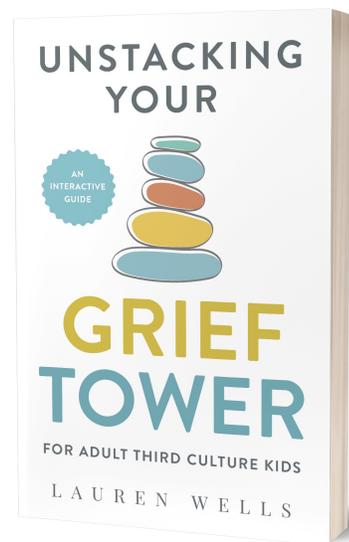
Wells, Lauren. *Unstacking Your Grief Tower: For Adult Third Culture Kids*. Fort Mill, SC: Independently Published. 2021.

Reviewed by Suzie Rodgers, IMB Field Personnel, Africa

Unstacking Your Grief Tower was written by Lauren Wells, who spent her teenage years in Tanzania. “She is also the author of *Raising Up a Generation of Healthy Third Culture Kids* and *The Grief Tower*. She specializes in practical, preventive care for Third Culture Kids (TCKs) and their families.”¹ In *Unstacking Your Grief Tower*, Wells notes that while life on the mission field can be a wonderful experience for TCKs, many experience loss and trauma during their developmental years (birth-age 20). These losses include numerous *goodbyes* and various hardships children in cross-cultural contexts face. Wells

believes these difficulties stack up like blocks on a tower. If TCKs do not process the grief, trauma, or pain as it happens, these blocks continue to stack until they have a tower that can crash them in early adulthood. This book offers practical activities that parents and TCKs can use to identify their *blocks* and then begin a healthy process of dismantling their tower.

As a mother of 3 adult TCKs, I can see this resource’s value. When we moved overseas 25 years ago, we were not given a handbook on how to walk our children through the difficulties they would experience on the mission field. As issues arose, we tried our best to work through them with the help of



¹ From the back cover of the book

God's word, prayer, and advice from other colleagues. However, I believe this book would have helped me be more aware of potential issues my children might face in Africa. We can make the mistake of making light of an issue by saying such things as everyone goes through this without taking the time to help our kids process things healthily. Wells notes, "By processing these memories, we are taking the time and space to think through them and consider how they have impacted us in the past and continue to impact us in the present. This diminishes the hold that they have on both our current and future reality" (70).

This book contains several strengths. First, it is an easy, quick read; but it will require ample time to work through the activities. Second, at the end of every chapter, there are helpful questions for the reader to consider and work through before going forward. A third strength is Well's instruction on how to make a grief timeline. This timeline becomes the blocks of your grief tower, and then the author helps you think through how to process each of those blocks. Finally, Wells does a good job of identifying issues many TCKs face while insisting this is just a first step. She wisely suggests that if someone needs help, they should talk with a trusted counselor. In addition, she also provides resources at the end of the book, including workshops, access to TCK caregivers, and websites.

While I benefited greatly from the book, I noted a couple of minor weaknesses. The first is an understandable level of subjectivity on the author's part. Her African experience was only four years, and she went to the mission field as a teenager. Many organizations discourage taking teenagers to the field because of the very challenges she mentions. One would expect her to have difficult transitions as a teenager moving to rural Africa. Much of her thesis revolves around the grief towers people build during their *developmental* years. Yet, most of her developmental years were spent in the U.S. While her experiences are helpful, the book would be even better if it also included interviews with others who had grown up overseas and parents who raised their children on the mission field.

A second minor concern revolves around her perception of trauma. TCKs face difficulties overseas, and those things should be processed. Yet, Wells tended to equate somewhat difficult things (like being a new kid in school) with genuinely traumatic things like watching someone being burned alive (30-35). While she admonishes the reader not to create a hierarchy of grief but validate every source of pain (10), it is also essential to help kids distinguish between difficult and traumatic. If everything is trauma, then nothing is trauma, and TCKs must learn how to process both appropriately.

As a TCK parent, I recommend that every missionary parent read this book to better help their children recognize and process grief or other difficulties they might face on the mission field. If you have adult TCKs, I recommend giving them this book as a gift and engaging in a healthy discussion about any difficulties they experienced. As I worked through this book, my eyes were opened to many things, and I believe this is a valuable resource for any TCK or TCK parent.