

Grief and Loss

COMMON REACTIONS TO GRIEF/LOSS

Making adjustments for the age and development of your child, think about the behaviors you have noticed in your youngster. The following behaviors are considered fairly normal reactions to a loss. Depression/anxiety

- Poor school performance
 - Poor concentration
- Acting out anger in inappropriate ways
 - Sleeping problems
- Regression to an earlier developmental stage
 - bedwetting
 - thumb sucking
 - difficulty parting from parent
- Eating problems (e.g., lack of appetite)
 - Various physical complaints
 - stomach aches, tension
 - inability to cry (may complain of "sore throat")
 - headaches

Please note that while these behaviors are considered normal during a period of grieving, if they persist, your child may need professional help with recovery.

SERIOUS REACTIONS TO GRIEF/LOSS

Once again, this list needs to be adjusted for the age and developmental level of the child. Professional intervention is suggested for any of these symptoms.

- Denial (e.g., refuses to acknowledge that anything has happened)
 - Suicide threats
- Emotional outbursts such as anger or panic
 - Cruelty to animals
 - Physical assaults on others
- Dramatic decline in school performance
- Phobic (fearful) reactions to going to school or being away from home
 - Involvement with drugs or alcohol
- Social isolation; unwillingness or inability to connect with others
 - Commission of serious acts of social delinquency
 - Nightmares or chronic inability to sleep
- Significant decline in personal appearance or hygiene

STAGES OF GRIEF

As do adults, children and adolescents pass through multiple "stages" of grieving when a loved one dies. However, because they have limited life experiences, the symptoms of grieving will often be different than those of adults and may vary greatly depending on the child's cognitive and emotional maturity.

The following five stages of grief/loss are experienced by children, adolescents and adults. These stages may occur in the order presented; however, this is not always the case. The sequence and timing of stages is really not as important as the individual's acknowledgement that the central emotion of each stage is somehow present.

Individuals tend to will move back and forth between stages until healing is achieved. Meaningful events as holidays, birthdays, and other special occasions may also impact how and when these stages are experienced.

1. Denial and/or shock

In this stage, the child is faced with a painful event or circumstance, and either refuses to believe that anything has happened at all, or searches for a less painful explanation. For example, the child may express a belief that someone who has died is merely "on vacation" and will return soon. This stage usually does not last long in relation to the other stages, but in rare cases it may persist for weeks or months.

2. Anger

As the child begins to emerge from the stage of Denial and see the "truth," an overwhelming sense of anger or rage may be felt. The expression of this anger often has a "Why me?" quality to it. Also, the person may feel jealousy or resentment towards others to whom a similar event has not happened. If not dealt with persistently and sensitively, this anger may persist well into adulthood, with the developing child/adult anticipating that others will abandon her, feeling angry that the world is an unfair and unsafe place, and being reluctant to develop closeness/intimacy with others for fear that something bad will happen.

3. Bargaining

During this stage, the child may feel guilty about his own perceived role in the loss. For example, he may tell himself that if he had been a "better" child, the loss might not have occurred. The child may also attempt to enter into agreements with God or family members to postpone having to deal with the inevitable pain of the loss. For example, he may pray that God will "undo" the loss if the child himself behaves better.

4. Depression

In this stage the child may be overwhelmed with feelings of sadness, regret, guilt, and even hopelessness that he will ever feel better. While it may be excruciatingly painful for adults to watch their children deal with these feelings, It is necessary and beneficial for the child to be allowed to verbally express his sense of sorrow and loss. (Thoughts of suicide may be present, and the child may even express a desire to join a deceased love one "in heaven." Caring adults should directly ask the child if he is having such thoughts, and should find out if he has a plan and a means for carrying out these thoughts. If so, professional help should be sought immediately.)

5. Acceptance

The child moves toward understanding and acknowledging that the loss has occurred and that life will go on -- however changed and different it is. In this stage a sense of healing should emerge, and the child should begin to return to normal pre-loss activities and relationships with a sense of hope for the future. In addition to the obvious loss caused by the death of a parent or loved one, there are other losses which may trigger the grieving process. Examples of these losses are:

- A pet dying or running away
- A move to a new location
- A change in schools
- An illness or new physical disability
- Family changes, especially parents' separation or divorce
- Sexual or physical abuse (loss of personal safety)
- Dissolution of a significant relationship

GRIEVING ISSUES OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Grief/loss issues for children and adolescents need to be addressed because problems can escalate. Children and adolescents have a limited understanding of themselves and suffer from a lack of experiences with death and grieving issues. Support is needed after a loss, but circumstances can either hinder or delay meeting their needs. Comfort and support is often given to the adults in a family, and the children are sometimes forgotten. In addition, adults are often caught up in their own grief and have little capacity to give support to kids because of their own struggle.

The following are some of the more common circumstances which impact the grief process of children and adolescents:

- The messages and attitudes parents, guardians and care providers deliver to the grieving child are very important to the child. Unfortunately, these same individuals often fail to deliver therapeutic support due to a lack of skills.
- Adults in the home are also likely struggling with grief and are often unaware of, or unable to respond to, their child's needs. Thus, the child's crucial need for support may go unmet.

- Natural life cycles in modern society are not as visible as in the past, because elderly, sick and dying patients are placed in institutions away from everyone. In addition, our mobile society separates families, inevitably denying kids the enriching experience of involvement in the lives of elderly relatives.
- The lack of exposure to death in our society. Advances in medicine have contributed to reducing the visibility of death in American life. Reductions in infant mortality, the extension of the expected life span, surgical procedures, and miracle medications have made death less visible. With limited visibility, death and dying are not dealt with as openly and frequently as they used to be.
- Advertisements, commercials and testimonials abound with claims for "turning back the clock" and postponing the aging process. The essential message is that aging and death are unattractive concepts and that we should fear the inevitability of growing old and dying.

STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATION

Talking to children about grief and loss is complex because so many factors influence the situation. Whenever providing assistance, it is necessary to become familiar with the following general suggestions:

- Tailor your communication to the developmental level of the child.
- Approach the conversation in a quiet, honest and straightforward manner.
 - Be comforting, hopeful, and sensitive.
- Remember that your attitude is as important as your words.

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPORT

- Communication is crucial and should be adjusted to the developmental and emotional needs of the child or teen. You cannot tell someone else how to feel or how not to feel. Expression of one's feelings is a natural and very necessary part of the healing process.
- Death and aging need to be viewed as a natural part of life, as a natural outcome of living. Plants, animals, and all living things eventually die. The death of a loved one can be seen as a natural way to start educating children about life cycles.
- Use good listening skills when speaking with children about grief and loss, because expression of emotions and feelings is a key to the healing process.
- Honesty and consistent messages promote a sense of security. Also, a good measure of patience may be necessary as sometimes questions will be asked repeatedly. This repetition is also part of the healing process.
- It is best to say briefly and simply what caused the loved one's death. Younger children may need additional reassurance that death itself is not "contagious" or sure to be repeated anytime soon.
- Help your child understand death using the language of your family religion. (You may wish to consult a clergy person to help you with this.) Sadly, a child's concept of a loving God can be

- destroyed if she comes to believe that death was God's way of punishing the deceased loved one, or even the child herself, for sinful or "bad" behavior.
- Encourage your child to talk frequently about the deceased person. Sharing memories and even funny stories can help the child release bottled-up and "stuck" emotions, which will aid in the healing process.
 - Children tend to idealize a deceased loved one, forgetting that the loved one was human and therefore not always perfect. You can help your child gently regain a balanced sense of perspective by encouraging him to remember a wide range of qualities in the loved one.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEENS

Adolescents often have trouble finding and maintaining a sense of overall perspective. These simple suggestions are intended to be "springboards" for creatively addressing your teen's feelings of emptiness, sadness and depression.

- Think of something you would enjoy doing for someone and then do it!
 - Give something away to someone who needs it
 - Do deep breathing exercises
 - Do a favor for someone without being asked
 - Play with your pet or take him for a walk
 - Take a relaxing bath or shower
 - Go for a long walk with a friend
 - Let those you love know it!
 - Listen to some favorite, happy music
 - Sing, dance
- Think of something you have wanted to do and then make plans to accomplish it
 - Call a friend or relative who has an optimistic attitude toward life
 - Read a good book
 - Forgive someone at whom you've been angry
 - Organize a fun group activity
 - Buy some flowers and plant them
 - Work out
 - Donate items to a needy cause
 - Pray or meditate

SUGGESTIONS FOR DIFFERENT AGES

- Infancy to 2 Years of Age

Infants don't understand the concept of death. They do, however, sense the emotions of those around them. They will react strongly to separation from a major caretaker. Some of the most common reactions are as follows:

- Crying
- Regression in toilet habits

- Crankiness
- Clinging behavior
- 3 to 5 years of Age

The meaning of death is understood in degrees and can be observed when children act out dying scenes during play. Children of this age cannot interpret death and the concept of “forever”. They also believe death is reversible as seen on T.V. and in movies. However, developing verbal skills will result in them being increasingly capable of expressing sorrow and sadness. Children of this age will also be very sensitive to the emotional climate in the home. Regressive behaviors (that is, behaviors characteristic of an earlier developmental stage) are also common.

- 6 to 10 Years of Age

At this age, the child understands the potential for her own death and therefore may become fearful of dying. And because of cognitive and language development, the child can communicate these fears. Your communication with her can be facilitated by carefully and sensitively sharing your own perspectives on loss, death, etc.

Reactions range from intense emotions to wanting to "fix" things for others who are in emotional distress. Emotional reactions are sometimes delayed in this age group.

- 10 to 13 Years of Age

Death is very real and personal during this stage. Children also realize no one is immortal, including themselves. There are many questions, especially regarding the biological aspects of death. It is important that the youth be encouraged to vent his feelings to begin the healing process.

- Adolescent

Adult-like thought processes are beginning to develop, as well as a conceptual understanding of death. Adolescents often experience a heightened sense of vulnerability due to their ability to contemplate the inevitability of their own death at some time in the future.

Sometimes expressions of grief are repressed due to a strong desire to fit in with their peers. Often, they choose not to express their intense yearning for the return of a deceased loved one. This is because they are afraid of being seen as different from their peers or as weak and vulnerable.

Social support is important, and a family member or other adult may need to insist that the teenager talk through the grief with a trusted professional. (A supportive peer group may also be helpful, but will likely not be sufficient to provide the mature perspective necessary to recover from a deep loss.)

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Grief and Loss Related Books and References

[The Dead Bird](#)

by Margaret Wise Brown

There is a little bird lying on its side. Its eyes are closed and there's no heart beat. The children are very sorry, so they decide to say good-bye. In the forest, they dig a hole for the bird, and cover it with warm ferns and flowers. Finally, their sweet song sends the little bird on its way.

[Why Did Grandpa Die? A Book About Death](#)

by Barbara Shook Hazen

[Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain...](#)

by Bryan Mellonie, Robert R. Ingpen (Contributor)

A pet . . . a friend . . . or a relative dies, and it must be explained to a child. This sensitive book is a useful tool in explaining to children that death is a part of life and that, eventually, all living things reach the end of their own special lifetimes

[Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs](#)

Tommy is four years old, and he loves visiting the home of his grandmother, Nana Downstairs, and his great-grandmother, Nana Upstairs. But one day Tommy's mother tells him Nana Upstairs won't be there anymore, and Tommy must struggle with saying good-bye to someone he loves.

Updated with new, full-color illustrations, this classic story will continue to win the hearts of readers of all ages.

[Someone Special Died](#)

by Joan Singleton Prestine, Virginia Kylberg (Illustrator)

This sensitive series offers a comforting and realistic look at some of the critical emotional issues that today's children face. These five extraordinary books are wonderful resources for children and the parents, teachers, and counselors who care for them.

[About Dying](#)

by Sara Bonnett Stein

[Saying Good-bye to Grandma](#)

by Marcia Sewall (Illustrator), Jane Resh Thomas (Author)

Susie is curious about what will happen when she travels with her parents to attend her grandmother's funeral in the small town where her mother grew up.

[The Tenth Good Thing About Barney](#)

by Judith Viorst, Erik Blegvad

"In simple phrases narrated by a child whose cat, Barney, has just died, the author succinctly and honestly handles both the emotions stemming from the loss of a beloved pet and the questions about the finality of death which naturally arise in such a situation. . . . An unusually good book that handles a difficult subject straightforwardly."--The Horn Book

[I'll Always Love You](#)

by Hans Wilhelm

In this gentle, moving story, Elfie, a dachshund, and her special boy progress happily through life together. One morning Elfie does not wake up. The family grieves and buries her. The watercolor illustrations, tender and warm in color and mood, suit the simple text perfectly

[Talking about Death : A Dialogue Between...](#)

by Earl A. Grollman

Why do people die? How do you explain the loss of a loved one to a child? This book is a compassionate guide for adults and children to read together, featuring a readalong story, answers to questions children ask about death, and a comprehensive list of resources and organizations that can help.

[For Those Who Live: Helping Children...](#)

by Kathy Latour

[150 Facts About Grieving Children](#)

by Erin Linn

[Living With Death and Dying](#)

by Elisabeth Md. Kubler-Ross

In this compassionate and moving guide to communicating with the terminally ill, Dr. Elisabeth Küebler-Ross, the world's foremost expert on death and dying, shares her tools for understanding how the dying convey their innermost knowledge and needs. Expanding on the workshops that have made her famous and loved around the world, she shows us the importance of meaningful dialogue in helping patients to die with peace and dignity.

[On Children and Death: How Children and...](#)

by Elisabeth Md. Kubler-Ross

On Children and Death is a major addition to the classic works of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, whose On Death and Dying and Living with Death and Dying have been continuing sources of strength and solace for tens of millions of devoted readers worldwide. Based on a decade of working with dying children, this compassionate book offers the families of dead and dying children the help -- and hope -- they need to survive. In warm, simple language, Dr. Kübler-Ross speaks directly to the fears, doubts, anger, confusion, and anguish of parents confronting the terminal illness or sudden death of a child.