

Grief and Loss

A Guide for Parents and their Children

The information contained in this booklet was initially compiled by a group of professional counselors who specialize in grief and loss. Helping children cope with the loss of a loved one is a difficult, yet critically important task. While children are able to comprehend death and react to their loss, they are extremely vulnerable. Adults must provide the special attention, support, and education that they require to help them cope successfully. If we embrace and empower children in difficult moments, they will be better able to deal with such realities of life.

"When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight."

~Kahlil Gibran

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Helping Children Understand Grief and Loss

Introduction

Losing a loved one can be terribly difficult for both children and parents, who are themselves deeply affected. Waves of grief can affect one at any time and any place, even many months or years after the death. As you cope with your own emotions on a daily basis, it is important to understand that children may experience the loss in profoundly different ways.

While family, cultural or religious beliefs will influence how you specifically use the suggestions offered herein, it is hoped that this general overview of the difficulties that may be encountered during your bereavement, and how to deal with them, will be helpful.

How Children Understand Death

Children's understanding of death is shaped as they grow and develop. How they cope with loss varies from child to child, and typically alternates between feeling playful and sad. The age of a child and his relationship to the deceased will affect his comprehension and emotional reaction, as will earlier experiences with death. Family, religious and cultural beliefs will also make a difference.

Children grieve differently from adults. A child's age should be taken into account as you try to understand his reactions to death. Normally, a child will exhibit characteristics from more than one of the following stages:

Infants-Toddlers (Birth-2 years of age)

At this age, although children will not possess an understanding of death, they will sense loss. They can become upset if their routines, such as meal or bath times and sleeping schedules, are changed. They may become fearful if they are separated from a parent or their usual caregiver.

Reactions to any of the above may result in increased restlessness, irritability and crying, or a need to be touched and held. Other changes in behavior may include increased temper tantrums or other intense feelings. Eating and sleeping patterns may also be affected.

You can help your child by providing simple and honest explanations to any questions. Always tell him where you are going and when you'll come back. In spite of your own feelings of disconnection and grief, try to keep his normal daily routines intact. Make an effort to comfort your child with a favorite toy, blanket, etc, and give him as much physical affection as possible.

Preschool (3-5 years)

Children at this age may believe that the dead are only sleeping, that the deceased has simply gone

away and will return, or in some cases, that they themselves have caused the death. They may be afraid that they, too, will die. Violence and death on TV or in movies may also influence their understanding of death. In some cases, they may associate going to the hospital with dying.

Behavior may include aggression (kicking, biting, pushing, yelling, etc), or regression to an earlier stage (bedwetting, thumb sucking, clinging, crying, or baby talk.) Children may exhibit anxiety about being separated from a parent or caregiver. They may frequently or unexpectedly want to talk about death. Their feelings may often alternate between playfulness and sadness.

You can help by giving simple and honest answers. Explanations of death that are age-appropriate and easy to understand are best, such as, "The body stopped working," or "The dead person cannot eat, play, or feel pain." It is best to avoid using words that have more than one meaning, such as "passed away" or "gone away," "taken from us," "put to rest," or "sleeping." Instead, use words such as "dead, died, and death." Listen carefully to what your child says, and be ready to discuss what he or she is thinking or feeling. Explain why others are sad and crying. Help your child to understand what may become different in his life without the deceased, as well as what will stay the same. It is important to provide reassurance that your child will be well cared for, did not cause the death, and cannot "catch it" as if it were a cold.

School Age (6-9 years)

The finality of death is a concept that can be understood by children this age. Their understanding, however, may be influenced by images from television and movies, scary books and other experiences, and they may imagine angels, skeletons, ghosts or spirits as representations of death. School-aged children may also believe that death will not happen to them, or that they can avoid death by being good.

Common reactions to grief include acting as if nothing happened, and/or reverting to younger behaviors such as bedwetting, clinging, thumb sucking, crying, and baby talk. Children may alternate between playing and feeling sad, and death may become a common theme in their play. Expect them to ask many questions, and possibly to develop learning problems or other issues at school. They may also exhibit physical reactions to the death, such as changes in appetite and sleep patterns, headaches and abdominal pain.

You can help your child by providing simple, honest answers and explaining why people are sad and crying. Give explanations of death that are easy to understand; for example, explain that the body stopped working and can no longer eat, play, or feel pain. Use direct words such as dead, died and death, rather than those having more than one meaning.

Your child should be encouraged to express any concerns and fears. Listen carefully, and be ready

to address her thoughts and feelings. Explain that such feelings may come and go, and convey to her what may be different, as well as what will stay the same without the person who died. Reassure your child that she will be taken care of, that she cannot “catch” the same affliction, and that she didn’t cause the death.

Encourage your child to express her feelings through writing, drawing, creating a memory box or scrapbook, etc., and provide resources such as books, journals, and music. Finally, it is a good idea to inform your child’s school of the death, so that additional support may be provided.

School-Age (9-12 years)

While children at this age are better able to understand the meaning of physical death, their thinking and reasoning is still not fully developed. They do, however, understand the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. Their understanding of death may be based upon what they have learned and experienced, and they may want to know more scientific or detailed facts about the death.

Reactions common to this age group are feelings of sadness and helplessness, guilt, holding back emotions, and difficulty accepting the death. They may be concerned about how they will be treated by others, and worry about how others are coping. Some may try to assume more responsibility than they can handle, and there may be changes in their school performance, such as trouble concentrating, getting along with others, or development of learning problems.

You can help by providing simple, honest answers. Your child should understand that he can talk openly about his fears and concerns, and you must listen closely to what he says. Talk to your child about what he is feeling and thinking, and explain that such feelings may come and go. Help your child understand what may be different and what will remain the same in your lives without the deceased. A friend or trained professional, such as a school counselor, social worker, clergy, therapist or doctor, may offer additional support. Inform your child's school of the death so that additional support may be provided there, as well. As with younger ages, books, journals and music can provide support for this age group. Encourage your child to express his feelings creatively.

Adolescents (12-18 years)

Adolescents may view death as would an adult, and are able to comprehend the scientific facts of death. They can distinguish between reality and fantasy, right and wrong, and they understand that death is something that happens to everyone. Teens may need to discuss their spirituality, which is often influenced by friends and others, and which may be challenged by the death of a loved one.

Although adolescents may not want or be able to ask for help, watch for feelings of sadness, anger, regret and even guilt. They may become depressed, separate from friends and family, and/or try risk-taking behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, and increased sexual behavior. Sometimes they may

act as if nothing has happened at all, but changes in school performance may signify inner turmoil.

You can help your adolescent struggle with grief and loss by talking openly with her about her fears and concerns by providing reassurance. Friends or trained professionals can help, as can teachers, coaches, and counselors at school. Include your teen in the decision-making process regarding family matters such as planning the funeral, choosing personal items, and future plans, but be aware of how much she can handle. Physical contact with your adolescent can be a comfort, as can books, journals, music, and other supportive resources used to express her feelings.

***"When someone you love becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure."
~Author Unknown***

Helping Children Cope with Grief and Loss

Children will react to your grief and emotions as well as their own feelings. Your own healthy expression of grief will help them understand that crying is a normal part of mourning. Children should also be encouraged to express their own very personal feelings of loss.

How a child learns to cope will depend on the emotional support provided. It is important to include children in the grieving process, such as involving them in planning the funeral or memorial service, as well as more informal family or cultural customs. For example, you may encourage a child to plant a tree in remembrance of the loved one, or to create a memory book. It is also very helpful to share favorite memories of the deceased in an intimate setting of family or friends.

Children need the opportunity to say good bye to the loved one, although this may be emotionally difficult. Participation in funerals and other memorial services can help them to mourn, share their feelings, and continue to heal. Give simple explanations regarding all of these services beforehand.

Children are often restless and unable to sit through a funeral. Be sensitive to their needs and reactions. It may be helpful to enlist another adult who can provide comfort and assistance, answer questions and give further explanation about what is being seen and heard. Children may wonder what will happen at the funeral, who will be there, what they are supposed to do or say, and what will happen after the ceremony.

Explaining Death to Children

You may not have all the answers, but you should try to respond honestly to the many questions your child will ask about death. It may be difficult, but it is important to tell the truth about the cause of death, including illness, fatal injury, suicide and murder. Avoid using confusing descriptions

of death, such as “passed away,” “taken from us” or “sleeping.” Choose your words carefully. The following suggestions may help to define terms unfamiliar to most children.

Bury – to place the urn or coffin in the ground

Cemetery - a place where people who die are buried

Coffin (or Casket) - a box that contains the person who died

Grave - a hole in the ground at the cemetery where the coffin or urn is buried. The hole is then covered with dirt.

Cremation - burning a dead body to ashes. Some people choose to be cremated. Cremation is used instead of keeping the body in a coffin.

Dead - the body is no longer living and has stopped working. The dead person doesn't breathe, walk, eat, sleep, or feel any pain.

Embalm - to remove body fluids from the dead person and to add a liquid chemical that keeps the dead body together.

Funeral (or Memorial Service) - a ceremony to honor and remember the person who died. This can take place in many different locations, including a funeral home, mortuary, church, synagogue, mosque, or at a cemetery.

Headstone (Grave, Monument, or Plaque) - the headstone lists the person's name, date of birth, date of death, and often a few words in loving memory. The headstone marks where the body of the person who died is kept.

Hearse - a special type of vehicle used for taking the casket or coffin to the funeral or cemetery

Mausoleum - a building in a cemetery where caskets or urns are placed instead of being buried in the ground

Morgue - a place where the person who died is prepared for burial or cremation

Urn - a container that holds the ashes of someone who died and been cremated. Explain what will be done with the ashes based upon your family traditions and beliefs.

Adult Reactions to Death

As mentioned above, children will react to your expression of grief. Mourning the death of a loved one -- especially a child and all the hopes and dreams you had for them -- is probably the most

painful experience an adult will ever encounter. In addition to children, your own parents, brothers, sisters, other relatives and friends are also experiencing grief, and are suffering as they watch you grieve. They may feel helpless to comfort you, or may offer you means of support that you may not be receptive to at the time. Everyone experiences grief differently. Try to recognize these variations in order to support those around you and accept support in return, which may help you to heal, as well.

Expressions of Grief

There are expressions of grief that are common to us all, such as disbelief and shock, anger, depression, and/or sadness. A feeling of restlessness or a desire to withdraw can occur, as well as a sense of personal responsibility or guilt about the death. One may lose the ability to concentrate, or experience changes in sleep patterns and eating habits. Personal relationships may be affected due to changes in behavior such as impatience and emotional outbursts. Work performance may be hampered, as well.

It is important to recognize such reactions and help yourself by eating well, getting plenty of rest, exercising and enjoying nature. Try to pamper yourself so that you can, in turn, care for others. It is also a good idea to share any concerns with family and friends, and to put off any big decisions until a later time.

Grief doesn't have time limitations, and may return periodically and unexpectedly for many years. If grieving continues to interfere with your daily life and the support of family and friends isn't enough, you may wish to seek the guidance of a professional grief counselor.

Spirituality

Following the death of a loved one, your spiritual faith may be a source of great comfort, or you and your family may find your beliefs shaken. You may become angry and attribute blame, or you may turn the blame inward, feeling guilt and confusion. These completely normal responses may deepen your feelings of helplessness, even despair.

You may have personal spiritual practices, prayers and readings that will comfort you and those around you. Some choose to honor the dead by reserving a special time or place in the home for meditation or other shared rituals. This may include lighting candles, having a place of honor for objects used or worn by the deceased, and placing flowers by a favorite picture of the beloved.

Words are often a great source of comfort and inspiration, helping adults and children alike to remember the deceased. A special prayer, poem or story can strengthen the bond you all still feel with the departed.

Children may have their own spiritual beliefs shaken, asking why God has allowed this to happen.

They may also wonder where the deceased is now (i.e. “Where is heaven?”). Try to answer these questions honestly, yet remain sensitive to their own personal expressions and beliefs. Many factors influence children’s spirituality: developmental age, the influence of those around them, books, and family tradition. Children gain a sense of spirituality from your own beliefs, as well as that of teachers, relatives, caregivers, and even their peers. Below is a brief guide that may help you understand how spirituality can influence the way a child experiences death, depending on his age and development.*

Infants/Toddlers/Preschoolers (Birth-age 5) find comfort in your presence. Their interactions with parents and other adults who are important in their lives and who care for them form the basis for their spirituality. Your discipline and guidance through words, songs, stories and action will help them develop a spiritual sense. Their familiarity with the sights, sounds and smells found in a particular religious setting and within its supportive community may bring them comfort and support so that they can ask questions they are pondering such as, “When I die, where will I go?”

School-age children (ages 6-9) find friends to be important in their lives, and may experience God as a friend, as well. Sharing a story from a holy book or perhaps a special, non-religious book may encourage your child to discuss his feelings about death. He may relate to a character or person in a story, and be able to discuss his feelings through that means. Common questions or comments might include, “I want to go to heaven, too”, “Why did they die?”, “Why can’t God make them better?”, and “Am I being punished?”

Older School-Age (ages 9-12) may question and be angry at God; feeling that the death of their loved one “wasn’t fair.” Fairness and justice come under scrutiny as they question the existence and goodness of a higher power, and they may need to talk to you about their feelings. You will need to reassure them that such questions and feelings are quite normal.

Adolescents (ages 12-18) are influenced by their peers or others with whom they form relationships. The spirituality within which they were raised may come under question, enabling them to relate to it in their own way. It is during these years that their religious community, including youth groups, can offer support.

**Adapted from "Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development" James W. Fowler, Harper San Francisco, October, 1995.*

Working together to Understand

Children will come to understand that feelings and emotional expressions of grief and loss are natural and normal. Throughout the process they will look to you, their parent, for guidance, reassurance, and support as together you learn to cope with this difficult, but very real part of life.