

Grief and How to Help Your Child

Bereavement is the state of having lost a significant other to death.

Grief is the personal response to the loss.

Mourning is the public expression of that loss.

Symptoms of “Normal” Grief

Grief reactions vary depending on who we are, who we lost, our relationship with that person, the circumstances around their passing, and how much their loss affects our day-to-day functioning. Different people may express grief differently and you may even have different grief responses between one loss and another.

Reactions to grief and loss include not just emotional symptoms, but also behavioral and physical symptoms. These reactions can often change over time. All are normal for a short period of time.

Cognitive	Physical	Emotional	Behavioral
❖ Confusion, disorientation ❖ Difficulty concentrating ❖ Memory impairment ❖ Thoughts of wanting to join the deceased	❖ Achy, stiff muscles ❖ Changes in appetite ❖ Changes in sleep pattern ❖ Dizziness, vertigo ❖ Fatigue, exhaustion ❖ Headaches ❖ Nausea, stomach aches, intestinal problems ❖ Pounding heartbeat, tightness in chest ❖ Restlessness ❖ Weakened immune system	❖ Anger ❖ Anxiety ❖ Sadness ❖ Denial ❖ Depression ❖ Frustration ❖ Guilt ❖ Helplessness ❖ Irritability ❖ Loneliness, isolation ❖ Numbness ❖ Relief the deceased's pain has ended ❖ Shame ❖ Shock, disbelief ❖ Worry	❖ Accident-prone ❖ Frequent crying ❖ Loss of interest in usual activities ❖ Nightmares ❖ Over-activity ❖ “Paranormal” experiences ❖ Withdrawal from family and friends

Symptoms that are not normal and may signal the need to talk to a professional include: Use of drugs, alcohol, violence, and thoughts of killing oneself.

Understanding of Death by Age Group

Toddlerhood: At this stage, death has very little meaning and is not seen as permanent. Toddlers will pick up on the emotions around them and may exhibit fear and anxiety as a result. Even if there is a past experience of death for your toddler, they may still struggle to understand the relationship between life and death.

Preschool-age: Children at this age may begin to understand that adults fear death and may view death as temporary or reversible. It is often explained to children in this stage at “went to heaven.” It is not advised for death to be explained as “sleep.” Preschool-age children’s experience with death is influenced by those around them. They may be curious and ask “why?” and “how?” They may also feel their actions caused the loss and feel guilt or shame. They may also not understand how their parents could not have been protectors in the situation and prevented the death.

School-age: School-aged children have more of an understanding of death, knowing that everyone dies and it is permanent. Death may be personified at this age as an angel or ghost. School-age children are very curious and may ask more complex questions, such as about the process of death and what happens afterwards. As death becomes more realistic to them, they may begin to fear their own death, as well as the unknown, loss of control and separation from family and friends.

Teenager: Past experiences and emotional development continue to influence a teen’s concept of death. Most teens will understand that death is permanent. By this stage, they may or may not have experienced a loss (family, friend or pet). They may want to have their religious or cultural rituals observed.



How to Support Your Child

It is important to help support your child through their loss and at their own pace. Some ways to help support your child are to:

- provide adequate (age appropriate) information about the death
- address their fears and anxieties
- reassure them that they are not to blame
- carefully listen
- acknowledge and accept their feelings and grief
- provide a sense of safety in the world
- respect their own way of coping
- help with overwhelming emotions
- involve and include them in rituals and anniversaries
- provide opportunities to remember the person who has died

Grief	
Comfort	Support
Don't	Do
www.thefuneralfriend.com	
Goal is to take away or ease the pain.	Goal is to be a supportive presence bereaved can lean on. To provide help and assistance.
Search for a silver lining.	Allow the pain to exist.
Focus only on what you can say to make the person feel better. This often leads to phrases that begin with 'At least...' or 'Don't despair...'	Actively listen, acknowledge and validate the person's thoughts and emotions, sit quietly if appropriate.
Push the person towards feeling better. Encourage the person to be strong.	Allow the person to grieve in a way that feels natural. Meet the person where they are in their grief and follow their lead.

How to Help Your Child Explore and Express Their Feelings

1. Talk openly with your child
2. Create a memory box
3. Make photographs available
4. Create a photo album/scrapbook/journal of memories
5. Put together questionnaires that help create a portrait of the person they lost (favorite food, color, music)
6. Create rituals



Grief

7. Seek professional assistance (therapy, support groups, etc.)

- The Community Hospice provides free support services for anyone who has experienced the death of a family member or friend. These services are available to everyone, regardless of whether the loved one was a hospice patient.
- All of the bereavement services are **free of charge** and include:
 - Grief Support Groups - for adults grieving a family member or friend.
 - Wave Riders - a weekly support group for families with grieving children.
 - Camp Erin - a weekend overnight camp for grieving children aged 6-17 years old.
 - Community Support - education, training, outreach and support related to grief and loss.

Recommended Reading

For Parents:

- ❖ Teen Grief: Caring for the Grieving Teenage Heart
- ❖ A Parent's Guide to Managing Childhood Grief: 100 Activities for Coping, Comforting, & Overcoming Sadness, Fear, & Loss by Katie Lear

For Children:

- ❖ The Invisible String by Patrice Karst
- ❖ The Memory Box: A Book About Grief by Joanna Rowland Illustrated by Thea Baker
- ❖ I Miss You: Grief and Mental Health Books for Kids by Pat Thomas and Lesley Harker

For Adolescents:

- ❖ Grief Recovery for Teens: Letting Go of Painful Emotions with Body-Based Practices by Coral Popowitz MSW
- ❖ The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens by Alan D Wolfelt PhD

Further Resources

Community Hospice (hospicegriefservices.com)

David Kessler (www.grief.com)

National Alliance for Grieving Children (www.nagc.org)

Adapted from:

CCP IBH Grief Education

Kidshealth.org

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