

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