

Navigating Children's Grief: How to Help Following a Death

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Possible Behaviors	How to Help
Birth–2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No understanding of death Child does not have words for feelings Aware of the absence of loved one Notices changes in routine Notices changes in family emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Longing Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one Fears of being abandoned Anxiety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Crying Sickliness Indigestion Thrashing Rocking Throwing Sucking, biting Sleeplessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance Maintain routines Meet immediate physical needs Include the child in the mourning process when possible Be gentle & patient
3-5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No understanding of permanence of death To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip May wonder what deceased is doing Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear Sadness Insecurity Confusion Anger Irritable Agitated Worried Guilty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regressive behaviors Repetitive questions Withdrawn Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings Interested in dead things Acts as if death never happened Intense dreams Physical complaints Crying Fighting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow the child to regress Give physical contact Encourage children to play & have fun Allow safe ways to express feeling Give simple & truthful answers to questions Maintain structure and routines Answer repetitive questions Let the child cry Talk (reflective listening) Include child in family rituals & mourning
6-9 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands that death is final Interested in the biology of death Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation & decay His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death Death is punishment Forming spiritual concepts Who will care for me if my caregiver dies Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sad Anger Lonely Withdrawn Worried Anxious Irritable Confusion Guilty Fear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regressive behaviors Specific questioning – looking for details Acts as if the death never happened Hides feelings Withdrawal Nightmares / sleep disturbances Concentration difficulties Declining or greatly improved grades Aggressive acting out Protective of surviving loved ones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow need to regress Give physical contact Have intentional times together Answer questions truthfully Watch for confusion Allow expression of feelings through verbal & physical outlets Encourage drawing, reading, playing, art, music, dance, acting, sports Let child choose how to be involved in the death & mourning Find peer support for the child Work with school to tailor workload

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Behaviors	How to Help
9-12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands the finality of death Denial His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) High death awareness (death may happen again) What if my caregiver dies? Formulating spiritual concepts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes Shock Sad Anger Confused Lonely Vulnerable Fear Worried Guilty Isolated Abandoned Anxious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regressive behavior & fluctuating moods Hides feelings Acts like death never happened Aggressive acting out Withdrawal Nightmares & sleep disturbances Concentration difficulties Changes in grades Talks about physical aspects of illness or death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort Expect & accept mood swings Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc. Find peer support groups Be available to listen and talk Answer questions truthfully Offer physical contact Give choices about involvement in death & mourning
12 years and up (teenagers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands the finality & universality of death Denial His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) High death awareness (death may happen again) May sense own impending death I need to be in control of feelings If I show my feelings, I will be weak Internal conflict about dependence & desiring independence May utilize spiritual concepts to cope 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief Shock Sad Anger Confused Lonely Vulnerable Fear Worried Guilty Isolated Abandoned Anxious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occasional regressive behavior Mood swings Hides feelings Acts like death never happened Acts out role confusion Aggressive acting out Withdrawal Nightmares & sleep disturbances Concentration difficulties Changes in grades Impulsive & high risk behavior Changes in peer groups Fighting, screaming, arguing Changes in eating patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort Expect & accept mood swings Allow hidden feelings unless there is risk of harm Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc. Support relationships with understanding adults Be available to listen and talk Answer questions truthfully Share your grief Watch for high risk behavior Find peer support groups Offer physical contact Allow choices about involvement in death & mourning



People Grieve Differently

Why We Grieve Differently

by Jinny Tesik, M.A.

We accept without question uniqueness in the physical world... fingerprints, snowflakes, etc. But we often refuse that same reality in our emotional world. This understanding is needed, especially in the grieving process. No two people will ever grieve the same way, with the same intensity or for the same duration.

It is important to understand this basic truth. Only then can we accept our own manner of grieving and be sensitive to another's response to loss. Only then are we able to seek out the nature of support we need for our own personalized journey back to wholeness and be able to help others on their own journey.

Not understanding the individuality of grief could complicate and delay whatever grief we might experience from our own loss. It could also influence us, should we attempt to judge the grieving of others - even those we might most want to help.

Each of us is a unique combination of diverse past experiences. We each have a different personality, style, various way of coping with stress situations, and our own attitudes influence how we accept the circumstances around us. We are also affected by the role and relationship that each person in a family system had with the departed, by circumstances surrounding the death and by influences in the present.

Past Experience

Past experiences from childhood on, have a great impact on how we are able to handle loss in the present. What other losses have we faced in our childhood, adolescence, or adulthood? How frightening were these experiences? Was there good support? Were we allowed to express our feelings in a secure environment? Has there been a chance to recover and heal from these earlier losses?

What other life stresses have been going on prior to this recent loss? Has there been a move to a new area? Were there financial difficulties, problems or illness with another member of the family or with us?

What has our previous mental health history been like? Have we had bouts with depression? Have we harbored suicidal thoughts? Have we experienced a nervous breakdown? Have we been treated with medication or been hospitalized?

How has our family cultural influences conditioned us to respond to loss and the emotions of grief (stoic father, emotional mother, etc.)?

Relationship with the Deceased

No outsider is able to determine the special bond that connects two people, regardless of the relationship, role or length of time the relationship has been in existence. Our relationship with the deceased has a great deal to do with the intensity and duration of our grief. What was that relationship? Was the deceased a spouse? A child? A parent? A friend? A sibling? A co-worker?

How strong was the attachment to the deceased? Was it a close, dependent relationship, or intermittent and independent? What was the degree of ambivalence (the love/hate balance) in that relationship?

It is not only the person, but also the role that person played in our life that is lost. How major was that role? Was that person the sole breadwinner, the driver, the handler of financial matters? The only one who could fix a decent dinner? Was that person a main emotional support, an only friend? How dependent were we on the role that person filled?

Circumstances Surrounding The Death

The circumstances surrounding the death; i.e., how the death occurred, are extremely important in determining how we are going to come to an acceptance of the loss.

Was the loss in keeping with the laws of nature as when a person succumbs to old age? Or was order thrown into chaos, as when a parent lives to see a child die? What warnings of loss were there? Was there time to prepare, time to gradually come to terms with the inevitable? Or did death come so suddenly that there was no anticipation of its arrival?

Do we feel that this death could have been prevented or forestalled? How much responsibility am I taking for this death?

Do we feel that the deceased accomplished what he or she was meant to fulfill in this lifetime? Was their life full and rewarding? How much was left unsaid or undone between the deceased and ourselves? Does the extent of unfinished business foster a feeling of guilt?

Influences in the Present

We have looked at the past, at the relationship, and how the loss occurred. Now we see how the influences in the present can impact how we are finally going to come to terms with a current loss.

Age and sex are important factors.

Are we young enough and resilient enough to bounce back? Are we old enough and wise enough to accept the loss and to grow with the experience? Can our life be rebuilt again? What opportunities does life offer now? Is health a problem?

What are the secondary losses that are the result of this death? Loss of income? Home? Family breakup? What other stresses or crises are present?

Our personality, present stability of mental health, and coping behavior play a significant role in our response to the loss.

What kind of role expectations do we have for ourselves? What are those imposed by friends, relatives and others? Are we expected to be the "strong one" or is it all right for us to break down and have someone else take care of us? Are we going to try to assume an unrealistic attempt to satisfy everyone's expectations, or are we going to withdraw from the entire situation?

What is there in our social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds that give us strength and comfort? What role do rituals play in our recovery? Do our religious or philosophical beliefs bring comfort or add sorrow and guilt? What kind of social support is there in our lives during this emotional upheaval?

Conclusion

When a person who is a part of our life dies, understanding the uniqueness of this loss can guide us in finding the support we will need and to recognize when help should come from outside family or friends.

When someone under our care or someone we'd like to help experiences a loss, this understanding is essential. Thus we can guard against a temptation to compare or to judge their grief responses to our own. The awareness of those factors that affect the manner, intensity and duration of grief, should enable us to guide the grieving person in seeking those forms of support suggested by the nature of their loss and the unique way it affects them.