



How Children and Adolescents Grieve

Infants and Toddlers

Understanding of Death

- Recognize absence of person despite inability to comprehend concept of death

How Grief is Expressed

- Loss may be demonstrated through detachment or withdrawal demonstrated by sluggishness, being quiet, unresponsive to a smile or a coo
- Sleeping and eating patterns could change
- May protest by crying more than usual, becoming more irritable or demanding
- May need more physical comforting, holding, rocking, nurturing
- May experience bladder or bowel disturbances

Helpful Approaches

- Provide consistent and secure routine as much as possible
- Provide physical, nurturing and loving contact

2-5 Year Olds

Understanding of Death

- Perceive death as temporary and reversible
- Need concrete explanations of death and its meaning (“the body stopped working”, “dead means never breathing, eating, talking, or moving again”) otherwise might get it mixed up with sleeping or being away on a trip
- May initially seem unaffected by news of death (“Oh, can I go play now?”)(may confuse death with sleep and may experience anxiety)
- May feel responsible for the death

How Grief is Expressed

- May express somatic complaints (stomach aches, headaches)
- May demonstrate “protest” in acting out behaviors (tantrums) or regression (return to bed-wetting, clinging, thumb-sucking)
- Frequently have fears and separation anxiety following death
- Take comfort in usual routines (meal time, play

time, bedtime)

- Deal with feelings in “approach-avoid” manner, demonstrating fleeting bouts of sadness, crying, anger, agitation

- May openly talk about death, even to strangers

Helpful Approaches

- Prepare child for daily routine, and funeral activities and events
- Use the words: dead and death. Do not say words such as: deceased, is sleeping, passed away, went away, resting, etc.
- Be open to discuss whatever comes up
- Include the child in funeral rituals

6-9 Year Olds

Understanding of Death

- Still employ “magical thinking”, so may have difficulty understanding permanence of death at first
- May see death as final but only something that happens to old people (and not to themselves)
- Curious about what happens to person when they die, and the biological process. Death may be thought of as a person or spirit (i.e. ghost, skeleton)
- May have difficulty expressing feelings when asking questions

How Grief is Expressed

- May have exaggerated fears about school and separation anxiety
- Often deal with feelings in “approach-avoid” manner, demonstrating fleeting bouts of sadness, crying, anger and agitation
- Strongly attuned to grief/emotional responses of key adults in their lives; may reflect adult moods in their moods
- May experience intense fear of other attachment figures dying
- Think their actions and words caused the death

Helpful Approaches

- Explain the physical process of dying, e.g. The body stops working

10-12 Year Olds

Understanding of Death

- Understand that Death is Permanent

How Grief is Expressed

- May experience school phobias and separation anxiety
- May express somatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches)
- May stop expressing grief to “protect” parents or siblings or to appear strong and “in control”
- Vulnerable to “parentification”, i.e. taking on adult roles to help grieving adult family members
- Think actions and words caused the death

Helpful Approaches

- Include in funeral arrangements and rituals
- Suggest making a memory/scrapbook, writing poems, journaling
- Encourage communication

Adolescents

Understanding of Death

- Understand that Death is Permanent

How Grief is Expressed

- Grief complicated by intense challenges of adolescence (increased independence and responsibilities, physical changes, sexuality, identity development)
- Commonly experience temporary decreases in school performance
- May experience depression, guilt, and concerns about things said or left unsaid
- Anger may manifest in tantrums, defiance, or withdrawal
- Think if they show their feelings, they will be weak
- Do not talk about their loved one dying because they don't want to appear different from their peers

Helpful Approaches

- Listen to your teen
- Set reasonable limits and handle serious behavior problems appropriately
- Tell other significant adults in your teen's life about the loss

Signs of Complicated Grief that May Require Professional Care

- May employ maladaptive behaviors to self-soothe and provide comfort (substance abuse, skipping school, shoplifting, etc)
- Pronounced self-blame or guilt
- Ongoing Nightmares/sleep disturbance
- Poor self care
- Excessive hopelessness
- Social isolation/extreme withdrawal
- Apparent absence of grief or unwillingness to discuss the loss
- Suicidal thoughts or plans