

Grief: Assisting children through trauma and loss

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Understanding the grief process

While the following stages commonly occur in the grief experience, it is important to remember that grief does not follow a defined pattern. These stages may be experienced repeatedly, in differing sequence and with differing intensity.

Denial is a shock absorber which temporarily reduces the full impact of the crisis, such as a person's unwillingness to talk about the loss. In the early stages denial isn't something that is wrong, however, problems can occur if it continues. Give permission to feel the feeling.

Anger/guilt often occurs due to a person's feeling of powerlessness over their loss. Questions include: How could he/she do this to me? Why would God allow it? How could this happen to someone at our school? Blaming others can also be a common response. It is important to admit the anger, identify the real source of the anger, and understand that it is okay to be angry. Seek healthy ways to express it such as strenuous physical activity, keeping a journal, sketching or talking with people you trust.

Sorrow/depression are evidenced by some or all of: crying, isolation, silence, a loss of energy, and an inability to sleep. Allow and encourage expressions of grief. Emphasize that crying is not a sign of weakness, rather it is facing and acknowledging loss. Recording thoughts in a journal can also be very healing. Activity is helpful for depression, although sometimes depression is so deep that even activity seems too difficult. Referral to the family physician is encouraged for depression that persists.

Bargaining is a means of trying to regain control or to make sense of what has occurred. This often takes the form of a promise to God that things will change if only He does something. The question "Why?" is very naturally asked through all stages but is perhaps most prevalent in the anger and the bargaining phase. The real problem cannot be faced until the "why" is abandoned and the person looks at "who, when, where and how" things happened. The reality of what has happened cannot be changed.

Acceptance and admission of our powerlessness in the situation is not quickly or easily reached. Having grieved we can move on with life. Emphasize that acceptance is not a matter of forgetting the person or minimizing the pain. In fact, it is a full acceptance that the loss was real, significant and painful.

Possible reactions by children ages 6 to 11

Children's fears and anxieties are based on an increasing awareness of real danger. Loss of prized possessions, especially pets, seems to hold special meaning. Imaginary fears that seem unrelated to the loss may appear as well. Regressive behaviour may appear such as bed wetting, clinging, and nightmares. Where the loss is associated with a disaster such as a fire, flood, etc., weather conditions (thunder, lightning, heavy winds) may trigger fears that the disaster will recur. Other reactions can include: irritability, disobedience, depression, headaches and visual or hearing problems.

How you can help

Take your children's fears seriously. A child's fear doesn't have to make sense. Being told that it is normal to feel afraid is reassuring.

Listen to what your children tell you. Knowing their fears will help you understand the situation.

Don't force your children to be brave or face what frightens them. The stronger the fear, the greater the need to confront it gradually and the longer it will take to overcome. Help by providing a night light, a flashlight by the child's bed or a friend to sleep overnight.

Explain the situation. Situations which are not understood cause the greatest fear.

Provide an atmosphere for children to talk freely about their fears. Often parents are reluctant due to the belief that this keeps painful memories alive and harms them.

Let them know that you experience fear. Talking about your own fears encourages children to talk about their experience.

Understanding children's night time fears

Traumatic events and loss increase children's fear of separation from parents. It is normal for children to seek the comfort of their parents' presence. Nightmares provide a way for children to work through their strong emotions. The frightening creatures and events encountered are as real as daily life.

How you can help

Increase time with your children during the day to help them feel more secure at night.

Provide opportunity for exercise and vigorous play to burn off tension and create fatigue.

Provide a comforting bedtime routine to contribute to a sense of well being.

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If your children get out of bed, lead them calmly back, reassuring them of your presence.

If your children call to you or cry, acknowledge their fear of separation. Leave a nightlight on and the door open until the child falls asleep.

If your children wake up frightened go to them and provide comfort. Try not to turn on a light or talk in a loud voice. Acknowledge the fear, and listen without interruptions. To calm your children, help by differentiating what is real and what is fantasy. Reassure them that you are near and that they are safe. If possible, stay until they are asleep. Allowing children to sleep on a mattress in your bedroom or in another child's room on a temporary basis may help.

If children are having increased numbers of nightmares or are extremely upset, seek the help of a school counsellor or public health nurse.

When does the hurting stop?

The events of recent days have, no doubt, been upsetting for you and your child. Traumatic events shake the world that we had considered safe and predictable. These events also create a high level of confusion and apprehension. This information sheet is intended to help you, as a parent, to understand and help your children through this difficult time.

Children exposed to a loss or sudden violent event experience intense feelings, including anxiety and fear. These feelings are very normal responses. They fear injury, death, being separated from family members, being left alone and experiencing a similar loss. These fears are very real to the child and should be accepted at face value by parents. This isn't to say that these reactions won't be upsetting or confusing but remember that reactions which occur as a result of loss are normal.

School avoidance

Children may refuse to go to school, have behaviour problems at school and/or experience difficulty concentrating. One reason for not going to school may be a fear of separating from parents. High achieving children may be afraid of doing poorly while low performers may find concentrating more difficult.

Encourage your child to attend school and to resume normal activities as soon as possible. Seek support from your child's teacher, school counsellor or principal.

Death and grieving

Tell children about the death of a loved one. Sometimes parents are so preoccupied with their own grief that they fail to consider their child's grief. This is particularly true when children do not demonstrate what we often consider the obvious signs of grief.

Others want to protect children from pain and sadness. These motives are understandable. Providing children with simple, honest, age appropriate information, gives them the right to grieve. Crying and other sorts of grief are healing and not a symptom to be controlled. Children should be encouraged to ask questions and respond as they feel.

It is important to remember that the absence of tears does not mean they do not feel grief. Communicate that grief lasts far longer than anyone expects although the intensity usually subsides. Certain events such as birthdays and holidays may result in a "revisitation" of grief.

Include children in funeral rituals in an age appropriate manner and explain the events surrounding the funeral. Avoid euphemisms (sleeping, passed away) and use the words death/dead. Provide family reassurance and support. When a parent dies, most children are fearful about what might happen to them should the remaining parent die. They need repeated gentle assurance that although their parent or relative has died and will not return, other family members will look after them. It is essential that all efforts be made to prevent any further break-up of the family after bereavement.

Caring for the caregiver

Disaster and loss can have a profound effect far beyond anything this brochure can address. Those in the midst of crisis understand that it is one thing to know helpful ideas; it is quite another issue to practice them. The whirlwind which results from pain and loss can only fully be understood by those in the situation.

Walt Whitman said, "I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person." At one level Whitman is describing the attitude needed to help people in pain but his words also point out that the wounds felt by those we love, are felt by us as well. In order to take care of yourself, be certain not to put unreasonable demands on yourself by trying to be all things to all people. Expectations and normal daily activities may need to be scaled down. Sleep needs to be taken.

Other sources of help

Loss and disaster wound many, even those who seem not to be touched by what occurred. Encourage openness to help from others; school counsellors, counselling clinics, hospice staff, Health Department personnel, and the clergy are just some of the resources available to assist you and your family. If you need help and don't know where to find it please contact your school staff or Student Support (604-595-6104).

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