

Parent Resources for Coping with Loss and Grief

Signs and symptoms of stress in children:

- Physical ailments such as stomach aches or headaches
- Separation difficulties (increased attachment to parents, upset about parents leaving for work, not wanting to leave parents to go to school)
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits (loss of appetite, overeating, nightmares)
- Regression to immature behavior (return to bedwetting, thumb sucking, “baby talk”) or to a less logical level of reasoning
- Unanticipated periods of crying
- Unspecified anger
- Loss of energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes in behavior- Withdrawal, Acting Out (aggression, tantrums)
- Joking about the event and making fun of it. Older children may take pleasure in scaring younger children with scary stories and then laughing at the innocence of the young children when the stories are believed.

Although any one behavior in and of itself may not necessarily be cause for alarm, it is important to address any changes you see by talking with the child about them. You need to try to communicate in a calm, caring and open manner that there is nothing too sad or too terrible to talk about with a caring adult and that they are not alone. It is important to keep in mind that there are no right or wrong feelings; therefore, you need to accept a child's feelings without making value judgments.

Warning signs that a child may need help coping:

- Extended and/or extreme instances of the above behaviors. Severe and long lasting and getting in the way of everyday life
- Extreme withdrawal
- Continual weeping or crying
- Persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event through intense recollections or dreams

- Prolonged lack of interest in their usual activities
- Risk-taking (putting oneself in dangerous situations)
- Suicidal talk or actions

Grieving:

- The style of grieving will differ depending on the age of the child, the relationship with the person who died, the suddenness of the death, etc.
- Grieving involves many feelings such as sadness, anger, abandonment, ambivalence, guilt, blame, etc.
- There is no one way or right way to grieve. All feelings must be validated.
- Children grieve in spurts. They will re-grieve through adolescence. It is important to be aware of the anniversary date of the death and other significant dates to the bereaved child.
- Children can grieve out of sync with others in the family.
- Adolescents grieve with their peers.

Commemorating:

- Commemorating is formally or informally remembering the person who died.
- Confirms the reality of the death and the value of human life.
- Involves student/faculty in the planning of the commemoration
- Do not dismiss school as a commemoration.
- All life must be commemorated. All life has value.
- Prepare the children and adolescents for rituals such as wakes and funerals.

Going on:

- Returning comfortably to regular activities
- Easiest and healthiest after the tasks of understanding, grieving and commemorating, although all tasks are circular, not linear, they can be revisited.
- Anticipate pain at anniversaries, and special times of remembering

- Going on is not about forgetting or loving that person any less
- Going on is a way we commemorate the life of a loved one.

Developmental Phases in Understanding Death:

Pre-adolescent (Ages 9-12)

- They have a more adult understanding of death. Death is final, irreversible and universal.
- They often see death as punishment for bad behavior, an acute sense of right and wrong
- They still revert to magical thinking
- They understand the biological aspects of death. Death is seen as an internal dysfunction that causes life to end.
- They are interested in the rituals for both pets and people
- They are concerned about how their world will change due to a particular death
- They tend to intellectualize death – Their thoughts are more available than their feelings. They want to keep life calm, they do not want to lose control. Sick humor as well as words like yeah, big deal, and so what, are often used.
- Drawings may include broken hearts, tears or barren trees as symbols

Adolescents (Ages 13-19)

- The normal adolescent tasks of separating from parents, establishing their own sexual identity, establishing their own value system, morality and career goals are complicated when a death occurs.
- They tend to distance themselves from the possibility of their own death
- They defy fate by engaging in high-risk activities. They drive fast, use drugs, alcohol, etc.

- They try to make sense out of life and death. They can be very philosophical as they “reconstruct” themselves. They need to make meaning of their tears.
- They observe and explore society’s attitudes about life and death. They may observe their own rituals. They need to be together with their peers.
- This is a time for powerful emotions vs. lifelong behavioral expectations.
- A death of a friend shatters all fantasies of immortality.
- They tend to deny the physical consequences of suicide.
- They do not want to be different.

Additional resources:

<http://www.hopkintonma.gov/home/government/departments/youth>

<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/coping-with-stress-2013-508.pdf>

<http://www.bmc.org/pediatrics-goodgrief/tipsforadults.htm>

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/griefwar.pdf

http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/age_related_reactions_to_a_traumatic_event.pdf