

Common Student Reactions to Loss and Grief

Children experience loss and grief in their own way. Factors that need to be considered as you work with the student include the age of the child or teenager, their personality, developmental stage, temperament as well as familial and cultural factors.

Normal Grief Responses

Typical grief responses may be seen through various behaviors, emotional responses, physical manifestations and thought patterns.

- **Behavior** – Sleep disturbance and differences from the child’s typical pattern, sleep interruption, social withdrawal, appetite changes, nightmares, anxiety over activities, going to school, being left alone, avoidant behavior (missing or skipping school, not engaging in friendship, sports or activities, etc.
- **Emotional Responses** – For each individual this will differ. There is NO right way to grieve; everyone has his or her own path with this. One may experience sadness, anxiety, guilt, shock, feeling numb, feeling lonely, worried. A sense of relief may be felt after the death of a loved one or a close individual who was suffering. This sense of relief may not be understood by the child and may lead to guilt.
- **Physical Manifestations** – common signs and symptoms a child may experience include changes in appetite (little or no appetite to overeating), feelings of being tired/low energy/lethargic, headaches, stomach aches, being hypersensitive to certain stimuli (loud noises, certain smells, etc).
- **Thought Patterns** – changes in a child’s thought process and reactions may occur, including nightmares, fears that did not exist before, confusion, difficulty concentrating for any length of time (may be seen in school, doing homework, watching television), denial about the loss of the deceased, etc.

Ages 14-18

Teens are usually in a place of growing independence. They may feel a need to hide their feelings of grief to show their control of themselves and their environment.

Teens often prefer to talk with peers rather than adults when they are grieving.

Teens are more likely to engage in high-risk behavior, especially after a death loss.

One young person expressed that her mom was always careful and followed all the safety rules, but died anyway. She asked, “Why should I be careful?”

As with all ages, maintain routines. If one parent died, be clear about who will care for them and what to expect if you die

It is important to remember that as a child grows they will continue to grieve their loss in different ways as they progress through each developmental stage.

Self Care Suggestions

• Take care of your physical needs

- Hydrate- Drink enough water to increase urination in order to remove adrenaline from your system. Adrenaline dehydrates the body.
- Eat well - Increase protein and decrease carbohydrates during times of change. Increase vegetable and fruit intake.
- Stay sober - It is recommended that you do not use alcohol or nonprescription drugs during high stress.
- Exercise – Do not exercise more than you normally do. If you do not exercise regularly, exercise gently. Plan to make exercise part of your regular routine.
- Sleep - Healing takes place during sleep. If there is difficulty falling asleep, consider restful and meditative activities that will assist you in getting to sleep. Try prayer, herbal teas, showers, hot baths, soothing music etc.

• Take care of your emotional needs:

- Get grounded – Sit comfortably and really feel your feet on the floor. Notice your butt in the chair. Observe your heart rate and your breath. Notice what happens as you pay attention to your system.
- Talk to friends, family, counselor, or cleric. Do not isolate. Carry a list of friends you care about, who support you no matter what, and who are available to talk at any hour, and vice versa.
- Write in your journal. Follow your spiritual practice, if you have one. Review your personal beliefs about meaning and purpose.
- Have fun, laugh. Laughter is a powerful elixir. Many people feel uncomfortable laughing or having any fun when life is feeling chaotic. This discomfort is common; however it is equally normal to find yourself laughing as part of healing and coping.

• Take good care of yourself while helping others:

- Continue to learn about normal reactions to change.
- Remember that you are responsible for your own attitudes and reactions. Recognize that feeling overwhelmed by change and chaos may signal a need for consultation or support.
- Recognize your own warning signs of stress – buddy up and commit to checking in with a partner. It may be difficult to assess your own reactions, especially as your personal trauma history may be triggered.
- Manage your work load – take breaks and set yourself manageable goals.

Parent Considerations for Children Attending Services

Consider your expectation and involvement in the service. Parents need to understand their own involvement as they decide whether to bring their child to a funeral or memorial service. If a parent is going to be involved in the service, they may want to ask a trusted person to accompany their children.

Consider what the child wants. If the child is adamant in not attending, this wish needs to be seriously considered. Generally, children appreciate the opportunity to make their own decisions about attendance. They may not be ready for this type of life experience. ASK a trusted individual to stay with the child during the service and connect with them immediately afterward. Although not physically present at the service, they may have questions or may feel guilty that they could not attend.

There is no magic age in which attendance at a service is recommended. The child's personality and developmental issues need to be taken into account. Explain the ritual of the service they will be attending. Considerations may include:

- Length and type of Service
- Open casket – if there is a body to view, explain that the deceased is not hurting, hungry or cold.
- Cremation – assure the child that the deceased was in no pain during cremation
- Projected emotional responses by those attending
- Child's development, temperament, capability to acclimate
- Child's relation to the deceased
- Child's wishes as to whether or not they want to attend. It is not recommended to force a child to attend
- Wake, Religious or Memorial Service, Burial Service - consider who may be there or the amount of people in attendance.
- Spending time with your child after the service is important as emotions may arise after the fact.
- Children are learning from their parent during this process. It is perfectly okay to cry and show emotion.
- Be prepared for many questions after the service. These questions and concerns from the child may not come until weeks later as the child begins to work through their grief. Older children may be hesitant to start the conversation. It is recommended to check in often with your child.
- If the child does not go they may feel guilty, disappointed in their self, or feeling as if they let the deceased person down. Be prepared to attend to these needs.

If you or your child does not attend the services there may be other opportunities for honoring the deceased individual. The child (and parents) might bake for the family, collect pictures of the deceased or flowers to give to the family, hand craft a card with a special message inside, or assist in a Memorial that is occurring in the community, such as a school based activity, a fund-raiser for a scholarship memorial, or the building of a wildflower garden.