



# Grieving Children

**GRIEF IS THE NATURAL RESPONSE TO A LOSS** and yet it can be quite challenging to know the right things to do to support a person who is grieving. It is even harder when that person is a child. Death, loss, and unexpected life changes are difficult for adults to understand and accept. How do you explain to a child what you are struggling to understand yourself? Here is some information that may help you to provide support in an age-appropriate manner to grieving children.

**What's typical at this age?** School age children are typically aware of death and permanence. They may become preoccupied with their own health and safety as well as the health and safety of significant people in their lives. Their aim is to avoid suffering another painful loss.

Although sadness is probably the most common expression of grief, it is not unusual for children to express their grief through anger and irritability. Fairness is very important at this age, and because many of the losses they face are unwanted and unfair, they may feel anger or even rage about what has happened. They may be irritable, reacting to seemingly minor problems with very strong emotions and behavior.

The emotions related to grief can be complex and confusing. Children often do not know how to recognize and interpret these feelings, so instead they present with physical aches and pains to gain access to sympathy, caretaking, and comfort from others.

**Restoring a sense of control** - Allowing children to be involved in making decisions helps them to feel a sense of control over what is happening in their life. Include them in planning memorials, setting up new routines, and modifying traditions. Ask them how they would like to contribute - drawing a picture, writing a poem, choosing a favorite food to serve, or selecting photos to display or music to play.

## Magical Thinking, Guilt, and Responsibility



In contrast with younger peers, school age children are increasingly aware of the dangers and risks that exist in life. At the same time, they may not fully understand the causes of these events. Their natural self-centeredness (which is developmentally appropriate) may cause them to think that their own words, thoughts, or actions are responsible for what happened, leading to feelings of guilt. They may develop beliefs that they can reverse the change or ward off future unwanted events by engaging in specific rituals or avoiding certain behaviors, places, or thoughts.



## Important things to keep in mind when you or someone you know is experiencing grief:



***Death is probably the best known but not the only cause of grief.*** People may grieve over many different types of losses including prolonged/indefinite separation from a loved one, loss of a valued dream or goal, loss of a meaningful part of one's identity, or a dramatic change in one's way of life.



***All losses are not the same and everyone doesn't grieve in the same way.*** It is neither healthy nor helpful to compare grief. Just because someone is not reacting the same way as you or doing the same things as you to cope, doesn't mean they aren't doing it right. What helps for one person may not help for another. If someone you know needs to tell you about a loss they've experienced, listen. Don't assume you know what they're going through just because you've been through a similar loss.



***Allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling.*** If you need to cry, cry. If you don't, don't. Whatever emotional reaction you have is legitimate and okay to express. It is not healthy to "put up a good front" and bottle up feelings. Emotions are not a sign of weakness, they're a reflection of love.



***It takes time.*** Grief is not something that can be resolved in a weekend. Often the reality of the situation doesn't even begin to sink in for quite some time. For many people, it takes a full cycle of all four seasons and all the holidays before all aspects of the loss are evident. Don't allow anyone to pressure you to speed things up (e.g. "Aren't you over that yet?") if you're not ready. Similarly, don't let anyone hold you back when you are ready to move on.



***Find ways to remember the past while engaging with the present and finding hope for the future.*** It is important to find ways of honoring those who have died (or are no longer actively part of our lives for other reasons). They don't stop mattering to us or having an impact on us. We are challenged to honor their memory and the life they led without sacrificing the ability to move forward in our own lives. If your grief is not for a person but for a way of life, the loss of a dream, the loss of a personal identity, or another form of loss, this is still applicable. Starting a new chapter of your life does not negate the relevance of the chapters that came before. The challenge for you is to incorporate some element of those past ways, identities, and dreams into your newly evolving reality. It means continuing to love, to grow, to learn, to laugh, and to live.



If the pain of grief has become so intense that life no longer seems worth living, help is available. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255, the Crisis Center 330-452-6000, or send a text to 741741. It can get better.



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