

Helping Children Cope With Loss

The death of a loved one is always difficult. When the death results from a war or a disaster, it can be even more troubling given the sudden and potentially violent nature of the event. For children, the loss of a parent, sibling, relative or friend can affect their sense of security. Helping children cope with their loss is crucial in enabling them to resume their lives more fully at home and school.

Responses to Loss

Children deal with death in many different ways, and not necessarily in the same manner as adults. Here are some common ways children might respond to a death:

- Sadness
- Denial, shock and confusion
- Anger and irritability
- Inability to sleep
- Nightmares
- Loss of appetite
- Inventing games about dying
- Fear of being alone
- Excessively boisterous play
- Withdrawal from friends
- Loss of concentration
- Guilt over failure to prevent the loss
- Physical complaints, such as stomachaches and headaches
- Depression or a loss of interest in daily activities and events
- Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school
- Profound emotional reactions (e.g., anxiety attacks, chronic fatigue or thoughts of suicide)
- Repeatedly imitating or asking questions about the deceased or making repeated statements of wanting to join the deceased
- Acting much younger for an extended period or reverting to earlier behaviors (e.g., bedwetting, “baby talk” or thumb-sucking)

Helping Children and Adolescents Grieve

- **Children express their grief in a variety of ways** and may even appear to be unaffected by the death. While pre-schoolers have difficulty understanding that death is not temporary, children between the ages of five and nine begin to experience grief more like adults.
- **Don’t push children to talk about their feelings.** Children, like adults, need time to grieve and be upset. Let them know you are ready to listen, and provide reassurance and validation of their feelings when they express them.

Some Issues to Consider when Helping a Child Overcome Loss:

- **Children are concrete in their thinking.** To lessen confusion, avoid such expressions as “passed on” or “went to sleep.” Answer their questions about death simply and honestly. Only offer details that they can absorb. Don’t overload them with information.
- **Children are physical in their grief.** Watch their bodies, and understand and support their play and actions as their “language” of grief. Offer reassurance.
- **Children can be fearful about death and the future.** Give them a chance to talk about their fears and validate their feelings. Share happy memories about the person who died. Offer a simple expression of sorrow and take time to listen.
- **Children need choices.** Whenever possible, offer choices in what they do or don’t do to memorialize the deceased and ways to express their feelings about the death. Help the child plant a tree or dedicate a place in memory of the person who died.
- **Children grieve as part of a family.** Children grieve the person and the “changed” behavior and environment of family and friends. Keep regular routines as much as possible.
- **Children are repetitive in their grief.** Respond patiently to their uncertainty and concerns. It can take a long time to recover from a loss. Expect their grief to revisit in cycles throughout their childhood or adolescence. A strong reminder, such as the anniversary of a death, may reawaken grief. Make yourself available to talk.

For More Information

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to www.mhacolorado.org.