

Tipsheet for Carers of Children and Young People Coping with Loss

(web link: <http://armchairpsychology.com.au/tipsheetyoungcopingwithloss.html>)

Children who suffer a loss are going to grieve. However, children lack the tools to manage strong emotions, and can become overwhelmed. As a caregiver, you need to realise that children will likely experience confusion, sadness, fear and anger at abandonment. Depending on their age and/or developmental level, children may or may not understand the concept of death and may continue to seek out their loved one. This can be very painful for their caregivers who are also grieving.

It is helpful to understand that different losses may impact children differently. Children often believe that catastrophic events are their fault, causing guilt and embarrassment. Talking with children through play and story-telling can be the best thing we can do.

If your child seems to be having trouble doing the things they normally/need to do, it is recommended that you seek out the help of a professional, such as a GP or psychologist.

Q: How can I help my child, if we know that someone they love is going to pass away?

A: It seems that children who are warned about an impending passing, experience lower levels of anxiety, and cope with their grief in healthier ways than those who are not warned. This should be done with compassion. Discuss with your health-care professional when this will be timely. The child should have the opportunity to have their questions answered in a kind, non-judgemental, and age-appropriate manner but not live for months with anticipation and fear of the impending death.

Q: How can I help my child after someone they love has passed away?

A: Children can benefit from seeing the body of the deceased. This can help them process their thoughts on whether that person is returning. The adults in their life should consider whether this is appropriate given the situation, and the child.

Children may also benefit from attending the funeral, if they won't be exposed to sustained high levels of emotion. They may be shielded by going with someone who will not be as affected by the death, such as a more distant relative, or friend. This person can then leave earlier with the child.

Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words. There are story books that are also helpful to read together. Be available and open to talking when they are ready. Exercise, eating healthy meals, and plenty of rest are all helpful. Encourage children to do the things they used to enjoy doing, and to play and laugh. Try to spend more time with your children and provide them with plenty of attention and affection. Let them be more dependent on you for a while. Maintain good routines – predictability is reassuring for children and young people.

Q: How do children grieve after they have lost a parent?

A: When a caregiver dies, the child's connection with them is severed. This means the world may feel like a big, scary place. In small children, this can be expressed through a return to bed-wetting and problems with sleep. They will likely cry and act restlessly in the hope of being reunited with their caregiver. Older children may also experience emotional and/or behavioural problems.

The loss of one parent may cause anxiety about the loss of the other parent. The child might seem very worried about their surviving parent and want to be near them. Alternatively, older children may try to shield the surviving parent from their fears, so present as coping well with the loss.

Where the child has lost an attachment figure, it is likely that their surviving parent is also experiencing grief. Many parents, despite their own feelings, are capable of continuing parenting in

a “good enough” way to keep meeting their child’s needs. Some parents though, will find it very hard to parent. The child may therefore feel alone and frightened, and think, feel, and act in ways that aren’t helpful for them. It is important that other caring adults can be allowed in to provide love, a warm cuddle and a comforting shoulder to cry on.

There are other factors that can complicate a child’s experience of grief. The most important thing we can do for grieving children is to provide stability and a sense of safety.

Q: Is grief different for children who lose a sibling?

A: The age of the sibling lost may affect the way that a surviving child experiences grief. An older sibling who cared for them may be grieved in a similar way to how they would grieve a parent.

Where the sibling was unwell and needing parental attention, the surviving child may have felt resentment at this. The surviving child may therefore feel successful at retaining parental attention upon their sibling’s death, but also guilt for feeling how they did through their sibling’s illness. Also, the surviving child may be angry with their parents for not keeping their sibling safe and may worry that their parents are not capable of keeping them safe.

Q: How do I know that what my child is feeling is normal?

A: Grief in children varies dependent on the age and developmental level of the child, as well as their relationship with the lost loved one. Many behaviours and reactions are normal, and it can be hard to know what will pass and what is a concern. For instance, crying is normal, but in the early days and weeks some children don’t cry and that can be okay too.

It can be normal for children to internalise their thoughts and feelings (becoming quiet and withdrawn), as well as externalise them (tantrums, misbehaving). It is normal for relationships, schoolwork, memory, concentration, sleep, eating and many other “life factors” to be impacted upon. Although all sorts of behaviours are normal, if you are concerned that you can’t support your child enough, or if your child’s distress is frequent, intense, or prolonged, it would be a good idea to discuss this with a professional, such as your GP or a psychologist.

Q: What can I do to support a young person (no longer a child but not yet an adult) grieving?

A: Nothing will remove the need to grieve, but there are some things that we know will help:

- Talk with them about death and what is happening. Allow them to engage with the process.
- Be honest.
- Acknowledge their presence, their importance, their opinions, thoughts, and feelings.
- Be patient and open-minded. Allow them to grieve in their own way.
- Be available – sit with them, listen to them, and answer their questions.
- Let them know that a range of emotions is normal.
- Validate their feelings and do not minimize them.
- Encourage them to eat and sleep, and to exercise, in a healthy manner.
- It is okay for you to express your emotions as well, let them know how you feel. Generally speaking, being open about your own grief will provide your child with reassurances that he or she is not alone and that it is acceptable to feel all types of emotions in response to loss.
- Check in with other adults involved in their life – family members, teachers, school counsellors.

Remember: Qualities like reliability, consistency, warmth, and openness are far more beneficial to support wellbeing than having the perfect words and right answers.