

TIP-SHEET FOR CARERS OF CHILDREN DEALING WITH GRIEF FROM LOSS

Children who suffer a loss are going to grieve, but lack the tools to manage strong emotions, and can become overwhelmed. Children will likely experience confusion, sadness, fear and anger at abandonment, and 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. 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.

HOW TO PREPARE A CHILD FOR THE LOSS OF A DYING LOVED ONE?

Children who are warned about an impending passing, experience lower levels of anxiety, and cope with their grief in healthier ways. Discuss with your health-care professional when this will be timely. The child should have the opportunity to have their questions answered in a non-judgemental manner, but not live for months with anticipation and fear of the impending death.



HOW TO HELP A CHILD AFTER THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE



Children can benefit from seeing the body of the deceased depending on the situation and their age.

This can help them process their thoughts on whether that person is returning. 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.

HOW DO I KNOW THAT WHAT MY CHILD IS FEELING IS NORMAL?

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. Crying for example, is normal, but in the early days and weeks some children don't cry and that can be okay too. 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.



HOW DO CHILDREN GRIEVE AFTER THEY HAVE LOST A PARENT?



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 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. 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, so it is important that other caring adults can be allowed in to provide love and support. The most important thing we can do for grieving children is to provide stability and a sense of safety.

IS GRIEF DIFFERENT FOR CHILDREN WHO LOSE A SIBLING?

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.



HOW TO SUPPORT A TEENAGER GRIEVING



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.
- 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 and do not minimize their feelings.
- 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. Being open about your own grief will provide your child with reassurances that they are not alone and that it is acceptable to feel all types of emotions in response to loss.