

Helping Elementary Students with Grief

Children and Grief

Grief is a normal and healing response to death. Everyone experiences grief in his or her own unique way. Children grieve losses in their lives as intensely as adults. Because children are often less able than adults to put their feelings into words, their grief is seen in their behavior. Children's reactions will differ depending on their level of emotional development, their relationship to the deceased, the information they receive concerning death, and their past experiences with death. They may be confused about what has happened and worried about what might happen in the future.

Children who are younger than eight years may not be able to understand that death is final. They may believe that they will see the dead person again. It is probably better not to force the idea that death is final on a child until they are ready to deal with it.

If the loss directly affects your children, you can expect to see them "reprocess" it as they reach new levels of understanding. Even if your children were not directly affected, it is still common for death to trigger fears of similar losses in their own lives. This is especially true if your children have already experienced the death of someone close, or if it is a stressful time for your family.

Children need a caring adult during this time to understand them, support them, and help them to express their feelings. Following are some common behaviors associated with children who are grieving and some ideas about how to help.

Common Grief Reactions

- Shock/denial
- Sadness
- Lack of Feelings
- Rebellion at home/school
- Sleep/appetite disturbances
- School problems - fighting, withdrawal, attention-seeking, poor concentration
- Physical problems – headaches, stomach aches
- Over-involvement with peers or loss of interest in peer and social activities
- Idealization of the deceased
- Restlessness/disorganization
- Preoccupation with the situation

Helping Secondary Students with Grief

Children and Grief

Grief is a normal and healing response to death. Everyone experiences grief in his or her own unique way. Young persons grieve losses in their lives as intensely as adults. They can experience a variety of emotions that may vary from day to day. Young people's reactions will differ depending on their level of emotional development, their relationship to the deceased, their belief system about death, and their past experiences with death. Those who are experiencing stress in their personal or family relationships may have more difficulty coping.

A common characteristic of young people is the belief in their own immortality. Young people may take on an attitude of "I dare it to happen to me," which, taken to an extreme, could mean experimenting with dangerous behaviors or situations.

Young people have a more adult understanding of death but may not fully accept that it will happen to them. They may express a lot of anger about death because they are more comfortable expressing anger than hurt and sadness, which may seem childish to them.

It is common for young people to need and seek out support from their friends during this time. This peer support is important, but they also need caring support from the adults in their lives.

Even if your young person did not have a close relationship with the person who died, death can often trigger feelings from past losses. The feelings can be just as strong as any directly related to the current loss.

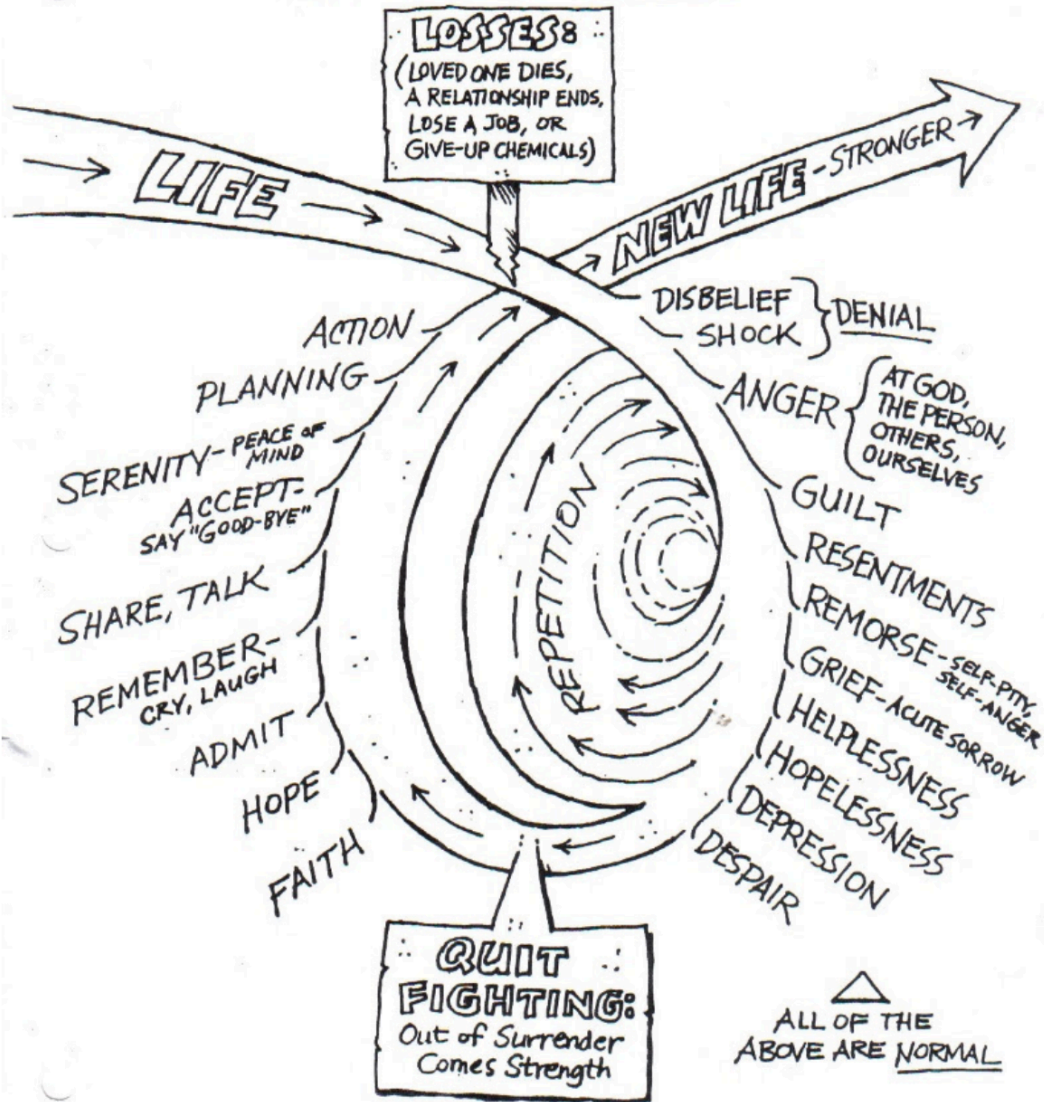
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The Loss Cycle

The Normal Cycle for All Losses...



DENIAL - ANGER - DEPRESSION - ACCEPTANCE - RECONSTRUCTION
 (BARGAINING TAKES PLACE ALL ALONG)

How Parents/Caregivers Can Help

- ✓ Be involved with your child/children.
- ✓ Observe their behavior.
- ✓ Ask them how they are feeling about the loss. Ask them again at a later time.
- ✓ Listen to your children.
- ✓ Help your children explore their feelings.
- ✓ Reassure them that their feelings are normal.
- ✓ Give assurances of love, support, and safety.
- ✓ Allow them their feelings without judgment.
- ✓ Let them feel their pain; do not minimize the loss.
- ✓ Use clear language (died, death, dead).
- ✓ Discuss with your children their feelings about attending the funeral.
- ✓ Plan for a caring adult to be present at the funeral, if your child attends.
- ✓ Routine and consistency are important.
- ✓ Be sensitive to the need for peer group support.
- ✓ Set reasonable limits and provide structure to provide feelings of security.
- ✓ Permit or encourage talk about the person who died.
- ✓ Get extra help if you need it.

Book List

Books for Young Students

- Buscaglia, Leo. *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*. The story of how life itself is immortal.
- Carlstrom, Nancy White. *Blow Me a Kiss Miss Lilly*. The death of an elderly friend.
- Clifton, Lucille. *Everett Anderson's Goodbye*. A young child struggles through the stages of grief after his father's death.
- Cohn, Janice. *I Had a Friend Named Peter*. A young child's best friend is killed in an accident.
- Fassler, Joan. *My Grandpa Died Today*. The death of a grandfather.
- Gould, Deborah. *Grandpa's Slide Show*. Family memories are important after the death of a grandfather.
- Powell, E. Sandy. *Geranium Morning*. A young child deals with the death of his father.
- Sanford, Doris. *It Must Hurt A Lot*. A child's pet dog dies.
- Stiles, Norman. *I'll Miss You, Mr. Hooper*. The death of a very special Sesame Street friend.
- Tejima. *Swan Sky*. The life and death of a young swan.
- Wilhelm, Hans. *I'll Always Love You*. A little boy's pet dog dies.
- Varley, Susan. *Badger's Parting Gifts*. Badger's friends deal with his death.

Books for Intermediate Students

- Clifford, Eth. *The Remembering Box*. The death of a grandmother, family love, and tradition.
- Donnelly, Elfie. *So Long, Grandpa*. The approaching death of a grandfather and the relationship he shares with his grandson.
- Jukes, Mavis. *Blackberries in the Dark*. A young man's visit to his grandmother's home brings back memories of his grandfather who died in the spring.
- Orgel, Doris. *Whiskers Once and Always*. A young girl's pet dies.
- Smith, Doris Buchanan. *A Taste of Blackberries*. The loss of a special friend.

Books for Older Students

- Fitzgerald, Helen. *A Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teens and Friends*
- Forman, James. *The Big Bang*. The death of an older brother.
- Gootman, Marilyn E. *When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens*. Death of a friend.
- Grollman, Earl A. *Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love*.
- L'Engle, Madeleine. *A Ring of Endless Light*. The impending death of a grandfather.
- Naughton, Jim. *My Brother Stealing Second*. The death of an older brother.
- Schwiebert, Pat. *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss*. Affirms the grieving.
- Ure, Jean. *One Green Leaf*. Teenage friends deal with the death of a friend.

Books for Parents

- Alderman, Linda. *Why Did Daddy Die?* Helping children cope with the loss of a parent.
- Flohr, Caroline. *Heaven's Child*. Sudden loss; death of a child.
- Gaffney, Donna A. *The Seasons of Grief*. Helping children work through loss.
- Gravelle, Karen & Haskinsm, Charles. *Teenagers Face to Face with Bereavement*. Helping teenagers work through loss.
- Lombardo, Victor S., & Lombardo, Edith Foran. *Kids Grieve Too*.
- Rofes, Eric. *The Kids Book About Death and Dying; By and for Kids*.
- Wass, Hannelore & Corr, Charles A. *Helping Children Cope with Death; Guidelines and Resources*.