

GREEN OAKS

Outpatient Services

**Help for the Grieving Student:
Giving Hope for Healing**

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Objectives



- Identify different types of losses.
- Define the grief process for school age population.
- Identify signs and symptoms of grief:
 - Elementary
 - Middle School
 - High School
- Discuss ways to intervene with a child experiencing grief.

Types of Losses

- Death of a loved one
 - Parent
 - Sibling
 - Grandparent
 - Friend
 - Other relative
- Divorce
- Moving
- Death of a pet
- Economic – change in status



The Grief Process

The 5 Stages of Grief are not intended to be worked through and “checked off,” like a list. Rather, they are guideposts, helping us identify and understand what we may be feeling. Not everyone will experience every stage, and many people will go through the stages in a different order. In general, however, grief will include the following 5 phases.

Denial:

- This stage includes feelings of shock, numbness, and disbelief. When loss first comes, most of us have a hard time believing “this is really happening.” It’s not that we’re denying that the death or loss has *actually* occurred, but rather, it’s a sense of, “I just can’t believe this person I love isn’t going to walk through that door anymore.” Yet, the feelings of this stage also protect us. If we were to take in all the emotion related to the loss right away, it would be too overwhelming. Instead, our body and mind have a little time to adjust to the way things are now without the deceased. Part of the “denial” stage is also to tell our story over and over—one of the best ways to deal with trauma, and also a way for us to make it real. Eventually, we may begin asking questions such as, “How did this happen,” or “Why?” This is a sign that we are moving out of the denial phase and into the feeling and healing process.

Anger:

- Anger can present itself in a variety of ways—anger at your loved one, at others, at God, at the world, at yourself. And anger can be a difficult emotion to cope with. Some will express anger easily and toward anyone or anything, but many of us will suppress the anger instead, keeping it bottled up or even turning it inward, toward ourselves. Anger turned inward is guilt—guilt that we “should have done something,” or even guilt that we feel angry toward the deceased. But anger is a natural response to loss. And if we’re able to identify and label our anger, it can help us express it in healthier ways that don’t hurt others or ourselves. Saying, “I’m angry,” and letting yourself feel that anger is part of the healing process.

The Grief Process

Bargaining

- With bargaining, there's a sense that we just want life back to the way it used to be. We wish we could go back in time, catch the illness sooner, see something we didn't see. We may also feel guilty, focusing on "If only...". Bargaining can begin before the loss occurs or after. If the death or loss was anticipated, such as in the case of illness, bargaining may have been going on for a while—we bargain with God to please "spare" our loved one; we say we'll "do anything" to keep them here. If the death or loss was sudden, we may wish we could bring them back or go back in time and change things. Bargaining keeps us focused on the past so we don't have to feel the emotions of the present. But bargaining can be helpful too. Once we accept that our loved one is dying, we can use bargaining to ease our minds and theirs, praying for a "peaceful passing." Or once they have passed, bargaining can help us focus on the future as we pray to "be reunited with them someday."

The Grief Process

Depression

- Eventually grief will enter on a deeper level, bringing with it intense feelings of emptiness and sadness. We feel like we don't care about much of anything and wish life would just hurry up and pass on by. Getting out of bed can be a huge burden, exhaustion and apathy can set in, and we may begin to wonder, "what's the point?" for pretty much everything. Others around us may try to help get us "out" of this "depression," but it's important to know that this isn't a mental illness—it's a natural response to loss. It's not a clinical depression we're experiencing, but rather bereavement and mourning, and the emotions of depression must be experienced in order to heal. We have to let ourselves feel the pain, loss, grief, and sadness, hard as it may seem. As Kubler-Ross encourages, "Make a place for your guest. Invite your depression to pull up a chair with you in front of the fire, and sit with it, without looking for a way to escape. Allow the sadness and emptiness to cleanse you and help you explore your loss in its entirety." [ii] This part of the grief process can last for some time—there's no set "time limit" for the emotions of grief. So be patient with yourself, and remember that feeling the "depression" is the way out of it.

Acceptance

- The experience of "depression" is what leads to "acceptance". Many people mistakenly believe that "acceptance" means we are "cured" or "all right" with the loss. But this isn't the case at all. The loss will forever be a part of us, though we will feel it more some times than others. Acceptance simply means we are ready to try and move on—to accommodate ourselves to this world without our loved one. This process can actually bring us closer to the one we loved as we make sense of how life *was* and process how we want life now *to be*.

www.drchristinahibbert.com/dealing-with-grief/5-stages-of-grief/

How Children Understand Death

Ages 3-6

- Don't believe death is permanent and expect the person to return
- Might be hard for them to comprehend about heaven
- Might believe that something they did or said caused the person's death and would need reassurance that nothing they might have been thinking made this happen

Ages 6-9

- Starts to believe that death may be permanent
- May begin to ask many questions how death and how it affects the body
- Doesn't yet believe death can happen to someone of their age

Ages 9-12

- Start to be concerned about how this death will personally affect them
- More aware death is final
- Wonders if they will die too and if, perhaps a surviving parent will die
- Wonders who will take care of them if something happened to a surviving parent

Teenagers

- Understands that death is permanent and irreversible
- Can repress their own needs and emotions
- Sometimes feels the need to take on an adult role especially if parent/s are having a hard time coping. May take on household chores and comfort adults, thus post-poning their own grief
- Might wear clothing of deceased to comfort themselves

From: "How to Help a Grieving Child" at www.FoundationForGrievingChildren.org



Elementary Age

- Between the ages of 5-9, children understand that death is permanent. They realize that when a person's body dies, they will not be coming back.
- Be honest about the illness of a loved one.
- Be honest about death.
- Coach parents to let them decide if they want to attend the memorial services. Prepare them for what those services will be like.

Elementary Age

- Help adults in the child's life to understand how to talk to the child.
- Linking objects (are items that once belonged to the deceased that the child now owns) are important. Adults could ask the following:
 - Do you have something that belongs to the special person? If so, describe it.
 - If you could have one item that belonged to the special person, what would it be?
 - Draw a picture of something that belonged to the special person.
 - Why does the object have special meaning?

“Identifying Ways School Nurses Can Support Grieving Children and Adolescents”

Warning signs

Elementary school level:

- Difficulty concentrating or inattention
- Somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach problems)
- Sleep disturbances (e.g., nightmares, fear of the dark)
- Repeated telling and acting out of the event
- Withdrawal
- Increased irritability, disruptive behavior, or aggressive behavior
- Increased anxiety (e.g., clinging, whining)
- Depression, guilt, or anger

Middle School Age

- Ages 10-14.
- They will rely on relationships to help them with the loss.
- Losing a sibling at this age is especially difficult, and might put the child at higher risk for more severe symptoms.

High School Age

- Seek additional support from family and peers to validate feelings.
- Though friends are very significant and can be supportive in their own way, adults, through honest and open communication and sharing, are most effective in providing support to adolescents.
- Provide information honestly and talk with them about what they are feeling.

Warning signs

Middle and high school level:

- Flashbacks
 - Emotional numbing or depression
 - Nightmares
 - Avoidance or withdrawal
 - Peer relationship problems
 - Substance abuse or other high-risk behavior
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- Parents report concerns:
 - Sadness
 - Easily upset
 - Holding their feeling in
 - Anxiety
 - Hard to go on or find meaning



Warning signs

Depressive symptoms

Children and teens having a depressive episode may:

- Feel very sad
- Complain about pain a lot, like stomachaches and headaches
- Sleep too little or too much
- Feel guilty and worthless
- Eat too little or too much
- Have little energy and no interest in fun activities
- Think about death or suicide
- Poor school performance

Seek Additional Support

Signs That Additional Help Is Needed

Adults should be particularly alert to any of the following as indicators that trained mental health professional (school psychologist or counselor) should be consulted for intervention and possible referral:

- Severe loss of interest in daily activities (e.g., extracurricular activities and friends)
- Disruption in ability to eat or sleep
- School refusal
- Fear of being alone
- Repeated wish to join the deceased
- Severe drop in school achievement
- Suicidal references or behavior



Interventions



SUPPORTING GRIEVING CHILDREN AND YOUTH

How adults in a family or school community grieve following a loss will influence how children and youth grieve. When adults are able to talk about the loss, express their feelings, and provide support for children and youth in the aftermath of a loss, they are better able to develop healthy coping strategies.

Adults are encouraged to:

- Talk about the loss. This gives children permission to talk about it, too.
- Ask questions to determine how children understand the loss, and gauge their physical and emotional reactions.
- Listen patiently. Remember that each person is unique and will grieve in his or her own way.
- Be prepared to discuss the loss repeatedly. Children should be encouraged to talk about, act out, or express through writing or art the details of the loss as well as their feelings about it, about the deceased person, and about other changes that have occurred in their lives as a result of the loss.



Interventions

- Give children important facts about the event at an appropriate developmental level. This may include helping children accurately understand what death is. For younger children, this explanation might include helping them to understand that the person's body has stopped working and will never again work.
- Help children understand the death and intervene to correct false perceptions about the cause of the event, ensuring that they do not blame themselves or others for the situation.
- Provide a model of healthy mourning by being open about your own feelings of sadness and grief.
- Create structure and routine for children so they experience predictability and stability.

Interventions

- Take care of yourself so you can assist the children and adolescents in your care. Prolonged, intense grieving or unhealthy grief reactions (such as substance abuse) will inhibit your ability to provide adequate support.
- Acknowledge that it will take time to mourn and that bereavement is a process that occurs over months and years. Be aware that normal grief reactions often last longer than six months, depending on the type of loss and proximity to the child.
- Take advantage of school and community resources such as counseling, especially if children and youth do not seem to be coping well with grief and loss.

**From the National Association of School Psychologist.
Death and Grief: Supporting Children and Youth**

Resources

- www.foundationforgrievingchildren.org
- www.johgriefsupport.org Journey of Hope in Plano, Texas.

“How to Help a Grieving Child” by the Foundation for Grieving Children 2014. Free downloadable PDF file when you sign up at their website listed above.

Thank you.



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