

Understanding Grief & Supporting Children Through the Grieving Process

Children can be deeply affected by loss. They may experience many emotions like:

- Frustration
- Sadness
- Anger
- Numbness
- Fear
- Relief
- Panic
- Lack of emotions
- Longing
- Disbelief
- Shock
- Confusion
- Guilt
- Anxiety

Strong feelings can be overwhelming for children. Some might get quiet and withdrawn, while others might express their feelings through challenging behaviors. How children understand and express loss will depend on their age, developmental stage, past experiences and connection with what they've lost.

Tips to Help You Support Children Who are Experiencing Grief and Loss:

- Offer support, reassurance and comfort
- Acknowledge or help them name or identify their feelings
- Find time to do enjoyable things together
- Let them know they are loved and will always be cared for
- Assure them that what's happened is not their fault
- Help them create a diary, memory box or special book to remember the person
- Maintain normal routines to help them feel secure
- Let them know that it's ok to play, be happy and have fun
- Allow them to ask questions and talk about their loss as much as they want to
- Encourage them to talk to a caring adult if they feel uneasy talking to you
- Provide clear and age appropriate answers to their questions
- Keep things as familiar as you can (school, pets and household possessions)
- Talk about your feelings and how you've been coping with them
- Try to include them in decision-making when it directly affects them



Additional Suggestions for Unit Leaders:

- Keep your unit's schedule, as much as possible– including meetings, outings, camping trips, service projects, etc.
- Make your meetings a safe place for your scouts to share their feelings.
- Scouts will each grieve in their own way, check in to see how they are coping.
- Expect to see some challenging behavior as they work through the stages of grief, please be patient.
- Let them know that you (or a designated adult) are available to talk as needed.
- Keep in contact with the parent's of your Scouts to share information.
- Include your Scouts in decision-making when possible.
- Some Scouts will want to talk about their loss, encourage their discussions, but....
- Not every Scout will want to talk about their loss, recognize this and respect it.
- With the assistance of your Scout's parents, plan how to honor and celebrate the life of the one who passed.

If you or your Scouts need additional assistance, please contact Diane J. Cloutier, Narragansett Council's Director of Safe Scouting at diane.cloutier@scouting.org.

Grief can affect children:



Cognitively

They might have trouble concentrating, making decisions or get easily confused. You might see nightmares, lack of motivation, or a decline in school performance and self-esteem.



Emotionally

Children tend to go in and out of the grief process - crying one minute, then playing the next. They may also be unsettled, express anxiety about the safety of others or feel responsible for their parents.



Physically

Children may feel sick more often, experience headaches, stomach aches, tiredness, lack of energy or hyperactivity. You may also notice changes in their eating habits and sleeping patterns.



Spiritually

Children will be curious about death and dying and may ask a lot of questions. They may start to question why this happened and where the person might be now.



Socially

It's common for children to either withdraw from family and friends, or become more dependent or clingy. They might also attempt to take on the role of an older sibling or adult who has died.



Behaviorally

They might show more challenging or demanding behavior as they try to get care or reassurance from you. Themes of death may show up in their drawings or play. Behavior may also regress like wetting the bed.

Understanding the 5 Stages of Grief

If you or someone you care about is dealing with loss, it can be helpful to learn more about the grieving process. Here are the 5 Stages of Grief, along with a few ways to help someone who is grieving after a death or other traumatic experience.

It's important to remember that the grieving process can be complex, and it isn't the same for everyone. These steps may not be followed exactly, or other feelings may surface after you thought you were through the stages of grieving. Allowing room to experience grief in your own way can help you heal after loss.

What Are the 5 Stages of Grief?

The 5 Stages of Grief is a theory developed by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. It suggests that we go through five distinct stages after the loss of a loved one. These stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.²

1. Denial

In the first stage of the grieving process, denial helps us minimize the overwhelming pain of loss. As we process the reality of our loss, we are also trying to survive emotional pain. It can be hard to believe we have lost an important person in our lives, especially when we may have just spoken with them the previous week or even the previous day.

During this stage in grieving, our reality has shifted completely. It can take our minds time to adjust to our new reality. We reflect on the experiences we've shared with the person we lost, and we might find ourselves wondering how to move forward in life without this person. Denial is not only an attempt to pretend that the loss does not exist. We are also trying to absorb and understand what is happening.

This is a lot of information to explore and a lot of painful imagery to process. Denial attempts to slow this process down and take us through it one step at a time, rather than risk the potential of feeling overwhelmed by our emotions.

2. Anger

The second stage in grieving is anger. We are trying to adjust to a new reality and are likely experiencing extreme emotional discomfort. There is so much to process that anger may feel like it allows us an emotional outlet.

Keep in mind that anger does not require us to be very vulnerable. However, it may feel more socially acceptable than admitting we are scared. Anger allows us to express emotion with less fear of judgment or rejection.

Anger also tends to be the first thing we feel when starting to release emotions related to loss. This can leave us feeling isolated in our experience. It can also cause us to be perceived as unapproachable by others in moments when we could benefit from comfort, connection, and reassurance.



3. Bargaining

When coping with loss, it isn't unusual to feel so desperate that you are willing to do anything to alleviate or minimize the pain. During this stage in grieving, you may try to bargain to change the situation, agreeing to do something in return for being relieved of the pain you feel.



When bargaining starts to take place, we often direct our requests to a higher power, or something bigger than us that may be able to influence a different outcome. Bargaining during the grieving process can come in the form of a variety of promises, including:

- "God, if you can heal this person, I will turn my life around."
- "I promise to be better if you will let this person live."
- "I'll never get angry again if you can stop him/her from dying or leaving me."

Bargaining comes from a feeling of helplessness and gives us a perceived sense of control over something that feels so out of control. During bargaining, we tend to focus on our personal faults or regrets. We might look back at our interactions with the person we are losing and note all the times we felt disconnected or may have caused them pain.

It is common to recall times when we may have said things we did not mean and wish we could go back and behave differently. We also sometimes make the drastic assumption that if things had played out differently, we would not be in such an emotionally painful place in our lives.

4. Depression

During our experience of processing grief, there comes a time when our imaginations calm down and we slowly start to look at the reality of our present situation. Bargaining no longer feels like an option and we are faced with what is happening.

In this stage of grieving, we start to feel the loss of our loved one more abundantly. Our panic begins to subside, the emotional fog begins to clear, and the loss feels more present and unavoidable. **There is an acute awareness of our humanness in this stage of grieving; when we realize that there is nothing we can do to influence change or create a better end result.**

In those moments, we tend to pull inward as the sadness grows. We might find ourselves retreating, being less sociable, and reaching out less to others about what we are going through. Although this is a very natural stage in the grieving process, dealing with depression after the loss of a loved one can be extremely isolating and one of the most difficult stages.

5. Acceptance

The last of the 5 Stages of Grief is acceptance. When we come to a place of acceptance, it is not that we no longer feel the pain of loss. Instead, we are no longer resisting the reality of our situation, and we are not struggling to make it something different.

Sadness and regret can still be present in this phase. But the emotional survival tactics of denial, bargaining, and anger are less likely to be present during this phase of the grieving process.

What is Complicated Grief?

Grief is a normal, expected set of emotions that can occur after the loss of a loved one. However, some people experience a more significant and longer-lasting level of grief. This is known as complicated grief.

Complicated grief may share many of the same symptoms of depression. It can also lead to depression, or worsen depression in someone who already experiences it.

Symptoms of complicated grief include:

1. Trouble thinking about anything other than your loved one's death
2. Lasting longing for your deceased loved one
3. Difficulty accepting that your loved one is gone
4. Long-lasting bitterness over the loss
5. Feeling as if your life no longer has meaning
6. Trouble trusting others
7. Difficulty remembering positive memories of your loved one
8. Grieving that gets worse instead of better

The Importance of Self-Care While Grieving

Taking care of yourself is not a selfish action when you're experiencing grief. Instead, it can be a part of the process that helps you feel better mentally and physically and better able to support others who are mourning with you.

Some ways to care for yourself include:

1. Exercising regularly, such as going on a walk, riding a bicycle, using an elliptical machine, or taking an exercise class (always consult your doctor before beginning any exercise program)
2. Getting at least 7 to 8 hours of sleep every night
3. Exploring a new skill, such as taking a cooking class, joining a book club, or enrolling in a seminar at your local college
4. Calling or seeing friends or loved ones who can offer support
5. Joining a support group for those who have experienced the loss of a loved one

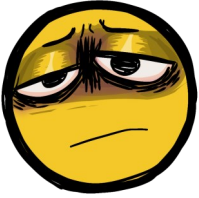
Just as some approaches can help, others may not. ***Turning to drugs or alcohol to self-medicate to escape your thoughts is not productive behavior, and can actually make you feel worse over time and is never the solution.***



When you come to an important date related to your loved one, such as an anniversary or birthday, you don't have to pretend the date isn't significant to you. Acknowledge the day. Celebrate your loved one's memory or spend time with loved ones who can help you feel better.

When Should A Grieving Person Seek Help?

The loss of a loved one is life-changing and can leave a profound hole in anyone's life. It is time to call a doctor if this loss causes them to experience the following symptoms:



- Difficulty performing everyday activities
- Feeling guilty or blaming themselves for the loved one's death
- Feeling as if they have no purpose in life
- Losing the desire to engage in social activities
- Wishing they had died as well
- Feeling as if their life isn't worth living if they don't have their loved one

The doctor may recommend that they see a mental health provider who specializes in grief. This therapist could suggest several treatment options, such as talk therapy, medication, or both. These treatments could help process the loss and manage grief.

Long-Term Outlook

Losing a loved one doesn't mean your life is over, but it does mean things will be different. Seeking help and support can help you feel better. With time, you can find healing that will help you move forward with life while also celebrating your loved one's memory.

Suicide Prevention

In some cases of prolonged grief and depression, thoughts of suicide, self-harm, or violence towards others may be present. If you think someone is at immediate risk of self-harm or hurting another person:

1. Call 911 or your local emergency number.
2. Stay with the person until help arrives.
3. Remove any guns, knives, medications, or other things that may cause harm.
4. Listen, but don't judge, argue, threaten, or yell.

If you think someone is considering suicide, you should take them to an emergency room and get help from a crisis or suicide prevention hotline. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988.



The Bottom Line

Mourning can become even more difficult when others diminish someone else's grief or ignore it entirely. All grief is valid. No one else gets to tell another person whether they should or shouldn't feel sad.

Persons who are grieving should draw strength by reaching out to others who are grieving the loss with them or to loved ones who will try to lighten their burden, not make them feel worse; then seek professional help when grief becomes overwhelming and/or debilitating.

Final Thoughts- Please Keep in Mind

Just as grief affects different people in different ways, grief affects children very differently than adults.

Even though adults are experiencing grief, they may be able to put on a 'face' to talk to others or get through the everyday tasks that are still required. Children might put on a similar 'face,' as they may go from being upset and crying in one moment to playing or engaging with others the next.



Younger children (babies, toddlers, and preschoolers) often struggle to understand what death is. They may go through some regressions (e.g., wetting the bed or having accidents after potty training) or become more clingy or anxious after someone they love has died.

In contrast, older children (teenagers) might experience waves or bursts of grief that come on suddenly. They might also start to withdraw from daily activities and lose interest in things that they might have previously enjoyed.

Even though it may be frustrating, it is important to be patient with children as they go through the grieving process. Grief does not have a specific timeline, and children may not want to deal with their feelings at the same time that adults do.

Providing children of all ages with patience, stability, and understanding is the first step in ensuring they have an environment where they can express their grief when they are ready to do so.

For more information from the sources used to create this resource, please visit the websites listed below:

Kids' Help Line- *Supporting a Child through Grief and Loss*

Positive Psychology- *Helping Kids Cope with Grief*

Health Work Collective- *Five Effective Grief Counseling Techniques for Children*

Mayo Clinic Press- *Helping Children Cope with Death*

Psychology Today- *How to Help a Child in Grief*

Child Mind Institute- *Helping Children Deal with Grief*

HealGrief- *Understanding Grief*

Very Well Mind- *How the Five Stages of Grief Can Help Process a Loss*

Positive Psychology- *Grief and Bereavement Helping Kids Cope with Grief: 6+ Tips to Support Children*