

# Parent's Guide to the Grieving Child

## Do:

- Be available to listen.
- Follow routines, they provide a sense of safety and comfort.
- Contact the school after the death and direct school staff about what should be shared and your comfort level with school grief support.
- Prepare child for return to school by making a plan with the child and school to establish a safe place to be alone at school if needed.
- Identify a safe person the child may talk with at school.
- Modify academic expectations as needed.
- Set limits and address risk taking behavior immediately.

## Do not:

- Act as if nothing happened.
- Make statements about how people will or will not feel in the future.
- Force a child to talk about his/her feelings; assure your willingness to listen when he/she is ready.
- Assume that the child is coping well, even if he/she appears to be.
- Take a grieving child's anger personally.
- Neglect your own grieving process; this will spill over and affect your child.
- Allow your own emotions to get in the way of being helpful.
- Expect the child to finish all assignments on time.

## Do Say:

- —I'm sorry.
- —I know you are sad/angry/in pain...
- —This must be a hard time for you...
- —I'm ready to listen if you feel like talking.
- —It can be hard to understand why these things happen.
- —Let's talk about what would make you feel more comfortable.
- —Expressing your tears and pain can help you through this hard time.

## Avoid Saying:

- —You will get over it.
- —You should be over this by now.
- —I know just how you feel.
- —You should/shouldn't feel like...
- —Count your blessings...
- —Things could be worse...
- —Your loved one is better off.
- —You'll be stronger for this.
- —Be strong for your mother, siblings, etc.

## Normal Grief Feelings

It is normal for a grieving child to express any of the feelings listed here. It is important to provide grieving children with the safety, acceptance and support they need to cope with these normal grief reactions in a healthy way.

Alienated  
Angry  
Anxious  
Apathetic  
Cautious  
Confused  
Depressed  
Disappointed  
Exhausted  
Fearful  
Frightened  
Frustrated  
Guilty  
Helpless  
Hostile  
Hurt  
Hysterical  
Lonely  
Pained  
Paranoid  
Regretful  
Sad  
Shock  
Withdrawn

## When supporting a grieving child...

- Answer the questions they ask, even the hard ones.
- Give the child choices whenever possible.
- Talk about and remember the person who died.
- Accept your sorrow-----take time to grieve.
- Talk about it-----find family/friends to talk to.
- Keep busy-----do purposeful work that occupies your mind.
- Eat well and exercise-----take care of your body.
- Remembrance-----find creative ways to keep memories alive.
- Keep a journal-----record your feelings in a safe place.
- Seek inner strength-----set aside time for peace of mind.
- Seek help-----look to family and friends for extra support.

## **Helpful suggestions for helping a child cope with death:**

- 1.** When talking to a child about a tragedy, find out what they know or think they know has happened. Children may be aware of more than you think.
- 2.** Answer any questions simply and honestly, but only offer the details that they can absorb.
- 3.** Let them know you will be available to listen. When they are ready to talk—listen.
- 4.** Let the child have time to grieve, be upset and talk about their fears. Validate their feelings and provide reassurance.
- 5.** Give the child different ways of expressing his or her grief—verbal, written, creative, musical and physical.
- 6.** Allowing the child to go outside and play can be a good way to run off the anxiety they may sense from the adults and feel themselves.
- 7.** Try and keep regular routines. Children can grieve a change in behavior and mourn the environment and the predictability of a schedule that existed before the loss or death. Keeping regular routines can help.
- 8.** Be patient and flexible. Children grieve intermittently. They may cry one moment and then play normally the next.
- 9.** Remember that it may take the child to recover from a loss depends on the child, the type of loss and the relationship with the lost person, pet, object, etc. This could be months or years.
- 10.** Validate the reality that although a child will usually recover from a loss in his/her own time, they will always feel some level of the loss especially when triggered by a memory. This is normal and can contribute to healing if the child is supported, validated and loved.

## STAGES OF GRIEF

*Following are the five stages of grief that most individuals experience after the loss of someone close to them. These stages do not necessarily follow in this order, and it is not unusual for some stages to recur during the grief process. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.*

### **Denial**

Upon initial impact, survivors may find it difficult to believe the death has actually occurred. They may waver back and forth with the reality of their loss. It is common for emotional numbness and shock to accompany denial.

### **Anger**

In this stage, survivors may blame and become angry with themselves or others for their loss. They may believe that someone caused, or should have prevented, the death. Anger is often misdirected and could target God, medical personnel, relatives, or others perceived to have been responsible for the well-being of the deceased.

### **Bargaining**

Bargaining describes the way survivors make a deal with themselves (or God) in an attempt to indefinitely delay the pain of their loss. An example of bargaining is when a survivor begins working sixty hours a week in order to be "too busy" or "too tired" to deal with the overwhelming emotional pain of their grief. Bargaining is common and generally short-lived.

### **Depression**

The Depression Stage is the most emotionally painful stage of grief and it is often felt during other stages. When depressed, it is difficult for survivors to focus on and perform their regular daily routine.

### **Acceptance**

During this stage, survivors are left with a general sadness, but are no longer consumed by despair. Renewed interest is displayed in themselves, other people, activities, and life in general.

## TRAUMATIC EVENTS INFORMATION SHEET

You have experienced a traumatic event (an injury, loss of a loved one or property or a serious threat, or any overwhelming emotional experience). Even though the event may be completed, you may now be experiencing or may experience later, some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through a horrible event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks ( or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With understanding and the support of loved ones the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular traumatic event was just too powerful for the person to manage by themselves.

Here are some very common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction in a traumatized person.

| Physical                                     | Thinking                                      | Emotional                            |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Nausea                                       | Slowed thinking                               | Anxiety                              |
| Upset stomach                                | Difficulty making decisions                   | Fear                                 |
| Tremors (lips, hands)                        | Difficulty in problem-solving                 | Guilt                                |
| Feeling uncoordinated                        | Confusion                                     | Grief                                |
| Profuse sweating                             | Difficulty calculating                        | Depression                           |
| Chills                                       | Difficulty concentrating                      | Sadness                              |
| Diarrhea                                     | Memory problems                               | Feeling lost                         |
| Dizziness                                    | Distressing dreams                            | Anger                                |
| Chest pain (should be checked at a hospital) | Disorientation (especially to place and time) | Feeling abandoned                    |
| Rapid heart beat                             | Difficulty naming common objects              | Feeling numb                         |
| Rapid breathing                              | Seeing the event over & over                  | Startled                             |
| Increased blood pressure                     | Poor attention span                           | Shocked                              |
| Headaches                                    | Etc.  | Irritability                         |
| Muscle aches                                 |   | Wanting to die                       |
| Sleep Disturbance                            |   | Worry about Others                   |
| Etc.   |   | Feeling isolated                     |
|  |   | Wanting to limit contact with others |
|  |   | Etc.                                 |

# Normal Stress Reactions

## Cognitive Symptoms

- ✓ Confusion
- ✓ Disorientation
- ✓ Memory loss
- ✓ Difficulty performing tasks
- ✓ Trouble making decisions

## Behavioral Symptoms

- ✓ Withdrawal
- ✓ Excessive humor
- ✓ Hyperactivity
- ✓ Excessive talkativeness
- ✓ Prolonged silence

## Physical Symptoms

- ✓ Sweating
- ✓ Headaches
- ✓ Dizziness
- ✓ Upset stomach
- ✓ Muscle tremors

## Emotional Symptoms

- ✓ Feelings of numbness
- ✓ Guilt
- ✓ Feeling detached from reality
- ✓ Melancholy
- ✓ angry