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Signs of Grief in Children and Teens

Even children who are able to express their feelings of grief through words, still at times will show signs of grief through verbal, emotional, and physical behaviors at times. Each child is unique so each child will express grief in his or her own way and own time. There is a wide range of normal behavior. Remember that the only normal you will ever find is a setting on a dryer.

These are some of the normal and worrisome behaviors that may be signs of grief in children or teenagers.

Normal Verbal Behaviors:

- Talking about the deceased or loss a lot
- Not talking about the deceased or loss at all. (Some children initially act like everything is fine)
- Asking numerous questions
- Not asking any questions
- Wanting to hear the story of the loss over and over
- Not wanting to hear anything about the loss
- Wishing to be with the deceased (be careful not to jump to the conclusion that a child or teen is necessarily suicidal, but don't ignore the possibility either)
- Engaging attention by talking a lot
- Saying silly things, being the class clown
- Mentioning nighttime dreams about the person who died
- Talking about having "seen" or "felt" the person who died
- Voicing fears of almost everything and anything
- Voicing worries about safety, other people getting sick or dying

Normal Emotional Behaviors

- oceans of tears
- crying at unexpected times
- having strong feelings about seemingly small things
- over-reacting to a situation
- inability to concentrate or focus
- noncompliance with adults
- needing to be near an adult all the time
- being angry at everyone and everything
- seeing someone and believing it is the person who died
- forgetfulness
- lowered self esteem
- irritability
- clowning

Normal Physical behaviors:

- eating a lot
- not eating much
- sleeping a lot
- not sleeping
- urine and bowel accidents
- pains in the stomach and other areas unexplained by physician
- non-serious, recurrent illnesses such as colds, sore throats, and headaches.
- older children regressing: clinging, wanting to do babyish things such as suck a bottle, play with dolls
- aggressive behavior such as hitting, pinching
- needing to touch people frequently
- weariness and fatigue, even with enough sleep
- wanting to rip and destroy things

Worrisome behaviors:

- * **dangerous risk taking**
- * **self destructive behaviors**
- * **threatening to hurt self or others**
- * **violent play**
- * **total withdrawal from people and environment**
- * **a dramatic change in personality or functioning over a long period of time**
- * **any of the "normal" behaviors happening over a very long time or to an extreme.**

High Risk Students (For Educators and Counselors)

In a grieving student, the following changes in behavior and/or occurrence of symptoms constitute a high risk student for whom a referral for professional evaluation may be appropriate.

Drop in grades: It is not uncommon for students to have a lapse in their grade point average for a short time after a loss. Although some students struggle with school work more than others. Grief takes top priority so studying, concentrating and retaining information are difficult. However if there is no improvement after some time, consider seeking further support for the student. Try to understand when a student is avoiding homework because of associated depression or inability to focus. Often teachers can work with such students and break down assignments or have them get support from a homework buddy.

Angry Outbursts

Hyperactivity

Depression and/or Anxiety

Discussions about wanting to die: Watch for the student expressing a wish to die through writing, speaking or drawing. In young children be attentive to their play, however remember that it is also normal for children to re-enact their experiences through play.

Changes in Physical Symptoms: Watch for symptoms like lack of appetite, nightmares, restlessness, inability to concentrate, clinging to parents or physical complaints.

Feelings of Guilt: Watch for students who express a responsibility for the death of a loved one or friend. He or she may blame themselves for something they said, did, or didn't say or didn't do.

Lack of communication: Watch for students who don't want to talk about the loss or exhibit prolonged inability to acknowledge a loss.

Identity Change: Watch for students who seem to be assuming the identity of the person who died.

Isolation or Withdrawal: Watch for the student who becomes isolated, drops out of clubs or sports, or cancels events with friends. Early on this is normal but this should not continue.

Use of drugs or alcohol, self injurious behaviors, or other risky behaviors.

(Information from Grief Speaks, Lisa Athan, www.griefspeaks.com, 2011)