

Common Grief Reactions

Below are diverse reactions to loss that are common in some form for children and teens — and even adults — of all ages. (See table below for age-specific considerations and information.) Within the same family, some individuals might experience only a few of the reactions listed, while others might struggle with many reactions. For anyone, these types of reactions are understandable and natural responses to a significant loss.

Feelings:

- Sadness, despair, sorrow, initial disbelief, shock, numbness, yearning, longing, missing the person
- Anger, irritability, frustration
- Anxiety, fears, worries about safety and future
- Confusion, insecurity, guilt, remorse, shame, powerlessness

Thoughts:

- Constant thoughts and memories of the death or the person who died
- Believing the person who died is still present (hearing, seeing, feeling or smelling the person; vivid dreams)
- Worries about their own health or another loved one's health
- Confusion, disbelief about finality of death, thinking death was one's fault
- Difficulty making decisions
- Insecurities, lowered self-esteem or self-confidence
- Impaired memory and concentration

Body Reactions:

- Frequent illness or physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, increased heart rate, tense or sore muscles, unexplained body aches and pains)
- Loss of energy, fatigue or feeling too keyed up or on edge, difficulty relaxing or feeling calm and regulated

Behaviors:

- Less participation or interest in normal activities and/or isolation or withdrawal from others
- Inability to sleep or be alone, clinging to caregivers
- Acting younger than age or not engaging in normal self-care
- Angry, irritable or aggressive behaviors or conflicts with others
- Impulsivity and reactivity, unpredictable behaviors or hyperactivity or difficulty staying still
- Changes in sleeping patterns and appetite (eating or sleeping too much or too little)
- Performing poorly in school or work due to lack of initiative or difficulty concentrating, or anxious overachieving or perfectionism

Concerning Grief Reactions:

For most children and adults, there will be a **gradual decrease in the intensity of grief reactions** over the first six months to a year after the death. If any of the symptoms above are **not improving** at that point, or if they are **interfering with normal functioning or development**, it might mean that more intensive support is needed to prevent long-term problems.

Additionally, if any of the following are present, professional support should be sought:

- Severe depression (e.g., hopelessness, lack of interest in normal activities)
- Self-harm or suicidal thoughts or actions
- Reckless or illegal behaviors; dangerous aggression, fighting or bullying
- Extreme feelings of guilt or desire to seek revenge against person responsible for death
- Giving up on or inability to function at school or work, truancy
- Severe withdrawal or giving up on relationships
- Severe fears or anxiety that get in the way of normal functioning
- Substance or alcohol abuse
- Prolonged eating or sleeping problems affecting health or development
- Prolonged posttraumatic stress symptoms related to the death:
 - Increased arousal (e.g., feeling keyed up, jumpy, irritable or on edge)
 - Intrusive thoughts, images or nightmares about the death
 - Avoidance of reminders of the death (e.g., numbing, withdrawal)
 - Difficulty engaging in a healthy grieving process (e.g., sharing memories, maintaining a positive emotional connection, meaning making) because reminders of the death or the person who died trigger the above trauma reactions (this is sometimes referred to as “traumatic grief”)

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