

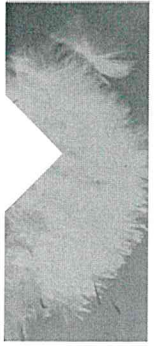


WESTERN RESERVE GRIEF SERVICES

Parent's Guide to the Grieving Child



Helping Children with the *big* Feelings of Grief



THE IMPACT OF DEATH IS OVERWHELMING FOR CHILDREN, especially as they deal with the rigors of school, stressful peer interactions, and changes at home. Often, children are not equipped with the skills needed to deal with these “big” feelings of grief. Unfortunately, in the weeks and months following a death, the adults that have helped them cope in the past are very busy with their own emotions and life changes. Here are several ideas for helping children with their “big” feelings of grief:

- ◆ **Use honesty and simplicity** when describing what happened. Children may become confused with inaccurate terms to describe dying, such as, “your grandpa is sleeping,” “we lost your mother today,” “your aunt passed away,” etc. Use words such as “dead” and “died”. Older children may want detailed descriptions of how the person died. Seek advice from a professional if you are unsure how or what to tell your child.
- ◆ **Be available and ready to listen** when a child chooses to share. When listening, give your undivided attention. Do not be distracted by cell phones or other interruptions. Describe the feelings of grief they could expect to have - sad, angry, guilty, scared, worried. Give examples of how you have dealt with some of these feelings. Address fears by telling them what you are doing to keep them safe and healthy. If the person died of illness, be sure to emphasize the fact that most people recover from illnesses.
- ◆ **Demonstrate and discuss appropriate ways to express feelings.** It is okay to share your sadness and tears with your children. Children may avoid activities or conversations to prevent their family members from crying or feeling sad. Reassure them that it's okay for you and them to cry. Be sure they know that crying can help them feel better.
- ◆ **Understand that anger is important for children to express,** and try not to take their anger personally. Give them ideas of how to let out anger without getting in trouble, i.e. punch a pillow, run fast, talk about it, etc. Feelings can also be expressed by writing, drawing, sculpting or doing other art projects.
- ◆ **Encourage involvement in memorial activities.** If possible, include children in planning the funeral or memorial services. Be sure to explain what will happen during the different parts of the service.
- ◆ **Involve children in remembering activities:** collecting photos, retelling their stories, or creating a memory box with mementos of your loved one. In addition, make plans to remember your loved one on special occasions and holidays.



Grief Reactions

Physical

- ◆ Appetite changes
- ◆ Rapid heart beat
- ◆ Breathing difficulties
- ◆ Chest tightness
- ◆ Sighing
- ◆ Cold hands
- ◆ Crying
- ◆ Sleeping difficulties
- ◆ Dizziness or fainting spells
- ◆ Slowed speech
- ◆ Dry mouth
- ◆ Stuttering
- ◆ Headaches
- ◆ Stomach problems
- ◆ Hives, rashes, itching
- ◆ Sweating
- ◆ Indigestion
- ◆ Tearfulness
- ◆ Low resistance to illness and infection
- ◆ Trembling
- ◆ Muscle tightness
- ◆ Voice – change of pitch
- ◆ Nightmares
- ◆ Weakness – especially in the legs
- ◆ Numbness or tingling
- ◆ Weight gain or loss

Emotional/Social

- ◆ Anger or angry outbursts
- ◆ Irritability
- ◆ Anxiety
- ◆ Jealousy
- ◆ Blaming others
- ◆ Loneliness
- ◆ Critical of self
- ◆ Longing
- ◆ Crying
- ◆ Loss of interest in living
- ◆ Depression
- ◆ Low self-esteem
- ◆ Dread
- ◆ Mood swings
- ◆ Fear
- ◆ Relief
- ◆ Freedom
- ◆ Restlessness
- ◆ Guilt
- ◆ Sadness
- ◆ Helplessness
- ◆ Shock
- ◆ Hopelessness
- ◆ Suspiciousness
- ◆ Impulsive behavior
- ◆ Withdrawal from activity
- ◆ Indecisiveness
- ◆ Worthlessness

Intellectual/Cognitive


- ◆ Loss of productivity
- ◆ Over-attention to details
- ◆ Perfectionism
- ◆ Preoccupation
- ◆ Sense of loved one's presence or decreased
- ◆ Fantasy life increased or decreased
- ◆ Worrying
- ◆ Forgetfulness

Spiritual

- ◆ Turning towards or away from faith tradition
- ◆ Anger at God
- ◆ Feeling abandoned

Behavioral

- ◆ Absentmindedness
- ◆ Restlessness
- ◆ Searching and calling out
- ◆ Clumsiness
- ◆ Eating difficulties
- ◆ Fingernail biting
- ◆ Teeth grinding
- ◆ Treasuring objects of the deceased
- ◆ Hair twisting
- ◆ Visiting places of the deceased
- ◆ Nightmares

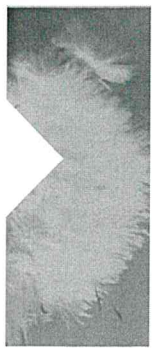


Watch for flare-ups of:

Allergies
Canker/cold sores
Arthritis
Diabetes
Asthma
Migraines

Grief can sometimes cause errors in judging distances ◆ grammar ◆ pronunciation ◆ use of numbers

This is only a partial listing of common grief reactions. Many additional grief reactions are not included here.



What to say to a Grieving Child* (and what not to)

DO SAY:

This must be a hard time for you.

I'm ready to listen if you feel like talking.

"We'll get through this together."

Let's talk about what would make you feel more comfortable.

“
It can be hard to understand why these things happen.
”

I can just sit with you; we don't need to talk right now.

Expressing your tears and pain can help you through this difficult time.

*I know you're...
...sad.
...angry.
...in pain.*

(If they're demonstrating those feelings.)

AVOID SAYING:

"You will get over it."

“
Count your blessings.
”

Things could be worse.

"I know just how you feel."

You should be over this by now.

Be strong.

I'm sorry for your loss.




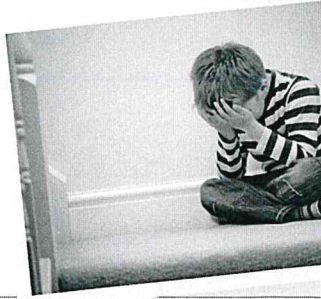




(children & teens find this redundant.)

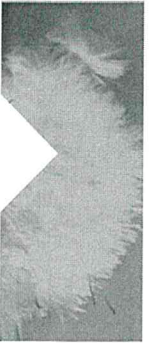
"You should/shouldn't feel like..."

They're in a better place.

This was God's will.

Developmental Stages and *reactions* to Death

Child's Age	Common Developmental Characteristics
 <p>2-5 years</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Magical thinking ◆ Active fantasy life ◆ Highly egocentric ◆ May blame self for bad things ◆ May not be able to verbalize needs and fears ◆ Reversibility of concepts. Need to repeat things 
 <p>5-8 years</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Child starts to think concretely and logically ◆ Ability to use language increases ◆ Increased memory capacity, both long and short term ◆ Increased awareness of feelings and expectations of others ◆ Peers are important ◆ Want to understand death in a concrete way 
 <p>8-12 years</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Enjoy games, and competing ◆ Begin to have increased understanding of self and relationship to world ◆ Increased language skills ◆ Able to reason through situations using problem-solving skills 
 <p>12-18 years</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Need independence ◆ Can think abstractly ◆ Puberty usually has begun by now ◆ May have false sense of immortality ◆ Peer group important ◆ May begin to have intimate relationships 



Grief Reactions

Helpful Approaches

- ◆ Confusion. Agitation at night; may be afraid to go to sleep
- ◆ Child may be able to appreciate a profound event has occurred, but may not understand permanence of death
- ◆ May seem unaffected
- ◆ Repeated questions

- ◆ Simple honest words, and phrases
- ◆ Reassurance
- ◆ Secure and loving environment
- ◆ Drawing, reading, books, playing together, active play
- ◆ Support play as form of expression
- ◆ Include in the funeral rituals

- ◆ Denial, anger, sorrow
- ◆ Distress
- ◆ May act as though nothing has happened
- ◆ Desire to be like peers
- ◆ May repeat questions
- ◆ May need physical activity regularly

- ◆ Answer questions simply and honestly
- ◆ Look for confused thinking
- ◆ Offer physical outlets
- ◆ Reassurance about the future
- ◆ Draw, read, play together
- ◆ Include in funeral rituals

- ◆ Shock, denial, anxiety, distress
- ◆ Try to cope
- ◆ Understand finality of death
- ◆ May have morbid curiosity, or want to know specifics about death and dying
- ◆ May need regular physical activity
- ◆ Want to be like peers

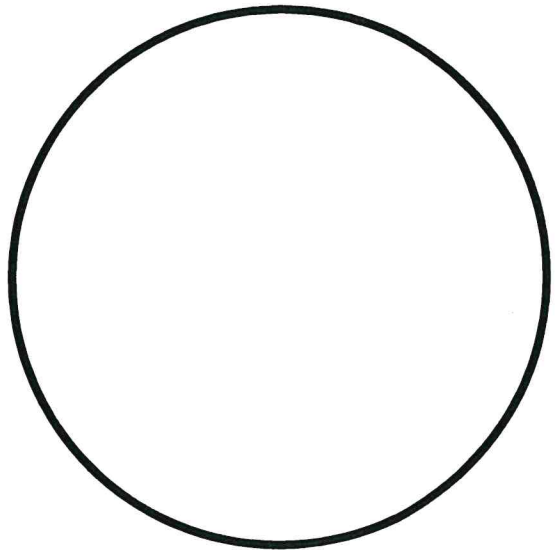
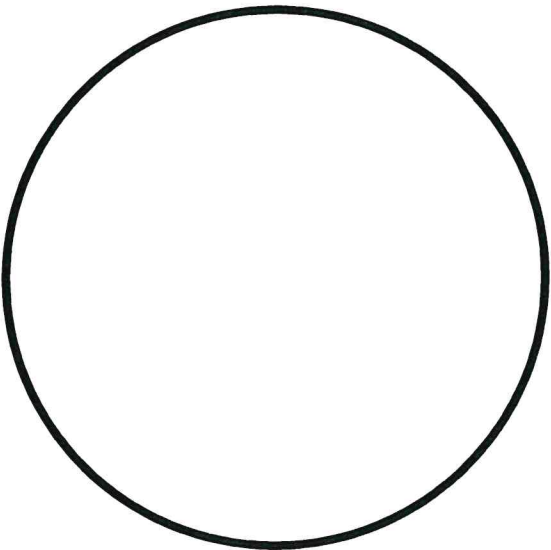
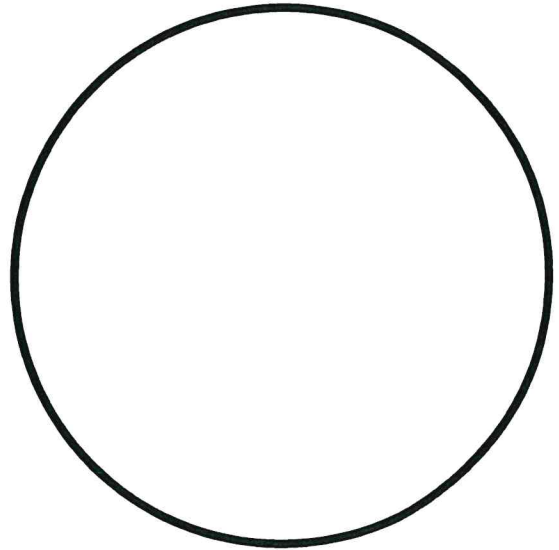
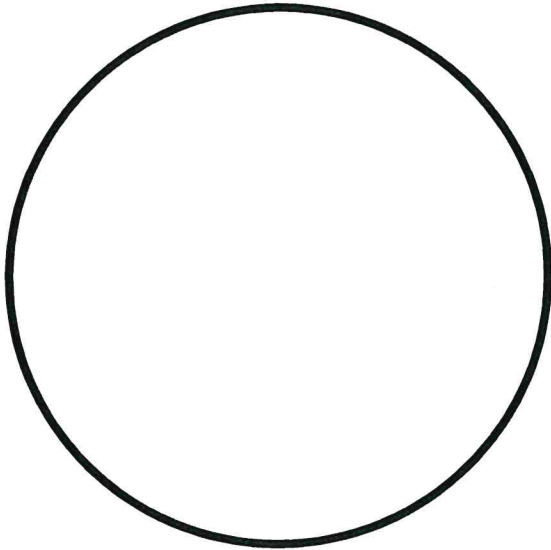
- ◆ Answer questions directly and honestly
- ◆ Reassurance about the future
- ◆ Create times to talk about feelings and questions
- ◆ Offer physical outlets
- ◆ Read
- ◆ Include in funeral plans and rituals

- ◆ Shock, anger, distress
- ◆ May become depressed or withdraw
- ◆ May react similarly to adult, but have less coping mechanisms
- ◆ May feel isolated, especially from peers

- ◆ Encourage peer support
- ◆ Groups may be helpful
- ◆ Utilize other adults
- ◆ Maintain consistent environment
- ◆ Include in funeral plans and rituals
- ◆ Allow and encourage expression of feelings

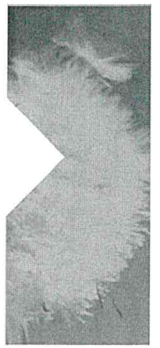
ACTIVITY

In the circles below, draw pictures of your different grief feelings. ALL feelings are okay.



It's what we do with our feelings that count. Talk with a trusted adult about how to cope with each feeling.

Helpful Suggestions



- ◆ **Keeping regular routines can help.** The change in behavior and routines can be difficult for children.
- ◆ **Be patient and flexible.** Children grieve intermittently. They may cry one moment and then play normally the next.
- ◆ **Remember the time it takes the child to recover from a death depends on the child,** the type of loss and the relationship with the person, pet, object, etc. This could be months or years.
- ◆ **Validate the reality that although a child will usually recover from a death in 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.
- ◆ **Help the child to foster memories of their special person who died.** This can help them process their grief and provide comfort in knowing that the memories they have of their special person can never be taken away.



- ◆ **When talking to a child about the death, find out what she knows or perceives about what has happened. Children may be aware of more than you think.**
- ◆ **Answer any questions simply and honestly, but only offer the details that they can absorb.**
- ◆ **Let them know you will be available to listen. When they are ready to talk, listen.**
- ◆ **Let the child have time to grieve, be upset and talk about their fears. Validate their feelings and provide reassurance.**
- ◆ **Give the child different ways of expressing his or her grief — creative, physical and verbal.**
- ◆ **Allow the child to go outside and play.** It can be a good way to run off the anxiety they may sense from the adults and feel themselves.

A dark grey banner with a white triangle pointing downwards at the bottom center. The word "ACTIVITY" is written in white, uppercase letters in the center of the banner.

ACTIVITY

Here are a few ideas for letters to your loved ones.

Lately I've been thinking...

I wonder...

Sometimes I miss...

I remember when...

Something exciting I've done lately is...

This summer, I/we...

When I go back to school...



How to *Support* the Grieving Adolescent

UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENTS can be a challenge and supporting grieving adolescents can be difficult. There are many ways adults can provide support. Grieving adolescents need opportunities and creative outlets to share their story of grief and express their feelings. Here are some ideas:

- ◆ **Encourage creative writing and/or journaling.** Writing gives grief words and an avenue to express their feelings.
- ◆ **Music plays an important role in their lives.** Songs can elicit feelings, thoughts and memories. Music can help adolescents share what they are experiencing with someone else and break through the defenses of grief. Promote music making or music listening.
- ◆ **Art provides another creative outlet** for grieving adolescent to create a visual image of their feelings and their story of grief. They may want to create a legacy such as a quilt or memory box. These visual images can open communication and provide a healthy grieving process.
- ◆ **Most importantly, let your adolescent know you are there to support and accompany them on their journey.**





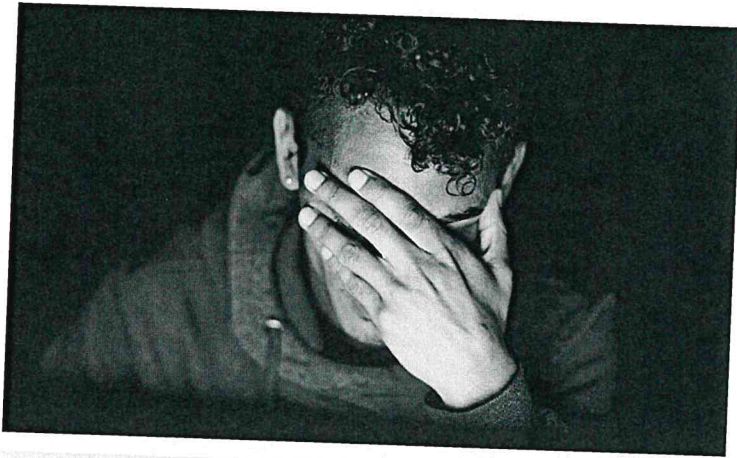
FOR THE ADOLESCENT

Straight Talk: *Surviving Grief*

YOU MAY EXPERIENCE ALL KINDS OF EMOTIONS. They may be overwhelming, frightening, and intense; you may feel out of control. When you are grieving, normal is messy. How do you cope?

- ♦ **Shock, disbelief.** Intellectually, you know your loved one has died. Emotionally, it doesn't seem real. Talk, talk, talk. Grief needs to become real before you can go on with the mourning process. Avoiding the pain IS NOT possible.
- ♦ **Denial.** The pain may be so raw that you cannot face it. Hence, you leave the room when someone is talking about the deceased. You bury yourself in your schoolwork. You try to numb yourself with alcohol or drugs. Understand that you cannot escape from dealing with grief. Isolating yourself, numbing yourself, acting in a self-destructive manner, will only make your pain worse – and deny the possibility for healing. So talk about your pain. And STAY AWAY from drugs and alcohol – they are depressants and will make you feel worse.
- ♦ **Anger.** You may be angry at the world, at God, at your friends for saying or doing the wrong things, at your family for hovering or not supporting you, at the deceased for leaving you. You have every right to be angry. But you don't have a right to take out that anger on others – or on yourself. If you're feeling angry, try playing basketball, going swimming, taking a walk, throwing a ball with your pet, going for a run, listening to some favorite music, exercising, journaling.
- ♦ **Guilt and Regrets.** If only I hadn't said...I wish I had listened to him...Give yourself a break. No one is perfect, including the person who died. Yes, maybe it would have been better if you hadn't had a fight before she died. When someone dies we often second-guess ourselves, but the truth is that awful things happen and there is little we can do about that. So again, give yourself a break.
- ♦ **Sadness.** You don't think you can cry anymore. You don't think you can bear the ache any longer. You are torn apart. School has no meaning; you withdraw from your friends; you push away your family. The slightest effort may leave you exhausted. Sadness after a death can be disabling, and often mimics depression. Be careful. Sometimes the pain can be so bad that you may want to look for ways to feel better fast – such as drugs and alcohol and promiscuity. Many believe they can't go over, under or around grief, you must go through it. Destructive behaviors will only push you in a deeper depression. So how do you deal with overwhelming sadness? Talk about the person who died. Make a memory book. Put together a video. Dedicate something to the person who died – such as an athletic event, a charity, a poem, a song. Remember, just as they say it is "darkest before the dawn," your grief may seem endless just before you begin to heal.

Give yourself a break. No one is perfect, including the person who died.



- ♦ **Fears, worries.** It's difficult not to worry that something will happen to someone else you love after a death. You may even worry that you will die. Try, first, to identify what your worries are. Then, talk to someone about those worries. Is anything in your control? If so, take a responsible action. If not, try some relaxation. Worry is common, but try to reduce the severity.
- ♦ **Inability to sleep.** Rest, rest, rest. Grief is draining, and yet your body might be fighting falling asleep. Try to drink a glass of warm milk or chamomile tea before bedtime. Try some relaxing music. Take a warm bath or shower. Watch a light, entertaining movie or TV program.
- ♦ **Inability to eat.** Grief can sometimes make you "forget" to eat or have no cares about what you're eating. Try to sit down at a mealtime and eat. Have healthy "munchies" cut up in the refrigerator. If you can't eat three regular meals, try five smaller ones. Comfort eating is normal, but don't make it a habit.

- ♦ **Inability to remember.** You forgot about the paper due in English class. You locked your keys in the car. You misplaced the grocery list your mom gave you. What to do? Be patient. Write things down. Organize for the next day the night before. Have your friends text or call and remind you of assignments.
- ♦ **Inability to concentrate.** How can you focus on your history when your mind is wandering even during your favorite TV show? Avoid taking on extra assignments – now is the time to do what is required. Underline, highlight, take notes on what you're reading. Allow more time to do your homework. Talk to your teachers. **BE EXTRA CAREFUL** when doing any task that requires your complete attention, such as cooking, mowing the lawn and **ESPECIALLY** driving.
- ♦ **Physical symptoms.** It is widely accepted that stress can depress your immune system. Hence, it is not unusual to see people who are grieving complain of headaches, nausea, dizziness, fatigue, insomnia, recurrence of allergies, frequent colds. Make certain to take care of yourself – make time for a doctor's appointment. Watch your health.



NOTE: If you need to speak to a counselor or therapist after someone special to you has died, it does not mean you are "sick." It means you have been injured by something beyond your control and you are getting help for your injury. It's that simple.

A final important word of caution:

- ♦ Suicidal thoughts must be taken **VERY SERIOUSLY**. If you or someone you know spends a great deal of time thinking about dying, **TELL SOMEONE IMMEDIATELY**.
- ♦ **Stay away from drugs and alcohol.** These substances will impair your judgment and put you at risk for doing something that you would not do if fully rational.
- ♦ **Think about your family and friends.** Although you may feel alone, understand that there are people who care about you. Turn to them.
- ♦ Go one day at a time. **Try not to think too far ahead when you are grieving.** Think about getting through the task in front of you; do not think about next week, next month, next year.
- ♦ Talk to someone you trust, be it a parent, a coach, a school counselor, a teacher, a religious leader, a therapist. **Talk to someone – If they are unavailable and you are feeling at risk for hurting yourself, call 911. Immediately.**
- ♦ Remember that as raw as your pain is today, you will feel better. You will laugh again. **You will heal.**