

Family Toolkit for the Grieving Student

As you navigate and support your grieving child(ren), we have developed a toolkit designed to provide pertinent information to families about normal, healthy grieving during childhood. The toolkit contains guidance about the experience of grieving children, helpful tips on how to best support grieving children, and suggestions for coping with specific grief-related experiences. This is not an exhaustive list. Your child's counselor, administrators, and additional support staff are here to support you and your family, please reach out with any questions or concerns.

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:

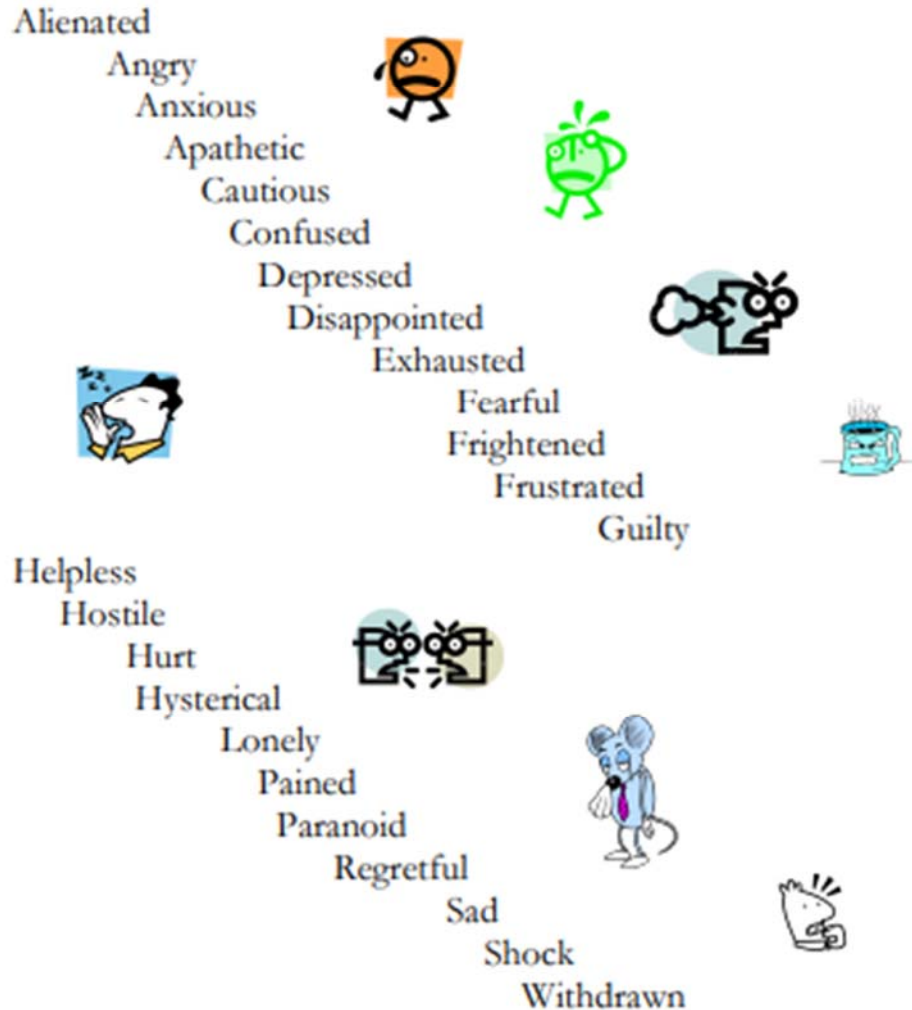
- "I'm sorry."
- "I know you are sad/angry/in pain..."
- "This must be a hard time for you..."
- "I'm ready to listen if you feel like talking."
- "It can be hard to understand why these things happen."
- "Let's talk about what would make you feel more comfortable."
- "Expressing your tears and pain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

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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.



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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.

The following guidelines can be helpful when supporting a grieving child:

1. Accept your sorrow-----take time to grieve.
2. Talk about it-----find family/friends to talk to.
3. Keep busy-----do purposeful work that occupies your mind.
4. Eat well and exercise-----take care of your body.
5. Remembrance-----find creative ways to keep memories alive.
6. Keep a journal-----record your feelings in a safe place.
7. Seek inner strength-----set aside time for peace of mind.
8. Seek help-----look to family and friends for extra support.

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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.

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Support Systems

A support system is the group of people in your life that you can turn to for help in times of need and who can turn to you in times of need. They are members of your inner-circle and outer-circle. They may include your close friends, family members, members of the clergy, people in your community and professional counselors.



Support systems can play an important role in grief for adults and children.

Children need to feel safety, love and acceptance when experiencing the big feelings of grief. Often, this can be difficult for adults to provide, particularly if they are overwhelmed with their own grief. This is an example of a time when turning to a close friend, a relative or spiritual leader for help may be appropriate. Utilizing your support system can be helpful to the entire family system, supporting the grieving child in the process.

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The Importance of Remembrance

Fostering the memories of a child's deceased loved one can help them to process grief. It can be comforting to know that the memories they have of their special person can never be taken away. Sometimes, remembering a special person who died triggers big feelings. This is a normal part of the grieving process. The key is to have a plan for how to cope with those big feelings. Through discussion and modeling, children can learn healthy coping from the adults in their lives.

Supporting a grieving child starts with:

- Being honest
- Answering questions
- Describing feelings and reactions of grief
- Following routines, with some flexibility
- Avoiding use of phrases like "You'll get over it"
- Being available to provide love and support
- Including children in funeral planning
- Not using euphemisms like "he's sleeping" or "she went away"
- Understanding a grieving child's anger as grief

Things you can say:

- "I'm sorry"
- "This is such a hard time for you"
- "I'm ready to listen if you feel like talking"
- "Let's talk about what might make you more comfortable here"
- "Crying can help you through this hard time"
- "I know you are sad/angry/in pain..."
- "It can be hard to understand why things like this happen"

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Supporting Adolescents Through Grief

When death impacts the life of your child or teen, it is often overwhelming and difficult to know how to help, particularly if you are grieving the loss yourself. Parents often feel the desire to protect and shield their children from the pain, sadness and tragedy of death. Unfortunately, avoiding grief will not avoid heartache. Dismissing death and failing to acknowledge grief reactions can increase feelings of isolation and discourage teens from seeking support.

The following responses can assist in creating an open and empathic environment, opening the door for your child to share his feelings and to recognize that his grief is normal.

- Acknowledge and validate her sorrow; reassure that INTENSE feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, fear and helplessness will lessen with time.
- Be available to LISTEN and offer to do so often.
- Stick to routine, normalcy and structure. Reinforce safety and security after the loss of control associated with death.
- Encourage healthy eating, sleeping and exercise habits; reinforce the importance of good self-care.
- Discuss your family's religious or spiritual beliefs; offer to attend services or pray together.
- Give your child SPACE to grieve; allow time for letter writing, journaling, art or music activities, physical outlets, or spending time with friends.
- Include him in planning and attendance at funeral and memorial services.
- Offer to help connect her to resources such as school counselors or grief support groups.
- Ask if he would like a hug, you might be surprised at how often the answer is "YES"!

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Finding the Right Words

Finding the right words to comfort someone who has experienced a death is challenging.

When that person is your child or teen, it becomes even more difficult. Often parents find themselves avoiding the topic altogether for fear that they will say the wrong thing.

The following are helpful responses that convey sincerity and demonstrate your recognition of their grief.

- *"I'm sorry"*
- *"It can be hard to understand why these things happen"*
- *"No, it's not fair"*
- *"This is such a hard time for you"*
- *"I'm ready to listen if you feel like talking"*
- *"I can't begin to understand how you are feeling"*
- *"How can I help?"*
- *"It's okay to cry"*

On the other hand, there are some response and clichés best to avoid. The following are often seen as unhelpful and even upsetting when offered to grieving children or teens.

- *"Be strong for your mother/ siblings, etc."*
- *"It was God's will"*
- *"You are the man/ woman of the house now"*
- *"I know just how you feel"*
- *"You will get over it"*
- *"You should/ shouldn't feel like..."*
- *"You should be over this by now"*
- *"You should count your blessings"*
- *"He/ she is better off/ in a better place"*

Remember that there are no magical words to take away the pain associated with death.

You don't have to say anything to show someone that you care. Often your presence alone says enough- that you are here and willing to listen.

Additional Resources:

- Child Mind Institute-Helping Children Cope with Grief- <https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-grief/>
- National Association for School Psychologists-Brief Facts and Tips- <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/addressing-grief>
- Brooke's Place-Grief Resources for Students in Need- <https://www.brookesplace.org/images/pdf/2018/grief-resources-2018.pdf>