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# Adolescents and Grief



**When adolescents experience a death, their parents, caregivers, relatives and teachers are often concerned about how best to support and meet their needs. Adolescents express and process grief in a variety of ways depending on their age, personality, past experience of loss, support systems, and the context of the bereavement.**

This information is designed to help parents, caregivers, relatives and teachers to understand and support adolescents to navigate their grief experience.

## **Common grief responses in adolescents**

Adolescents, like adults, will vary in their responses to death and dying; however, there are some common reactions that may affect them. These include:

- Shock and disbelief that the person has died
- Sadness that the person has gone
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things Reluctance to go to school
- Disruptive behaviours/frequent fighting

- Non-compliance to requests Hyperactivity
- Increased need for attention
- Issues of abandonment, insecurity and safety concerns Fear, guilt, relief, anger, rage, regret, confusion
- Concern about being treated differently
- Change in values, questioning what's important
- Preoccupation with death, wanting details
- A need for checking in on surviving parents, siblings, extended family, friends, etc
- Changes in relationships and family roles
- Wanting to be physically close to safe adults
- Changes to sleep patterns and appetite
- Headaches, tiredness, muscle aches and nausea
- Anxiety about the future

## **Causes for concern**

Be aware of signs that indicate an adolescent is not coping and seek professional support where the following is evident:

- » Hopelessness, depression, intense
- » Sadness dramatic changes in
- » Personality antisocial or violent behaviours
- » Excessive guilt or self-blame related to the grief
- » Death risk taking or behaving dangerously
- » Inappropriate sexual behaviour
- » Breaking the law or illegal behaviour
- » Excessive gaming
- » Drug and alcohol abuse
- » Prolonged sleep and/or eating problems extended Withdrawal or isolation from family and/or friends
- » Reoccurring thoughts of death
- » Ongoing suicidal thoughts or evidence of self-harming behaviours.

## **Helping adolescents navigate their grief experience**

### **Listen and talk with them**

Adolescents need and want truth as much as adults. When they don't get it they may lose trust with that adult and attempt to piece together information with peers, which can often be incorrect or embellished, resulting in worry and confusion. Try to be open, honest and consistent in your communications with them. Invite them to talk about the loss and respect their choice if they are not ready, but check in with them regularly in case they change their mind.

### **Provide safety and security**

Adolescents often look to their peers for support when times are tough, so encourage and support them to connect with friends in a safe environment. Encourage their continued participation in enjoyable activities, such as sports or hobbies, and try to maintain routines as much as possible.

Families are also very important in supporting a young person with their grief and can help young people to maintain a sense of security and feel safe.

## **Provide opportunities for expression, memorialisation and connection**

Support and encourage them to gather stories and memories of the person who died, bringing them together in ways and activities that appeal to them, including:

- » Writing journals photos
- » Creative artwork
- » Music/dance talking
- » Blogs

## **Allow for a range of responses to loss**

- Memorials
- Tree planting
- Creative writing
- Joining a support group
- Starting a book of memories
- Bushwalking

Be aware that your own grieving style may look very different to that shown by the adolescent. Finding out how they express their grief and reassuring them that it's okay to have different ways of grieving, will help them to feel more supported. Provide them with information about normal feelings associated with grief.

## **Provide support leading up to anniversaries and significant occasions**

Help them to anticipate times that may be particularly difficult, (e.g. Christmas, birthdays or anniversaries) and develop a plan for coping with these periods. Try also to help them find meaning in what has happened and foster a sense of hope for the future.

## **Support yourself**

You won't be in any position to provide support if you don't first take care of yourself, both physically and emotionally. If you are struggling, don't be afraid to ask for help, whether that be through family, friends or health professionals.

## **Seeking help**

With good information, love and support, adolescents can learn to understand and work with their grief. It can be particularly challenging for families to support each other when a family member has died, because everyone will grieve in different ways, so seeking professional support might be helpful if you're finding it difficult to support each other through a loss.

Download Grief Australia's MyGrief app for immediate information about how to receive bereavement support or how to support someone who is grieving. The MyGrief app is available at <http://bit.ly/mygrief> for both Apple and Android smartphones.

Contact Grief Australia on 1800 642 066 to arrange to speak with a specialist bereavement counsellor about telephone or online bereavement counselling.



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# Children and Grief (Primary School)



Following the death of someone close, parents are often concerned about how to best support and meet the needs of their children. Like adults, children experience, express and process grief in a variety of ways depending on their age, stage of development, personality, family culture, understanding of death, past experiences of loss and the context of their bereavement. When considering how best to provide support, the child's unique grieving needs should also be considered.

This information sheet is designed to help parents, caregivers and teachers to understand and help primary school-aged children navigate their grief experience.

## **A primary school-aged child's understanding of death**

Children of primary school age are beginning to understand the concept that death is permanent, though younger school-aged children may engage in 'magical' thinking, trying to outwit death. Due to a limited

understanding of death, primary school-aged children may also have an increased fear in regards to their own death or feel responsible for the deceased's death.

## **Talking to primary school-aged children about death**

Although it is natural to want to protect children from hurt or upset, it is important that you take the time to talk and listen to them following the death of someone close. Answer their questions about death in an honest and consistent way without glossing over the truth or minimising the impact of what has happened by saying that 'everything is fine'.

Begin by asking what they already know. Children are more perceptive than we give them credit for, and may already have picked up on and formed their own opinion around what has happened. When explaining the situation to them, it is important that you tell them the facts in a simple and age-appropriate way, e.g. 'Grandma has died and will not return'. Children often take things literally, and saying things like 'Grandma has gone to sleep', or 'Grandma went to hospital and isn't coming home', can be confusing and lead to unnecessary fears, e.g. they may become afraid of going to sleep or visiting hospital.

It is also important to explain why their loved one died, e.g. 'Mark died because his body stopped working, this means he can no longer breathe, eat or feel hot or cold'. This will reassure children that the death wasn't a result of anything they said or did.

## **Common signs of grief in primary school-aged children**

Children, like adults, will vary in their responses to death and dying; however, there are some common factors that may affect them.

### **Children of primary school-age may:**

- Experience a difficult transition period, want to see death as reversible and believe death only happens to other people
- Be very curious about death and burial rituals and ask detailed questions
- Imagine death as a bogeyman or ghost
- Play games pretending to die
- Be angry over the death and focus their anger at certain people or anyone involved with the death, e.g. doctors, parents
- Take time to absorb the reality of what has happened and might not appear to be immediately affected by the death
- Be quick to blame themselves
- Experience disturbed sleep, decreased appetite, poor school performance or have physical reactions, e.g. headaches
- Worry about who will look after them if a parent or other caregiver dies
- Take on a parenting role to younger siblings
- 'Act out' feelings rather than talk about them
- Be concerned about what their peers think and might be anxious about being seen as 'different'
- Feel isolated, because no-one else they know has had a similar experience

## **Helping children to navigate their grief experience**

### **Listen and talk with them**

Children need time and to feel safe in order to express how they are feeling. Be prepared to revisit conversations a number of times, as children need time to process information. Be patient, open, honest and consistent with your responses. Reassure them that grief is normal, and it is okay to be upset about what has happened.

### **Include them**

Include children in decision-making when appropriate; for example, give your child the choice as to whether or not they would like to participate in the funeral or any other mourning rituals. Rather than making suggestions, speak with them about their ideas of ways they would like to remember their loved one.

### **Provide safety and security**

Death can threaten a child's sense of safety and control. It is vital that the child's physical and emotional needs are met to support them in adapting to the loss. Try to maintain routines and firm, but fair, boundaries as much as possible.

### **Provide opportunities for expression**

Many children respond well to creative outlets, and there are a range of activities that you can do with children to encourage them to process and express their grief, including:

- Drawing and painting
- Reading and storytelling
- Writing poetry or letters to the person who has died
- Craft activities, e.g. make a memory box or collage
- Music and dance

### **Allow for a range of responses to loss**

Grief is individual and personal, and accordingly children may grieve in ways that are different to adults, siblings or schoolmates. Some children are more social and verbally expressive, while others are more private and talk less. Some children spend time talking about their feelings, while others manage their grief by doing things.

### **Provide opportunities for memorialisation and connection**

Offer opportunities for them to maintain links to the deceased through memorialisation and connection, e.g. visiting the grave, reflecting on memories and participating in rituals of remembrance.

### **Support yourself**

You won't be in any position to provide support if you don't first take care of yourself, both physically and emotionally. If you are struggling, don't be afraid to ask for help, whether that be through family, friends or health professionals.

### **Seeking help**

With good information, love and support, children can learn to understand and work with their grief. However, if you feel that your child needs more assistance than you can provide, don't hesitate to seek further help from a health professional.



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# Children and Grief (Preschool)



Following the death of someone close, parents are often concerned about how to best support and meet the needs of their children. Like adults, children experience, express and process grief in a variety of ways depending on their age, stage of development, personality, family culture, understanding of death, past experiences of loss and the context of their bereavement. When considering how best to provide support, the child's unique grieving needs should also be considered.

This information is designed to help parents and caregivers to understand and help preschool-aged children, i.e. aged five years and under, navigate their grief experience.

## **A preschool-aged child's understanding of death**

Preschool-aged children often find it difficult to understand the finality and irreversibility of death. This understanding often results in terms such as 'death' and 'forever' needing repeated explanations and children may expect the deceased to return. Children may also have questions in regards to the deceased's feelings, e.g. are they hungry?

## Talking to preschool-aged children about death

Although it is natural for parents to want to protect their child from hurt or upset, it is important that you take the time to talk and listen to your children following the death of someone close. Answer their questions about death in an honest and consistent way, without glossing over the truth or minimising the impact of what has happened by saying that 'everything is fine'.

A good place to begin is by asking them what they already know. Children are more perceptive than we give them credit for, and they may already have picked up on and formed their own opinion around what has happened.

When explaining the situation to them, it is important that you tell them the facts in a simple and age-appropriate way, e.g. 'Grandma has died and will not return'. Young children often take things literally, and saying things like 'Grandma has gone to sleep', or 'Grandma went to hospital and isn't coming home', can be confusing and lead to unnecessary fears, e.g. they may become afraid of going to sleep or visiting hospital.

It is also important to explain why their loved one died, e.g. 'Mark died because his body stopped working, this means he can no longer breathe, eat or feel hot or cold'. This will reassure children that the death wasn't a result of anything they said or did.

## Common signs of grief in preschool-aged children

Children, like adults, will vary in their responses to death and dying; however, there are some common factors that may affect them.

### Preschool-aged children may:

- Be greatly affected by the emotions of those around them, especially parents and siblings
- Grieve in doses, alternating between displaying grief and playing as if nothing has happened
- Have a matter-of-fact curiosity about death, asking confronting questions
- Become fussy, irritable, withdrawn, or show signs of insecurity
- Have distressing dreams and nightmares
- Experience restless sleep
- Have changes in their appetite
- Have difficulties concentrating or making choices
- Feel responsible for the person's death
- Act or behave in ways that are younger than they are, e.g. bed wetting, sleep difficulties or clinging behaviour
- Feel bewildered and physically search for their loved one who has died

## How can I help my child to navigate their grief experience?

### Listen and talk with them

Children need time and to feel safe in order to express how they are feeling. Be prepared to revisit conversations a number of times, as children need time to process information. Just as young children have short attention spans, they also have short feeling spans. They need brief, simple and repeated explanations. Be patient, open, honest and consistent. Reassure them that it is okay to be upset about what has happened.

### Include them

Include children in decision-making when appropriate; for example, give your child the choice as to whether or not they would like to participate in the funeral or any other mourning rituals. Rather than making suggestions, speak with them about their ideas of ways they would like to remember their loved one.

### **Provide safety and security**

Death can threaten a child's sense of safety and control. It is vital that the child's physical and emotional needs are met to support them in adapting to the loss. Try to maintain routines and firm, but fair, boundaries as much as possible.

### **Provide opportunities for expression**

Many children respond well to creative outlets, and there are a range of activities that you can do with children to encourage them to process and express their grief, including:

- Drawing and painting
- Reading and storytelling
- Craft activities, e.g. make a memory box or collage
- Music and dance

### **Allow for a range of responses to loss**

Younger children may grieve differently than adults, older siblings, or even siblings of a similar age. Some children are more social and verbally expressive, while others are more private and talk less. Some children spend time talking about their feelings, while others manage their grief by doing things.

### **Provide opportunities for memorialisation and connection**

Offer opportunities for them to maintain links to the deceased through memorialisation and connection, e.g. visiting the grave, using the deceased's name, reflecting on memories and participating in rituals of remembrance.

### **Support yourself**

You won't be in any position to support your children if you don't first take care of yourself, both physically and emotionally. If you are struggling, don't be afraid to ask for help, whether that be through family, friends or health professionals.

### **Seeking help**

With good information, love and support, your child can learn to understand and work with their grief. However, if you feel that your child needs more assistance than you can provide, don't hesitate to seek further help from a health professional.



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# About Grief



**'I'd never had a serious loss before and I thought grief was basically lots of crying which peaked at the funeral and then you 'got over it' and 'moved on'. I wasn't prepared for the utter emotional, physical, and mental chaos that it was. I wasn't prepared for all the other emotions that came with it – the guilt, the anger, the fear.'** – Annie.

Grief is our response to loss. It is the normal, natural and inevitable response to loss, and it can affect every part of our life, including our thoughts, behaviours, beliefs, feelings, physical health and our relationships with others.

With the support of family and friends, many people adapt to loss well and may not experience intense and persistent feelings. However, for some, the experience of grief can be overwhelming and further support may be helpful.

## **Common grief responses**

After a death, we may experience a range of intense feelings such as sadness, anger, anxiety, disbelief, panic, relief, irritability or numbness. Grief can also affect our thinking. We may think we will never get over this, or that we are going crazy. Sometimes grief can also cause difficulty in sleeping and physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, aches and pains. If physical symptoms persist, check with your GP to exclude other causes.

## **Grief is an individual experience**

Everyone grieves in their own way. Your grief is unique to you, and as long as you are not causing harm to yourself or those around you, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' ways to grieve.

We do not always know how people are grieving simply by what we see. Some people are open and expressive with their grief, crying, and wanting to talk, whilst others are more private, may be reluctant to talk and prefer to keep busy. Other factors, such as culture, gender and belief systems can also influence the ways that people grieve. Culture in particular can affect the way we experience and express grief, each culture has its own set of beliefs and rituals for death and bereavement. Sometimes the expression of grief may be at odds with someone's culture, it is important for each person to grieve in ways that feel right for them.

Grief is individual and personal, and it's important to respect each other's way of grieving, even if we don't necessarily understand it.

## **Life grows around grief**

It is a common myth that people 'get over' grief. The reality is, a part of us will always grieve the loss of our loved one. With time, the pain will lessen, but the sorrow we feel will always be a part of us. When people grieve they are coming to terms with what has changed in their lives. There is no 'return to normal'; rather, we have to learn to live around a new kind of normal – re-learning the world and re-learning ourselves within it.

## **Grief doesn't have a timeline**

Grief can be triggered at any time, and it's not unusual for grief to be felt over an extended period of time. It's okay to admit you are struggling with your grief, whether it be weeks, months, years or even decades after the death.

## **Looking after yourself**

When grieving, or supporting someone who is grieving, it can be all-too easy to neglect our own needs. Taking the time to look after yourself, however, can make a big difference in your ability to function on a day-to-day basis, especially in the longer term. Below are some suggestions about how to get through some of the difficult times.

## **Privately and personally**

- » Try to delay major decisions that cannot be reversed for 6–12 months, e.g. disposing of belongings.
- » Keep a diary or journal.
- » Create a memorial – do or make something to honour your loved one.

- » Develop your own rituals, e.g. light a candle, listen to special music, make a special place to think.
- » Allow yourself to express your thoughts and feelings privately.
- » Write a letter or a poem, draw, collect photos, cry etc.
- » Exercise – do something to use pent-up energy, e.g. walking, swimming, cycling, gardening.
- » Draw on your religious or spiritual beliefs and practices.
- » Explore other people's experiences through books, movies, articles, etc.
- » Do things that are relaxing and soothing.
- » Some holistic or self-care ideas that may assist include meditation, distractions, relaxation and massage.
- » To help with sleeplessness: exercise, limit alcohol and caffeine and try to maintain a routine, especially around bedtime.

## With other people

- » Sharing with other people can reduce the sense of isolation and loneliness that comes with grief.
- » Allow people to help you; don't be embarrassed to accept their help. You will be able to help someone else at another time. It is your turn now.
- » Talk to family and friends; sharing memories and stories, thoughts and feelings can be comforting and strengthen your connection with your loved one.
- » Consider joining a support group to share with others who have had similar experiences.
- » Take opportunities to join in public ceremonies where you can be private, yet part of a larger group.
- » Use rituals and customs that are meaningful to you.
- » Talk with a counsellor to focus on your unique situation, to find support and comfort, and to find other ways to manage, especially when your life or your grief seems to be complicated and particularly difficult.

## When to seek further help

Although grief can be very painful, most people (85–90%) find that with the support of their family and friends and their own resources, they gradually find ways to learn to live with their loss and do not need to seek professional help.

Sometimes however, the circumstances of the death may have been particularly distressing, such as a traumatic or sudden death, or there may be circumstances in your life which make your grief particularly acute or complicated. If you are finding it difficult to manage on a day-to-day basis, it may be helpful to see a counsellor or other health professional. It's okay to admit you are struggling with your grief. No-one will think any less of you if you ask for help along the way.



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