

## A CHILD'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

| <u>AGE</u> | <u>CONCEPT OF DEATH</u>  | <u>GRIEF RESPONSE</u>   | <u>SUGGESTIONS/INTERVENTIONS</u>  |
|------------|--|---|---|
| 4 - 7      | Death is still reversible. Feels responsible because of wishes or thoughts. Self is immortal. Suspects parents might die.  | Concern with the process. How? Why? Repetitive questioning. May act as though nothing has happened, worry about parents dying, generalized distress or confusion. | Talk about it, factual information about illness or accident not symbolic language. Read books about death together, symbolic play or acting out events, identifying feelings.                                |
| 7 - 10     | Beginning to suspect they might die. Interest in causes of death, age illness, violence. Still may have some magical thinking – my thoughts, wishes caused this. Beginning to see death as real, final. Death may be punishment. | Desire for complete details. Concern with other's response, What is the right way to do this? Beginning to mourn.   | Answer questions regarding facts of death, identify feelings, give permission to express a range of feelings. Be available but allow alone time. Allow for physical outlets and symbolic play. Talk about it. |
| 10 – 12    | Beginning to develop interest in spiritual aspects of life.  | Understands mourning. After initial adjustment to loss of a parent, may not grieve till much later.   | Reaffirm the family's ethnic, religious, cultural, values and customs. Create rituals, customs or remembrances.   |
| Teens      | Essentially an adult view of death, though they may feel invincible.   | May be especially sensitive to loss of a parent due to process of separation and cutting ties already begun   | Listen, be available, do not attempt to take grief away. Acknowledge, support expression of feelings. Discuss suicide, causes for despair and reasons for hope.   |

- Adolescence itself is a grief process. Teen loses childhood, parent loses a child.
- Children may not demonstrate grief responses right away. If adults are consumed with their own grief, children may postpone their process until stability returns to the family.

## A Student Dies, a School Mourns. Are You Prepared?

By Ralph Klicker, Ph.D.

| <b>Age</b> | <b>Understanding of Death</b>   | <b>How They Express Feelings of Grief</b>   | <b>Grieving Behavior</b>  | <b>Additional Comments</b>   |
|------------|---|---|---|--|
| 2 – 5      | Do not understand finality of death. It is temporary and reversible.                                  | Do not have the vocabulary to express grief. Feelings will be acted out in play and behavior.   | Crying<br>Egocentric concerns<br>Have an interest in dead things.<br>At times will act like the death never happened.                         | May ask the same questions over and over.<br>They react to death in light of their own experiences with it.  |
| 6 – 9      | Beginning to understand finality of death. Believe it is real but only happens to others, not them.   | Have strong feelings of loss but it is difficult to show them. Need permission to grieve, especially boys.  | Magical thinking – what they wish for happens.<br>Can be withdrawn.<br>Can experience nightmares.<br>Aggressive behavior, especially in boys. | May feel responsible for death because of their behavior or magical thinking. Personify death as ghosts, monsters, etc. If it is real they can't avoid it.   |
| 9 – 12     | Have a good understanding of finality of death. Have a curiosity about the physical aspects of death. | Have the vocabulary to express feelings but will often not express the verbally but in behavior. Concerns are egocentric. Need encouragement to express feelings. | Lack of concentration.<br>Decline in school grades.<br>Misbehavior<br>Aggressiveness, especially in boys.                                     | May identify with deceased by imitating their mannerisms. Have short attention spans. Can be grieving one minute, act like nothing happened the next. Adults sometimes misinterpret as not caring.           |
| 13 – 18    | Have adult understanding of death. Philosophize about life and death, search for meaning to death.    | Can express feelings, but often choose not to because they feel they must be strong. Paradox of feeling immune to death but also fear it.                         | Aggressive behavior.<br>Need for comforting and reassurance, especially girls.<br>Participate in dangerous behavior like drugs or alcohol.    | Have the additional problems of puberty and adolescence to compound grief. Death affects entire life of adolescent, school and relationships with others.<br>May appear to be handling it, but really isn't. |

## COMMON SIGNS OF GRIEF RESPONSE

The Family Loss Project/Network

John R. Jordan, Ph.D. – Director

| <b>PHYSICAL</b>                                 | <b>EMOTIONAL</b>                             | <b>COGNITIVE/SPIRITUAL</b>                             | <b>BEHAVIORAL</b>   |
|---|--|--|---|
| Back/Neck/Muscle Pain                           | Shock/Emotional Numbness                     | Disbelief/Unreality/"A Fog"                            | Sleep Disturbance   |
| Stomach upset/<br>Diarrhea/Constipation         | Sadness/Sorrow/<br>Despair                   | Confusion/<br>Disorientation                           | Change in appetite  |
| Weight Loss                                     | Anger/Protest/<br>Irritability/Resentment    | Memory/Concentration<br>problems                       | Searching for the<br>deceased                                     |
| Feelings of<br>weakness/Fatigue                 | Self-reproach/Guilt/<br>Regret               | Need to make sense of<br>the death – "why?"            | Sighing/Crying/<br>"Weepiness"                                    |
| Feelings of<br>emptiness/heaviness              | Anxiety – general or<br>specific             | Rumination about<br>deceased or death                  | Carrying objects/<br>Visiting places linking<br>with the deceased |
| Restlessness/Nervous/<br>Hyper-activity/"Wired" | Fear of "going crazy"                        | Idealization of<br>deceased and lowered<br>self-esteem | Social withdrawal   |
| Headaches                                       | Helplessness/"Out of<br>Control"/Overwhelmed | Visions/Contact with<br>the deceased                   | Avoidance of reminders<br>of deceased or the loss                 |
| Chills/Sweats/"Cold<br>Hands"                   | Mood swings/<br>Emotional<br>"rollercoaster" | Difficulty with decisions                              | Change in sexual desire<br>(increase or decrease)                 |
| Chest pain/tightness/<br>Difficulty breathing   | Peace/Calm/<br>Heightened awareness          | Dreams or nightmares<br>of deceased or death           | Increased use of alcohol<br>and other drugs                       |
| Dry Mouth                                       | Relief                                       | Absent-mindedness                                      | Telling the story over<br>and over                                |
| Startle Response                                | Feelings of presence                         | Feelings of<br>meaninglessness                         | Clinging/Difficulty with<br>separations                           |
|   | Loneliness                                   | Depersonalization –<br>sense of unreality              |   |
|   | Yearning/Pining                              | Denial/"Not really<br>dead, just gone"                 |   |
|   | Apathy/Lack of<br>pleasure in anything       | Assumptive world<br>changes                            |   |
|   | Agitation                                    |  |   |

## ***How Adults Can Help Children Cope with Death and Grief***

*If is often helpful for adults to seek additional support and education to understand their own grief process and model a healthy reaction to loss by expressing their feelings and receiving support. Children will generally learn their response to loss from adults in the family.*

*Children may feel frightened and insecure because they sense the grief and stress of others, and feel powerless to help. They will need additional love, support and structure in their daily routine.*

*When someone dies, children often worry about themselves and other dying. They need to know who would take care of them in the unlikely death of both parents.*

*They need an adequate explanation of the cause of death, using correct terms like die and dead. Vague terms and trying to shield them from the truth merely adds confusion. Avoid terms that associate going away, sleep, or sickness with death. Listen carefully to a child's response.*

*Children have magical thinking and may believe that their behavior or thoughts can cause or reverse death.*

*Do not exclude children when family or friends come to comfort grieving adults. Avoidance or silence teaches children that death is a taboo subject. Children need to learn how to cope with loss, not be protected from grief.*

*Help children learn to recognize, name, accept and express feelings to avoid developing unhealthy defenses to cope with difficult emotions. Make physical and creative activities available for energy outlets.*

*A child may try to protect grieving adults and try to assume the caretaker role, but children need to grow up normally without being burdened by adult responsibilities.*

*Help children learn to cope with other losses. The death of a pet is a very significant loss for a child. The patterns for coping with loss and grief begin in early childhood and often continue through adulthood.*

*Share personal religious beliefs carefully. Children may fear or resent a God that takes to heaven someone they love and need.*

*A child's grief may not be recognized because children express feelings of grief more in behavior than in words. Feelings of abandonment, helplessness, despair, anxiety, apathy, anger, guilt and fear are common and often acted out aggressively because children may be unable to express feelings verbally.*

## ***My Grief Rights: Ten Healing Rights for Grieving Children***

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. Fort Collins Colorado

Someone you love has died. You are probably having many hurtful and scary thoughts and feelings right now. Together those thoughts and feelings are called *grief*, which is a normal (though really difficult) thing everyone goes through after someone they love has died.

The following ten rights will help you understand your grief and eventually feel better about life again. Use the ideas that make sense to you. Post this list on your refrigerator or on your bedroom door or wall. Re-reading it often will help you stand on track as you move toward healing from your loss. You might also ask the grown-ups in your life to read this list so they will remember to help you in the best way they can.

1. I have the right to have my own unique feelings about the death. I may feel mad, sad or lonely. I may feel scared or relieved. I may feel numb or sometimes not anything at all. No one will feel exactly like I do.
2. I have the right to talk about my grief whenever I feel like talking. When I need to talk I will find someone who will listen to me and love me. When I don't want to talk about it, that's okay too.
3. I have the right to show my feelings of grief in my own way. When they are hurting, some kids like to play so they'll feel better for awhile. I can play or laugh, too. I might also get mad and scream. This does not mean I am bad, it just means I have scary feelings that I need help with.
4. I have the right to need other people to help me with my grief, especially grown-ups who care about me. Mostly I need them to pay attention to what I am feeling and saying and to love me no matter what.
5. I have the right to get upset about normal, everyday problems. I might feel grumpy and have trouble getting along with others sometimes.
6. I have the right to have "griefbursts." Griefbursts are sudden, unexpected feelings of sadness that just hit me sometimes – even long after the death. These feelings can be very strong and even scary. When this happens, I might feel afraid to be alone.
7. I have the right to use my beliefs about my god to help me deal with my feelings of grief. Praying might make me feel better and somehow closer to the person who died.
8. I have the right to try to figure out *why* the person I love died. But it's okay if I don't find an answer. *Why* questions about life and death are the hardest questions in the world.
9. I have the right to think and talk about my memories of the person who dies. Sometimes those memories will be happy and sometimes they might be sad. Either way, these memories help me keep alive my love for the person who died.
10. I have the right to move toward and feel my grief and, over time, to heal. I'll go on to live a happy life, but the life and death of the person who died will always be a part of me. I'll always miss the special person.

*(Author's Note: This "bill of rights" for grieving children is intended to empower them to help themselves heal – and to help direct adults in their lives to be supportive as well)*

## Boys and Healing from Loss

Here are some signs that you may notice in boys who are experiencing a loss:

- Increased withdrawal from relationships and problems in friendships
- Depleted or impulsive mood
- Increase in angry outbursts
- Denial of pain
- Increasing demands for autonomy
- Inability to concentrate
- Changes in sleep patterns – increase, decrease or disturbance
- Over involvement with sports or academics
- Increased aggressiveness
- Increased silliness
- Increased risk-taking behavior
- Low self-esteem or harsh self-criticism
- Weight change – either up or down

Boys have traditionally been stifled from expressing emotions. Here are a few things they do:

- Using actions instead of words
- Door slam
- Throwing hands in the air
- Problem solving
- Withdrawing
- Timed release

Keep in mind!

- Boys take longer!
- Offer boys shame free zones
- **Do something** with the boy
- Non-judgment
- Talk of your own experiences
- Once a day give your boy your undivided attention
- When a boy does express tender emotions avoid teasing and taunting
- Avoid shame words like “Why,” “How could you do that?” Use “Tell me about it”
- Look beyond the anger, aggression and rambunctious
- Express love openly and freely
- Let boys know they don’t have to be sturdy oaks
- Create a broad and inclusive model for masculinity

Do!

- Wrestling
- Car therapy
- Work backwards from action to emotion
- Ask him “What’s the toughest thing about this?”
- Tell him what you are feeling
- Honor his loss with your action

Don’t!

- Ask him how he feels
- Tell him what to do
- Tell him you know how he feels
- Follow him into his cave

## Girls and Healing from Loss

Here are some signs that you may notice in girls who are experiencing a loss.

- Increased withdrawal and private time
- Clinging and intensified friendships
- Depleted or sad mood
- Increased times of crying
- Pointing out of pain
- Weight gain or loss and other physical symptoms
- Over involvement with studies
- Increased care giving to others
- Increased gigglefests
- Added sense of responsibility
- Low self-esteem and harsh self-criticism

Girls have traditionally been encouraged to express emotions. Here are a few things they do.

- Long telephone conversations
- Dramatic responses
- Crying with friends
- Sharing magazines and books
- Emotionally more needy and clingy
- Drawing, writing

Keep in mind!

- Girls grow faster and grieve faster
- Offer shame free zones
- **Talk with the girl**
- Share your own experiences
- Talk about your own experiences
- Once a day give undivided attention
- When she cries and shares, hold her hand
- Avoid guilt statements
- Look beyond the tears and drama
- Express love openly and freely
- Let girls know they don't have to be the Big Woman in the house
- Create a broad and inclusive model for femininity

Do!

- Ask about her day
- Hugs
- Shopping therapy (disciplined)
- Go to emotion then action
- Ask her what she can do to help herself
- Share your feelings
- Honor her loss with words and actions

Don't!

- Assume how she feels
- Leave her on her own
- Tell her you know how she feels
- Forget about her

## ADOLESCENT GRIEF

Adolescents may display their grief in a different way that we see in adults.

These are common reactions:

1. Distraught, may tears, sobbing, very dramatic
2. Withdrawn, inactive, appears depressed
3. Few tears, appears quiet and moves on or gets real busy, doesn't appear sad

### **Normal Developmental Tasks**

Adolescence can begin at age 11 and go through age 22. There are specific developmental tasks that need to be accomplished in order to move successfully into young adulthood. These do not go in any particular order, and may be worked on over and over until the adolescent feels comfortable.

1. Join formal and informal groups to discover where they feel comfortable and fit in.
2. Experimenting with many behaviors and activities to find out what is right for the individual.
3. Gender related issues, sexual attractions, feelings, experiences.
4. Challenging parental authority in their life.
5. More complex ideas and abstract thought.
6. Intensify education and set goals.

### **Possible Red Flags**

You may see some of these behaviors throughout adolescence. They are a matter for concern when they interrupt individual/family functioning in a serious way for more than two weeks. If you are concerned about any of these behaviors, talk to your child, a counselor and/or your doctor.

- Withdrawn, immobilized, stops doing any usual activities
- Grades drop dramatically/skipping school
- Not sleeping, sleep disturbances, bad dreams, nightmares
- Weight change
- Changes in friends – you don't meet the new friends or may not like them
- Becomes highly involved/dependent on a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship to the exclusion of other friends/activities
- Appears angry and hostile, and may pick on younger sibling excessively
- Bad attitude, separates self from family, negative about everything
- Thoughts and talk of death – attracted to the topic
- Music – only listens to music that has negative themes and appears obsessed with it
- Indications of substance abuse
- Illegal activity



## Helping Your Grieving Adolescent

Parenting teenagers...it's a tough job under the best of circumstances. But when a teenager is grieving as well, four dynamics place additional stress on the situation.

First, grieving families often feel a need to pull together for support. Since adolescence is increasingly a time for breaking away and relying on peer support, these conflicting needs can place parents and teens at odds with one another.

Second, adolescents are keenly aware of parental reactions and, when parents are grieving, often try to protect them from further pain. Most commonly, this takes the form of not talking about it.

Third, simply because they've experienced the death of a loved one, grieving teens tend to feel different from their peers. In an attempt to fit in, they may try to ignore their own grief reactions. Nevertheless, their normal grief reactions seethe beneath the surface, waiting for expression...healthy or unhealthy, at appropriate or inappropriate times.

Fourth, the stress of bereavement adds to the physical and emotional swings already common in adolescence.

So what's a caring parent or caregiver to do? Here are four strategies for helping your adolescent through bereavement.

1. Provide an environment the adolescent perceives as safe. Like adults, if they don't feel safe, young people can't do the necessary grief work. They need to know that they can trust themselves as having grief reactions that are normal, their peers and adults to be supportive, and parents to be a dependable safety net.

You can help through structure, discipline, and education. Structure and maintaining routines provide adolescents with a subtle, daily sense of continuity and permanence at a time when everything else seems up for grabs

Discipline...reasonable and caring but consistent and firm...reassures adolescents that someone is in control and will save them from serious harm.

Education can transform a neutral environment into a healing one for your teen. Make sure the adults in his or her world (school personnel, coaches, bosses, clergy, etc.) know that a death has occurred. Share with them printed materials about normal grief responses and what grieving people need. Use health classes and all school assemblies to educate peer groups about bereavement.

And educate your child about normal reactions to grief so that he knows he is not going crazy and can trust the way his body, mind and emotions are responding. If he pulls back from discussion, provide books or movies that illustrate normal grieving.

2. Encourage your teen to express what the grief experience is like for him or her. Recognize and affirm that her experience is likely to be different from everyone else's in the family. Provide "emotional coaching" for your child by modeling appropriate emotional reactions to loss.

If your teenager is a quiet or private person, encourage other methods of expression. Helpful ways of expressing emotion include playing music or music instruments, writing (song, poetry, diaries, letters to the person who died), sports (including martial arts and punching bags) and art and photography.

3. Facilitate an ongoing connection with the person who died. Tell stories about the person who died. Give your adolescent a photo of him or her with the person. Support him in visiting the gravesite if that is meaningful to him. Make sure he has a memento of the person who died...a favorite tool or sports or hobby item, a piece of jewelry, a book, a sweater or robe...by which to stay connected.

And make sure you remember (in discussion, in prayer, by way of a small gift) to include the memory of the person who died in your celebration of important events in your child's life, events such as graduations, getting a driver's license, participating in his or her first school play or first varsity sporting event.

4. Encourage your teenager to participate in normal adolescent life as she feels able. Grieving takes enormous energy, so your child may need to slow down a bit while she works on her grief. However, it's important for her to know that you don't expect her to take on an adult role now that someone important has died. Let her know you love and accept and support her...just as she is now with all the normal living and loving and learning she has yet to do.

## FOR TEENS ONLY

### GUILT

#### As a Result of Something Said or Done

Teenagers experience ambiguity between their identity as an adolescent and their increasing adult role. As a part of development, internal and familial conflicts arise. This is their attempt to explore their own ethical and moral identity. It is not uncommon for a teenager to argue or say things such as, "I hate you" or "I wish you were dead." It is important to note that neither of these statements can cause death.

### GUILT

#### For Things Unsaid or Done

Forgetting someone's special day, not fulfilling a promise, never saying "I love you," are a major source of guilt for the bereaved teen. It is not uncommon to assume that the person "knows" he or she is loved.

### GUILT

#### For Feeling Relief

When a loved one dies after a long illness, relief after the death is natural. It is important for the teen to understand that it is the release of suffering which usually prompts the relief. If the relationship was unpleasant, the relief that exists could be expected as well.

### GUILT

#### In Regard to Other Family Members

Each person in the family had a different relationship with the deceased and will react in their own way to the death. It is difficult for the teen to understand how he or she can comfort family members. Teens need to know that they can provide comfort, but that the grieving process cannot be erased.

### SADNESS

It is helpful for each family member to discuss his or her own feelings of sadness. This discussion helps with the process of accepting the fact that the deceased will not be back. At this point, when denial subsides, sadness can become intense. Holidays and other special occasions are particularly difficult.

### DEPRESSION

Here are some ways to work through depression: Talk with someone trustworthy, give and accept hugs, exercise, listen to uplifting music, go to a movie that has a positive message, reach out to someone in need.

### ANGER

#### Towards the Medical Profession

If the person died as a result of an accident or illness, it is not uncommon to question the health professional who could not save his or her life. Anger needs to be expressed in order to be worked through.

### ANGER

#### Towards the Deceased

Anger towards the person who died also needs to be expressed. The bereaved may be angry at the person for not paying more attention to his or her health or for feeling abandoned. Regardless of the cause, it is natural to express these feelings.

### ANGER

#### Towards Ourselves

It is not uncommon to hold oneself responsible for the death of a loved one. Especially in the case of suicide, teens must know that no one can force another person to commit suicide. It is a choice only the deceased could have made.

### ANGER

#### Towards God

After someone dies, many people feel God let them down by allowing the death to occur. It is healthy for the teen to express these feelings with a person he or she feels safe and without judgment.

### ANGER

#### Towards Other People

People who are still celebrating holidays or experiencing events with loved ones can be a target for the bereaved person's anger. This anger may not take the form of a conscious act, but show up in other inappropriate ways.

### ANGER

Anger appears in several ways. Some responses are: negative judgments, tears, withdrawal, fighting, panic, fear. Each response is normal to grieving. It is important that the person has a safe environment within which to express his or her feelings.

## What to Say to Grieving Students

### Teachers

"I'm sorry that your mother died."

"I'm available at lunch (be specific) if you want to talk or shoot some baskets."

"Let's talk about what would make you feel more comfortable in class." Some ideas might be:

Homework issues

Being able to leave class when needed

Having a journal or drawing paper for times the student can't concentrate

"I care about you."

"I am aware that today is your birthday/your mother's birthday/Mother's Day/the anniversary of the day your mother died. I'm thinking about you."

"When is your basketball game? Maybe I can stop by and watch you play"

### Other Students or Teachers

"I can't know how you feel, but I want to."

"I can't know how you feel, but my Grandfather died (share)."

"If you want to talk, I want to listen. If you don't want to talk, I'll hang out with you."

"If you don't want to talk to other students, I'll tell them about your mother."

"I'd like to do something with you on Saturday. We can sit and talk about your Mom if you'd like, or we can go roller skating at the mall – both is O.K."

"Do you want a hug?"

"Show me her pictures."

*(Don't forget to continue to joke and crack-up. Laughter is food to help us endure.)*