

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH LOSS

SOURCE: NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

The death of a loved one is always difficult. In cases where the death results from a disaster, it can be even more troubling given the suddenness and violent nature of the event. For children, the loss of a parent, sibling, relative, or friend can affect their sense of security. Helping children cope with their loss will be crucial in enabling them to resume their lives more fully at home and school.

Responses to loss

Children deal with death in many ways, and not necessarily in the same manner as adults. Here are some common ways children might respond to a death:

- ☹ Sadness
- ☹ Denial, shock, confusion
- ☹ Anger and irritability
- ☹ Inability to sleep
- ☹ Nightmares
- ☹ Loss of appetite
- ☹ Fear of being alone
- ☹ Physical complaints such as stomach-aches and headaches
- ☹ Loss of concentration
- ☹ Guilt over failure to prevent the loss
- ☹ Depression or a loss of interest in daily activities and events
- ☹ Acting much younger for an extended period or reverting to earlier behaviours (eg., bedwetting, 'baby talk', thumb-sucking)
- ☹ Boisterous play
- ☹ Withdrawal from friends
- ☹ Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school
- ☹ Excessively imitating or asking questions about the deceased or making repeated

statements of wanting to join the deceased

- ☹ Inventing games about dying
- ☹ Profound emotional reactions (eg., anxiety attacks, chronic fatigue, thoughts of suicide)

Tips for helping children and adolescents grieve

Children will express their grief in a variety of ways and may appear to be unaffected by the death. Pre-schoolers have difficulty understanding that death is not temporary; children between the ages of five and nine begin to experience grief more like adults.

Don't push children to talk about their feelings. Children, like adults, need time to grieve and be upset. Let them know you are ready to listen and provide reassurance and validation of their feelings when they express them.

Here are some issues to consider when helping a child overcome loss:

- ☹ Children are concrete in their thinking. To lessen confusion, avoid expressions such as "passed on" or "went to sleep". Answer their questions about death simply and honestly. Only offer details that they can absorb. Don't overload them with information.
- ☹ Children are physical in their grief. Watch their bodies and understand and support their play and actions as their "language" of grief Offer reassurance.





- ☁ Children can be fearful about death and the future. Give them a chance to talk about their fears and validate their feelings. Share happy memories about the person who died. Offer a simple expression of sorrow and take time to listen.
- ☁ Children need choices. Whenever possible, offer choices in what they do or don't do to memorialize the deceased and ways to express their feelings about the death. Help the child plant a tree or dedicate a place in memory of the person who died.
- ☁ Children grieve as part of a family. Children grieve the person and the

- "changed" behaviour and environment of family and friends. Keep regular routines as much as possible.
- ☁ Children are repetitive in their grief. Respond patiently to their uncertainty and concerns. It can take a long time to recover from a loss. Expect their grief to revisit in cycles throughout their childhood or adolescence. A strong reminder, such as the anniversary of a death, may reawaken grief. Make yourself available to talk.

"Everyone needs a hand to hold on to ... "

