



Grief By Age



GRIEF BY AGE: 0 – 2

Babies and toddlers don't understand the concept of death, but they do notice changes and absences of people in their environment. They may feel abandonment if an attachment figure is missing. They will also observe the distress of others around them.

COMMON REACTIONS

- Increased crying and irritability
- Clinginess
- Looking for the person who has died
- Stranger anxiety
- Decreased interest in play or food
- Regression in previously reached milestones

WAYS TO SUPPORT

- Keep babies and toddlers as close to the family as possible to maintain attachment development
- Hold and cuddle often
- Maintain routines
- Speak calmly to them
- Provide comfort objects

GRIEF BY AGE: 3 – 4

Preschoolers do not understand that death is permanent. They may become curious about death.. This age group has active 'magical thinking' where they may think the person can become alive again or that they did something to make the person die. Preschoolers are very concrete; it is important to use accurate words such as 'died,' not 'lost.' Preschoolers can feel insecure and frightened when things change. They benefit from reassurance that they will be kept safe and be looked after.

COMMON REACTIONS

- Crying, clinginess, tantrums, irritability
- Lack of responsiveness and withdrawal
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Loss of interest in play
- Temporary regression

WAYS TO SUPPORT

- Answer questions honestly
- Keep routines
- Talk about who is looking after them and keeping them safe
- Support them with touch and words
- Keep close to familiar adults
- Honestly explain death as a part of life
- Read children's books together about death and grief
- Use words that describe feelings
- Encourage creative play and exercise as an outlet for thoughts and feelings
- Include them in the funeral
- Share and discuss memories

GRIEF BY AGE: 5 – 12

School-aged children gradually begin to understand death is permanent. Some children may still think that the person who has died will feel things (be cold, lonely or hungry). Children can become anxious about their own health and safety. They may be concerned that someone else they love may die. They may ask blunt questions about what has happened to the person's body. It is important to answer questions honestly and provide enough information so that children are not left with gaps in their knowledge. The risk of not enough information is that a child may fill this space with inaccurate information. Children's imagination and 'magical thinking' can mean a child may feel that their thoughts, words or actions caused a death. They may feel guilty.

COMMON REACTIONS

- Blaming themselves for the death
- Being distracted and forgetful
- Increased anxiety for their safety
- Separation anxiety
- Stomachaches, headaches
- Suppression of emotions or strong emotions
- Behavioral issues
- Trying to please adults
- Change in eating and sleeping
- Temporary regression

WAYS TO SUPPORT

- Reassure they are safe
- Maintain routine
- Use words to describe feelings
- Talk about death and answer questions
- Include in funeral
- Encourage play

GRIEF BY AGE: 13+

Teenagers understand that death is part of life. Grief can have an impact on the move from dependence to independence, where young people move from family ties to increasing reliance on their peers. Teens struggle to ask for support and may want to be with friends more than family for support. They may find the intensity of emotions overwhelming and deny emotions. To escape emotional discomfort some teens may use risk taking behavior.

COMMON REACTIONS

- Inability to concentrate
- Withdrawal
- Taking on adult responsibilities, trying to please
- Having questions about mortality, spirituality
- Using jokes and humor to mask their feelings
- Feeling embarrassed or guilty
- Hiding or minimizing their loss
- Dreaming about the person who has died
- Defiance, irritability
- Change in eating or sleeping patterns
- Risk taking
- Low self esteem

WAYS TO SUPPORT

- Include them, be honest
- If they don't want to talk to you, leave helpful info they can access on their own
- Ask other adults to be available
- Keep routines, where possible
- Avoid expectations of adult behavior
- Praise and encourage them
- Seek professional help if you are concerned