



GRIEF SERVICES

THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES AND CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO ILLNESS/LOSS

INFANT TO 2 YEARS

Babies and very young children are very sensitive to the changes a loss can bring about. They notice increased anxiety and sadness especially if the main caregiver is distressed or if there is an extreme change in the emotional atmosphere of the home. They might exhibit anxiety through crying spells, fitful sleeping or upset bowels. Consistent schedules and frequent comforting through physical cuddling and calming reassurances may alleviate some symptoms.

TODDLER 2 - 3 YEARS

Young children sense a loss and suffer the feelings that accompany loss, but they are unable to intellectually comprehend the situation. Respond to your child's feelings and any increased levels of anxiety with a lot of reassurance and comfort regarding their safety. During the illness and death they will have a disrupted routine. After the confusion and irregular hours are returned to a normal routine again the child should adapt and feel secure again.

This age has a short-term memory so will often ask "why"? Since the child will certainly notice the absence of their significant loved one, give very simple and brief explanations about the death. They learn through imitation so it is important to establish some healthy coping skills during the grieving period. For instance, adults might include the loved one in prayers, assist the child in taking flowers to the gravesite and share positive story-telling or reminiscing when looking at pictures.

PRESCHOOL 3 - 5 YEARS

Children of this age have been exposed to and understand the physical aspect of death of plants, insects, and animals, but they generally perceive death as temporary. Explain the death of their loved one using factual, concrete language. This age child still believes illness and death to be reversible, so be prepared to answer the same questions several times with short explanations. Patience will be needed, as it takes time and experience for this realization to become part of their understanding. Do not be surprised at their indifference or if they do not ask any questions. Children cannot tolerate “sadness spans” and will take frequent opportunities to play. Since their perception of “dead” is less alive, help them distinguish between life and death by being honest and correctly using the terms of “dead” or “died”. Explain that when people die, “their bodies stop working” so they do not breathe, eat, talk, think or feel anymore.

The most painful thing about death to this age is the idea of separation and abandonment. Someone they depend on has gone away. They may be angry or resentful at the person who died; or unable to show it and then they can become sullen or withdrawn. Offer support and comfort through physical presence, verbal reassurance and consistent representation of their safety and importance in your life.

GRADE SCHOOL 5 - 9 YEARS

Children of this age are curious about illness and death and understand that death is final, but they see it as happening mostly to other people. They may have nightmares about it, fear that death is contagious and they worry more about things and events that can happen. Clear explanations continue to be vital to help reassure, dispel misunderstandings and correct unnecessary worries. Spiritual explanations, such as “God loved Grandma so she is with God now” must be introduced with clarity and caution as the child is continually learning concepts of good and bad and what rewards or punishments may be anticipated. Without adequate understanding, a child may become frightened, believing that God will take them too.

There is still a tendency at this age to believe that thoughts can make things happen. Reassure the child of the facts about the illness, and it not being contagious, and that the child did not cause the death through thoughts or wishes or outcomes of arguments.

PRE-ADOLESCENT 10 - 12 YEARS

Older children often have had more experience with loss by this point and understand death as a biological process that comes to all living things and is an inevitable outcome of life. At this age, children may begin to develop philosophical views of life and death. As they learn how to handle their new perceptions surrounding death, they may find it difficult to talk about or express their feelings. Sometimes their use of humor can help them with their own uneasiness with reality and the actuality that death can happen again.

This child is also developing socially, becoming more aware of others and accepting responsibility for themselves and others. Due to this awareness they need to be included in the unfolding events of deteriorating illness and death of a loved one. Their desire to feel productive and important needs to be recognized and welcomed especially as an asset to the family in helping.

Their expanding empathy toward others also indicates they are more aware of others' reactions to the death. It is important to offer healthy models of grieving for greater communication and learning for this child to grow. Their concern in fearing isolation, being different than others, could create anxious feelings about the meaning of the changes in their family. It is extremely important to encourage them to maintain interests and activities; encourage their sociability in getting together with special friends. They depend on your reassurance to provide stability. Your openness and trust is needed to support their confidence in their own disturbing grief reactions in this quickly changing pre-teen development.

ADOLESCENT 12 - 18 YEARS

Teenagers have the mental and emotional capacity to sense the depth of meaning in death. However, teens may not necessarily have the coping skills needed or the full vocabulary to express themselves. Teens recognize they too will die one day so they may be intrigued with seeking the meaning of life. Additionally, teenagers are struggling to forge their independent identities, so death is very threatening. Losses may make teens feel more child-like and dependent. The loss of a parent may come at a time when the teenager has been pushing parents away as part of the normal developmental separation process. This causes confusion and guilt for their feelings, which may make them feel out of control. A consequence could be

withdrawal or reluctance to share feelings. Assist your teen in identifying with these issues and help him/her put words to their feelings. Let them know you accept them and that you are feeling confident with the challenges and can handle the changes.

They may feel that the situation requires them to step into an adult role in response to the loss. However, teenagers are uncomfortable with anything that makes them different from their peers. Their fear of not “fitting in” could lead to alienation from their friends. Help your teenager continue to be a teenager; try not to request management or adult-like help from your teen with the family. They will benefit more from your respect of their need to grow independently at this time of their life.

Teenagers do not dwell in the present. They are mainly concerned with what happened before and after, i.e. yesterday’s news and tomorrow’s plans. Their likely reaction to a death or news of impending terminal illness is denial over what is happening. Encourage your teen to talk about the difficulty of the changes in the family. They will need your intuition and understanding in helping them talk more openly about their own difficulties.

Their tendency to seek help from friends in coping with the events could lead to participation in risky behaviors. It is important to discuss appropriate methods for coping skills and your awareness of typical choices for coping behaviors. They may need your encouragement to seek appropriate activities and interests in order to stay connected to a positive and supportive group of friends.