

Addressing Grief: Brief Facts and Tips

1. Grief is not solely related to the death of a loved one. The symptoms, characteristics, and process of grieving can be similar after other types of loss (e.g., divorce, transition, moving).
2. Grief is personal. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. How people grieve can be influenced by developmental level, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, mental health, disabilities, family, personal characteristics, and previous experiences.
3. Grief often is characterized by sadness, emotional pain, and introspection in adults. However, children's grief reactions differ according to age and developmental level:
 - **Middle and High School** - Decreased school performance, attention/concentration, and attendance; avoidance, withdrawal, high risk behaviors or substance abuse, difficulty with peer relations, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional numbing or depression.
4. Grieving does not have a timeline. Families should be aware of anniversaries, birthdays, developmental milestones, and other factors that could affect students months or years after the loss.
5. Grieving involves meeting specific milestones. Individuals are likely to experience (and often re-experience) some or all of the following adjustments/responses:
 - Accepting the death
 - Experiencing the feelings and emotional pain associated with death and separation from the deceased
 - Adjusting to changes and surroundings that no longer includes the deceased
 - Finding ways to remember and memorialize the deceased
6. Grieving is a normal response to loss, but may require some support. Additional assistance should be provided when the following are noted:
 - Noticeable loss of interest in daily activities
 - Changes in eating and sleeping habits
 - Wishing to be with the deceased loved one
 - Fear of being alone
 - Significant decreases in school performance and achievement
 - Increased physical complaints such as headaches, stomachaches
 - Changes in school attendance (e.g. missing days, being late)
7. Things to avoid
 - Less direct wording when referring to the deceased such as "they are sleeping," or "they went away"
 - Minimizing statements such as "it was only your great-grandmother, (or dog, neighbor, etc.)"
 - Predicting a timeframe to complete the grieving process such as, "it has been a month, you should be getting over this," or "the pain will fade soon"
 - Over-identifying, (e.g., "I know how you feel")
 - Too much self-disclosure (e.g., I lost my mom to cancer) as not everyone handles self-disclosure the same way and the focus should remain on the student's grief
8. Things to do
 - Maintain routines as normally as possible
 - Ask questions to find out the young person's understanding of the event and emotional state
 - Give the youth permission to grieve
 - Provide age and developmentally-appropriate answers
 - Connect the young person with helping professionals & other trusted mentors/ adults
 - Encourage coping strategies, especially ones that encourage interaction with other students (e.g., sports, clubs)

References & Resources

The Dougy Center (National Center for Grieving Children & Families)

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Sesame Street Grief Resources

National Alliance for Grieving Children

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

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