

Understanding the Grief Cycle

Children grieve sporadically. Every child's grief experience is unique and individual. It is not so much as a forward progression through the grief cycle but a working through grief. These are some common experiences:

- Shock and denial
- Protest and strong emotions
- Disorientation
- Deep sadness (hopelessness, fear of failure, aimlessness, irritability)
- Acceptance and adjustment

Typical Responses to loss from Younger Children:

How children react will depend on the relationship they had with the person who died, their age, and their prior experience with death. Preschool age children do not understand that death is final and may confuse death with sleep or someone taking a trip. They may show greater interest in things that are dead. As children reach elementary age, they do begin to understand that death is final and this concept often creates more fear and sadness. Children in both age groups typically have difficulty expressing their feelings verbally as they either do not have the ability to do so or find that talking about death is too anxiety provoking. Children will often display their feelings in their behavior and play, so it is important to be more watchful of how they act and what they do rather than what they say.

Typical Responses to loss from Adolescents:

As children get older, their responses begin to resemble adult reactions to trauma but may also have a combination of some more childlike reactions mixed with adult responses. Their own personal histories with loss will contribute to their reactions. Most adolescents know that death is final and universal. While they are more knowledgeable that life is fragile, they tend to believe that they are immortal and invincible which can lead to risk-taking behavior. Adolescents may blame themselves. Teens may romanticize death and fantasize about their own death and reaction of others. They may not show their feelings for fear of appearing weak or needing to appear in control of their feelings. Some responses/feelings may include:

- Physical complaints
- Behaving impulsively
- Arguing, screaming, fighting
- Allowing themselves to be in dangerous situations
- Acting like it never happened
- Confusion or poor concentration,
- Aggressiveness,
- Withdrawal,
- Sleep and appetite disturbance,
- Decreases in energy level,
- Shock
- Indifference
- Depression,
- Feelings of vulnerability and anxiety (maybe this could happen to me)
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Anger
- Sadness
- Abandonment
- Guilt
- Fearfulness
- Worry
- isolation