



Grieving Preschoolers

GRIEF IS THE NATURAL RESPONSE TO A LOSS and yet it can be quite challenging to know the right things to do to support a person who is grieving. It is even harder when that person is a very young child. Death, loss, and unexpected life changes are difficult for adults to understand and accept. How do you explain to a child what you are struggling to understand yourself? Here is some information that may help you to provide support in an age-appropriate manner to grieving preschoolers.

What's typical at this age? Young children may have a difficult time understanding what happened. It is very important to use simple, accurate language. If someone died, use the words “died” and “dead.” Saying they’re gone, lost, or they’ve passed away may be confusing or misleading to the child. Expect the child to ask a lot of questions. Answer honestly and be prepared to answer the same questions more than once, as the child tries to grasp the permanence of the situation.

Young children may temporarily regress emotionally and behaviorally. Their emotions may be intense, causing them to overreact to seemingly small problems. They may act clingy or ask for help with things they previously knew how to do on their own. They may have outbursts of crying or aggression that aren’t typical for them.

It is common to see changes in eating and sleeping patterns when young children are grieving. They may lose their appetite or become hungry all the time. They may have a hard time falling asleep or seem unusually quick to tire. They may also have upsetting dreams.

Be a grief role model



Young children don’t automatically know how to act or how to express what they’re feeling so they look to the adults around them for guidance. It is good to let the child see that you are hurting too. Show them how you express your emotions and the healthy strategies you use to cope. Acknowledge that everything doesn’t make sense to you either. Let them know that it is OK if their feelings are different than yours. This helps them to know that their reactions are normal and valid.

Help them remember - Tell stories and share pictures. Watch videos together. Many young children appreciate having mementos they can hold onto to help them remember and feel connected. Creating rituals or traditions to commemorate the loss, especially on special occasions such as holidays and anniversaries can be very comforting.



Important things to keep in mind when you or someone you know is experiencing grief:



Death is probably the best known but not the only cause of grief. People may grieve over many different types of losses including prolonged/indefinite separation from a loved one, loss of a valued dream or goal, loss of a meaningful part of one's identity, or a dramatic change in one's way of life.



All losses are not the same and everyone doesn't grieve in the same way. It is neither healthy nor helpful to compare grief. Just because someone is not reacting the same way as you or doing the same things as you to cope, doesn't mean they aren't doing it right. What helps for one person may not help for another. If someone you know needs to tell you about a loss they've experienced, listen. Don't assume you know what they're going through just because you've been through a similar loss.



Allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling. If you need to cry, cry. If you don't, don't. Whatever emotional reaction you have is legitimate and okay to express. It is not healthy to "put up a good front" and bottle up feelings. Emotions are not a sign of weakness, they're a reflection of love.



It takes time. Grief is not something that can be resolved in a weekend. Often the reality of the situation doesn't even begin to sink in for quite some time. For many people, it takes a full cycle of all four seasons and all the holidays before all aspects of the loss are evident. Don't allow anyone to pressure you to speed things up (e.g. "Aren't you over that yet?") if you're not ready. Similarly, don't let anyone hold you back when you are ready to move on.



Find ways to remember the past while engaging with the present and finding hope for the future. It is important to find ways of honoring those who have died (or are no longer actively part of our lives for other reasons). They don't stop mattering to us or having an impact on us. We are challenged to honor their memory and the life they led without sacrificing the ability to move forward in our own lives. If your grief is not for a person but for a way of life, the loss of a dream, the loss of a personal identity, or another form of loss, this is still applicable. Starting a new chapter of your life does not negate the relevance of the chapters that came before. The challenge for you is to incorporate some element of those past ways, identities, and dreams into your newly evolving reality. It means continuing to love, to grow, to learn, to laugh, and to live.



If the pain of grief has become so intense that life no longer seems worth living, help is available. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255, the Crisis Center 330-452-6000, or send a text to 741741. It can get better.