



***Children's
Grief & Loss
Issues ...and how we can
help them***

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Counselling
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When life issues are unexpressed or un-acknowledged, they become locked in "frozen blocks of time".

These ***frozen blocks of time*** stop the normal grieving process and deny the child the ability to grieve. It can feel as though life stops and time stands still. The natural flow of feelings is inhibited. There is no movement forward until the issues are resolved and the feelings released. Suicide, homicide, AIDS, abuse, and violence are familiar examples of situations that lead to complicated grief.

The grieving process is normal and natural after a loss. However, when children are stuck in a ***frozen block of time***, they are denied access to this normal and natural flowing process. Overwhelmed by frozen feelings, the grief process seems to be "on hold" or nonexistent. The child is not in touch with his or her feelings of grief, or those feelings feel uncertain and in conflict with each other.

For complicated grief, an unexpressed or unresolved important life issue - a frozen block of time - has created a wall of ice between the child and his or her grief. Our job is to help melt that wall.

If the surviving parent is not able to mourn, there is no model of grief for the child. A closed environment stops the grief process. Many times the surviving parent finds it too difficult to watch his or her child grieve. They may be unable to grieve themselves and consequently, unwilling to recognize their child's pain; feelings are denied and the expression of these feelings withheld. The possibility exists of the surviving parent becoming mentally absent due to their own overwhelming grief and in turn, producing feelings of abandonment and isolation in the child. Children often fear that something will happen to this parent or to themselves—this is when overprotective behavior is displayed.

The grief response is affected by many factors. All of them have a role to play in the way we react to a particular loss. For a death-related loss, here are some of the factors which play a role in the grieving process: the strength of relationship to the deceased, the life role played by the deceased, and the length of the relationship. In addition, the emotional, physical and economic dependency on this individual plays a key role in the way we handle the loss.

By helping children put their feelings outside of themselves we can facilitate their healing. Sharing feelings diminishes the hurt.

Children need explanations of what is happening so that the missing pieces won't be filled in with their own imagination or interpretation. Try using a simple and concise explanation with the child, while still sharing enough facts to leave open the possibility for dialogue.

Coping with loss is ongoing

Children can commemorate death informally or with a real ceremony. As long as they are involved, if they want to be, they will be able to work through their grief. In this way, they can affirm the value of the life that was taken.

When children understand, grieve, and commemorate death, they are ready to "go on." This readiness involves knowing it's O.K. to start life again. Children need to know that accepting death is not the same as "forgetting" it. It may hurt on birthdays or the anniversary of a loss, however, experiencing and coping with grief will strengthen a child's ability to cope with future losses.

Myths of Grief and Loss

The goal of helping bereaved children is to "Get them over their grief and mourning"

Children and adults are often told that they "should be over it by now - It's been almost a year." Adults who believe this myth deny children the patience to live with and to work through their grief. The last thing a child wants is to forget. They need to remember the deceased in a positive way and incorporate this memory into their life's journey.

Adults and children often wrongly equate coping with grief to forgetting about the deceased. This is done without realizing that their pain is what connects them to their loss. We need to find alternative ways to connect them to the lost person or event; diffuse the pain, and transform it into a positive experience. Children often ask if they can see where the deceased is buried. This is a healthy request and helps the healing process.

Children are better off if they don't attend funerals

Not allowing children to attend funerals creates an environment of denial and removes their right to actively participate in the grieving process. The funeral provides a structure for the child to see how people comfort each other openly, mourn a loved one, and honor his/her life. Children learn the ways we say goodbye to the remains of the person who died, and how we show respect for the deceased. They need to say good-bye and created a way to do so.

Children assuredly follow their hearts to find their own unique ways to work through grief. Being present at the funeral, placing personal mementos in the coffin, and participating in the ceremony are very concrete ways children can contribute to the process of saying good-bye.

We often shield children from the funeral experience because we think it is too difficult. It is difficult. By presenting children with the option to participate in the funeral of a distant relative or family friend, they are familiarized with the concept of death and mourning, and are able to connect this grieving process to the loss of a loved one. They come to see death as an open part of life.

Today's children face grief and loss issues we never dreamed of.....

Today's children often feel they will not live to reach adulthood....

The problem with expecting children to heal quickly from a loss is that they just don't understand the concept of what it's like to lose someone, to have your hero die. The only thing they've lost is a toy or pet. And just like losing their favorite teddy bear, children think that after a few weeks they should be able to get over it and sleep with the stuffed rabbit instead.

We live in a society where we are discouraged from crying and expressing emotions outwardly. I say cry on. Cry as hard as you want for as long as you can, because sometimes, we feel so desensitized to life that crying is to only way for us to feel alive.

The loss of a little one means the loss of the joy of childhood and the dreams. The loss of an older child means losing the person you have come to know over years.

Children need to work through the various feelings associated with mourning:

- ❖ Understand that the loss is real
- ❖ Feel the hurt
- ❖ Learn to live life without the individual who passed
- ❖ Transform the emotional energy of grief into life again

Let Kids Know: "The deceased won't be in your daily life, but they will be in your memory."

Let Kids Talk: "I'm sad, angry, or frightened about what happened to the deceased. I feel so lonely without them."

Let Kids Participate: Children can choose what to do with the deceased's toys, their clothes, their belongings, or where to put their pictures? What kind of a ceremony would they like to have? Who would they like to invite?

Let Kids Be Unique: Each child is different and consequently, so is their grief.

A sudden loss means there's no chance to finish things and to say goodbye. A long-term illness makes it necessary to think of finishing things and saying goodbye.

Common Feelings, Thoughts, and Behaviors of a Grieving Child.

- ❖ Child retells events of the deceased's death and funeral.
- ❖ Child dreams of the deceased.
- ❖ Child feels the deceased is with him or her in some way.
- ❖ Child rejects old friends and seeks new friends who have experienced a similar loss.
- ❖ Child wants to call home during the school day.
- ❖ Child can't concentrate on homework or class work.
- ❖ Child bursts into tears in the middle of class.
- ❖ Child seeks medical information on death of deceased.
- ❖ Child worries excessively about his or her own health.
- ❖ Child sometimes appears to be unfeeling about loss.
- ❖ Child becomes "class clown" to get attention.
- ❖ Child is overly concerned with caretaking needs.

If your child seems depressed and withdrawn, it's a good idea to watch him or her carefully. Poor grades, for example, may signal that your child is withdrawing at school.

LOSING A CHILD TO SUICIDE

For parents who've lost a child to suicide, the pain and grief may be intensified. Although these feelings may never completely go away, there are some things that survivors of suicide can do to begin the healing process.

Maintain contact with others. Suicide can be a very isolating experience for surviving family members because friends often don't know what to say or how to help.

Remember that your other family members are grieving too and that everyone expresses grief in their own way. Your other children, in particular, may try to deal with their pain alone so as not to burden you with additional worries.

Expect that anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays may be difficult. Important days and holidays often reawaken a sense of loss and anxiety. On those days, do what's best for your emotional needs

Understand that it's normal to feel guilty and to question how this could have happened, but it's also important to realize that you may never get the answers you are looking for. The healing that takes place over time comes from reaching a point of forgiveness - for both your child and yourself.

Talking with your children and encouraging them to share their feelings with you can be a big help. Explain that, unfortunately, many people do commit suicide, and it's not the fault of other people. It's natural to feel guilty and to wonder if there's anything that could have been said or done to prevent it. It's also natural to feel some anger at what happened - and even some embarrassment.

TEEN SUICIDE

When a teen commits suicide everyone is affected; family members, friends, teammates, neighbors, and sometimes even acquaintances may experience feelings of grief, confusion, guilt - and the sense that if only they had done something differently, the suicide could have been prevented. The reasons behind a teen's suicide or attempted suicide are often complex.

It's important to understand how suicide rates differ between teenage girls and teenage boys. Girls experience suicide ideation and suicide attempt about twice as often as boys. In addition, teen girls tend to select different methods of suicide; such as self-induced overdose or cutting, whereas boys are more likely to use firearms, hanging, or jumping from heights. It is for this reason that teenage boys are four times more likely to succeed on their first suicide attempt.

Factors that *increase* the risk of suicide among teens

- ❖ The presence of a psychological disorder, especially [depression](#), bipolar disorder, and alcohol and substance use (In fact, approximately 95% of people who die by suicide have a psychological disorder at the time of death.)
- ❖ Feelings of distress, irritability, or agitation
- ❖ Feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness that often accompany depression (A teen, for example, who experiences repeated failures at school, who is overwhelmed by violence at home, or who is isolated from peers is more likely to experience such feelings.)
- ❖ A previous suicide attempt
- ❖ A family history of depression or suicide (Depressive illnesses may have a genetic component, so some teens may be predisposed to suffer severe depression.)
- ❖ Having suffered [physical](#) or [sexual abuse](#)
- ❖ Lack of a support network, poor relationships with parents or peers, and feelings of social isolation
- ❖ Dealing with gender or sexual orientation issues in an unsupportive environment

Teen suicide often occurs following a stressful life event, such as a perceived failure at school, a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend, the death of a loved one, a divorce, or a major family conflict.

Why *YOU* need to be ready to talk to children about
suicide

- ❖ Children who have had an honest conversation about death and dying, suicide statistics and grief, will have an easier time navigating grief after a traumatic loss.
- ❖ They will have a less judgmental and more compassionate response to others, and will be able to sort out their own feelings more easily if the topic has already been brought up. They will be less likely to view those lost as simply 'suicide statistics'.
- ❖ A broader understanding of what drives people to this desperate act, along with appropriate assigning of responsibility, will reduce feelings of hopelessness that are common in child survivors of suicide.
- ❖ With a caring adult to step in and take action, the child's pain can be made bearable and permanent emotional damage minimized.
- ❖ If you understand the relationship between anger and grief in adolescents, it will be easier for you to recognize a teen at risk for depression, drug abuse or delinquency post a death by suicide.
- ❖ Length of mourning period is prolonged when grief involves a suicide.
- ❖ Secondary losses like financial crises, lost housing and changes in insurance are life events commonly associated with suicide.
- ❖ Hopelessness increases with loneliness. This makes it critically important for you to offer encouragement and hope to a child grieving suicide.
- ❖ Heart-broken children are deprived of critical support because of our own perception of suicide. Emotional distancing from suicide statistics and their ramifications keep us from frank and honest discussions with children.
- ❖ Often, in the case of murder-suicides or fatal car accidents involving several family members, the survivor's guilt can be overwhelming, and there can be no one left to share the grief.
- ❖ Children sense the distress of adults around them and may not share their feelings because they do not want to burden caregivers.

Some parents are reluctant to ask teens if they have been thinking about suicide or hurting themselves. Some parents fear that if they ask, they will plant the idea of suicide in their child's head.

Ways to talk about SUICIDE to children

- ❖ Define suicide as when "someone chooses to make their body stop working."
- ❖ Give age appropriate facts and explanations.
- ❖ Dispel myths of suicide.
- ❖ Re-tell good memories.
- ❖ Model feelings and thoughts for children.
- ❖ Emphasize suicide is a mistake because there "is always another way out."

Activities to help young children deal with grief

1. Read stories to children that allow them to project their feelings onto the story characters. This opens a dialogue with a child in a way that is non-threatening.
2. Allow children to visualize their hurt, fear or pain. They can then draw or use clay and imagine these symbolic representations of themselves are describing grief. For example, if the hurt could talk, eight-year-old Nancy explained, it would say "Why me?" Nancy had experienced multiple losses, including the death of her younger sister. Feelings of having bad luck or being punished began to emerge through the use of this visualization technique.
3. Invite children to make a Loss Timeline, filling it in with people and dates in chronological order according to when they died. This Loss Timeline becomes a concrete representation of all the losses one has experienced.
4. Create with children a geneogram family tree using a circle and square to represent those people still living and those people who have died. Kids can not only see the extent of the losses they've endured but also, their remaining support system.