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Grief

Factsheet for parents and teachers

Grief is an unhappy and painful emotion that is experienced when a person is affected by the loss of a loved person or possession. It is a perfectly natural process that is most commonly associated with the death of a loved one. Feelings of grief can also result for the loss of a favourite possession, a pet, the end of an important or significant relationship, or the loss of ones health.

Causes, incidence, and risk factors

Everyone experiences grief in their own way, but generally there are recognised stages to the process of mourning. It starts with the recognition of a loss and extends to the eventual acceptance of it. Responses will vary depending upon the circumstances associated with the death. For example, reaching the stage of acceptance can come quite quickly, especially if the loss was anticipated. If the loss was sudden, accidental or violent, coming to a stage of acceptance may take longer.

It may take a year (or longer) to overcome strong feelings associated with loss and to reach a point of acceptance.

Usually the person comes to a point where the negative feelings associated with grieving are left behind and they can carry on with live with a sense of normality again.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>

Symptoms

The following are all normal, healthy symptoms that one could expect to experience during the grieving process:

- shock
- sadness
- disbelief
- fear
- anger
- numbness

Grief is an essential response to loss and the expressing of these feelings should not be discouraged or prevented.

Youth and Grief

Young people and children grieve differently from adults. Young children usually see death as temporary and reversible - a belief reinforced by cartoon characters that "die" and "come to life" again. Young people between five and nine begin to think more like adults about death, yet they still believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know. After this time the universality and finality of death is finally understood.

Adding to an adolescent's shock and confusion at the death of a brother, sister or parent is the unavailability of other family members, who may be so shaken by grief that they are not able to cope with the normal responsibility of caring for their offspring. Parents should be aware of normal adolescent responses to a death in the family, as

well as danger signals. According to experts in grief, it is normal during the weeks following the death for some young people to feel immediate grief or persist in the belief that the family member is still alive. But long-term denial of the death or avoidance of grief is unhealthy and can later surface in more severe problems.

A young person who is frightened or apprehensive about attending a funeral should not be forced to go; however, some service or observance is recommended, such as lighting a candle, saying a prayer or visiting a grave. Once young people accept the death, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. The surviving relatives should spend as much time as possible with the young person, making it clear that they have permission to show their feelings openly or freely. The person who has died may have been essential to the stability of the adolescent's world, and anger is a natural reaction. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability or a variety of other behaviours. Often the young person will show anger towards the surviving family members. After a parent dies, many young people will act younger than they are. The early adolescent (10-14 years) in particular may temporarily regress, demanding time, energy and attention. Some younger adolescents may believe they are the cause of what happens around them. The young person may feel tremendous guilt, believing a parent, grandparent, brother or sister died because he or she had once "wished" the person dead. The young person feels guilty because the wish "came true."

Do's and Don'ts when someone is grieving

- x Don't let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out to a grieving person.
- x Don't avoid them because you are uncomfortable. Being avoided by friends adds pain to an already intolerable and painful experience.
- x Don't say you know how they feel (even if you think you do).
- x Don't say "You ought to be feeling better by now", or anything else which implies a judgement about their feelings.
- x Don't tell them what they should feel or do.
- x Don't change the subject when they mention the dead person.
- x Don't try to find something positive things about the persons death.
- ✓ Do let your genuine concern and care show.
- ✓ Do be available; to listen, or whatever else seems needed at the time.
- ✓ Do say you are sorry about their loss and about their pain.
- ✓ Do allow them to express the grief they are feeling if they are willing to share.
- ✓ Do encourage them to be patient with themselves, not to expect too much of themselves, and not to impose any "SHOULD'S" on themselves.
- ✓ Do allow them to talk about the special, endearing qualities about the person they have lost.
- ✓ Do encourage and support them to seek help if you are concerned that they may not be working through it on their own.

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