



Helping Children Cope Even While You Grieve

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Age is not a prerequisite to grief. Not unlike their parents, a child must be allowed to experience the stages of grief. Denial of opportunity to “release” feelings, participate in family loss, and share in recovery may be very damaging to the health and well being of the child.

You do not have to be a psychologist or therapist to understand and use basic tools to address the needs of a grieving child. It does require recognition that “kids are people too,” and acceptance that their process of mending is no different than adults. Whether death or divorce, the stages of a child’s emotional recuperating are very similar to adults, and must be fully addressed by the parents in order to reap positive results.

Never assume you know what your child may be thinking or feeling. Even in the closest relationships, he or she will keep their most intimate feelings as they assess, for themselves, the impact of the emotional trauma and related environment issues that have been forced upon them. There are general stages of grief manifested in behaviors, attitudes and changes similar to the following:

Initial Shock which can be manifested in periods of withdrawal and silence or through wild behavior and disobedience;

Emotional Release which is a stage of becoming more aware of their loss and reacting with dramatic release of various emotions including crying without cause, striking siblings or becoming easily provoked. Some youth may exhibit a variety of disruptive behaviors in school in addition to anti-social responses at home;

Physical Symptoms include sleepless nights, nightmares, abnormal eating habits and digestive problems; and finally

Guilt Feelings exhibited by blaming others for what they feel they have done to create the situation. Some youth blame the surviving parent for their feelings of sadness and avoidance or rebellion. The road to recovery for youth may require that adults take a proactive role. There are several activities parents can use to create an atmosphere of comfort and support. These activities also encourage a closer communication between parent and child that moves far beyond the immediate crisis.

- Encourage your child to prepare a picture album of favorite activities they experienced with the loved one. This may include family outings, birthday celebrations, or special events and holidays.
- Encourage the child to write a story or “diary of events” about positive experiences they remember when the loved one was with them (purchase a colorful diary or notebook and include a “special pen” the child can use for this activity. Make this a personal experience for them that no one else may share. Do ask to read their diary entries or short stories. Let them offer to share when they are ready. If the child is unsure how to begin, suggest they develop a summary around the picture album.
- Encourage the child to draw pictures of pleasant memories. Purchase a combination of crayons, paint and brushes. Make the project unique to them. Keep it easy and convenient to begin by making it clear supplies will be available as they find the need for them. The key here is to make sure their interest in expressing themselves is not dampened by the lack of supplies.

The key ingredient is your openness to explore whatever creative ideas are necessary to help your child move through the grief process and not become stagnate in any one phase. In helping children cope with the loss of someone they love, keep the following in mind:

- Be honest and direct and truthful in explaining what happened. Creating stories to “protect” feelings may make the grief process more difficult in the long run.
- Allow and encourage children to express their feelings openly. Let them know that crying is normal, helpful and acceptable. Don’t put time limits on this process. Each child is unique and will move along at a pace most comfortable to him. Don’t compare or contrast one child with another and categorize strengths or weaknesses. Help them know you accept their feelings, support positive choices and will guide them through negative experiences along the way.
- Accept individual emotions and reactions and don’t tell the child what he or she should or should not feel.
- Listen to what the child is saying then focus on responding to the child’s needs. Avoid putting words in their mouth or thoughts in their head. Become a good listener.
- Be a strong foundation, maintaining as much stability in the child’s life as you are able.
- Encourage the child to be part of some of the decisions the family will make during the death planning process. Take time to explain the process and procedures and always ask them how they feel. Don’t band them from discussions.
- Be patient, recognizing that children may need to hear what happened again and again and will ask the same questions over and over. Not unlike the learning curve in school, repetition is helpful to reinforcing the meaning of an end of life process.

What can you do for YOU?

What can you do? Live! Be healthy and survive. We have the power within us to move forward in the journey of transitioning from loss to transforming in life. Many of us get stuck in neutral, allowing negative, anxious, or angry thoughts and feelings of helplessness and despair. These internal enemies seek to steal your joy, kill your dreams and destroy your physical body. You have the power, however, to “think yourself” healed, to “speak positive affirmations” no matter how things look or how you feel, and to “take charge of caring for your physical health.

The mind is a dangerous weapon in time of grief. It is important, therefore, to focus and avoid your tendency to stray toward helpless negative thoughts by surrounding and immersing yourself in an atmosphere of peace and comfort. Sometimes, use of external support and comfort by controlling the environment through sound therapy can be helpful. Simple choices can include avoiding television, with its loud commercials, unexpected violence and death scenes, and negative news media or using soothing music and nature sound machines. These easily accessible tools can help create a therapeutic atmosphere conducive for mental relaxation and can promote healthy body functions. Sound therapy can reduce stress, encourage sleep, and promote physical health.

Our tongues are weapons that can be used to help or inflict enormous harm on ourselves. It is important to be mindful of what we say in our quiet times of grief reflection and emotional pain. We can set the tone and atmosphere in our homes and in the lives of our children that will last their lifetimes. Are you responsible for their state of mind? Yes. We are responsible for how they experience the grief process now and in their future. By helping them, we help ourselves. By walking our children through exercises and activities that encourage them to express their feelings, we gain a better understanding of where we are in the grief process. We can also speak to our grief, identify our issues (expressed in anger, withdrawal, overeating, or lack of eating), so that they can be addressed when we are ready.

Health issues tend to be overlooked during the grieving process. Often, even family members allow too much time to elapse before confronting the loved one over diet related changes they have noticed in the grieving individual. No matter what we experience emotionally, our bodies require maintenance and care. The worse thing that could happen for anyone is to reach a level of emotional recovery, only to face physical health issues that developed as a result of the grieving process.

You are what you eat or don’t eat. If you find yourself “slipping” in to a I don’t care attitude about food, seek help from a friend. Sometimes it is only a matter of being reminded to eat a meal or to take a vitamin. A simple phone call reminder or visit for company while you eat may be all that is necessary.

You may also want to establish a ritual with our children so that it may be used as a bonding time for them.

Food supplements are an important nutritional asset to replace some of the nutrients you may miss by skipping meals or eating the wrong things. Loss of appetite is natural. Loss of essential nutrients that prevent illness and weakens the immune system is dangerous, and the process for renewal and regeneration can be lengthy and often costly. You might ask yourself “how can I focus on my health when I recovering from my loss?” A better question might be “Can I afford not to care?” Can you make room for our health, so that you can be healthy for your children?” Count the cost and then take charge of how you feel.

Grieving is an individual wilderness experience that is not exclusive to adults. Shock, anger, denial, guilt and behavior changes are human responses. Children need adults to help them connect to their resources, maintain a positive attitude, and walk in faith believing that they will heal and get through it. Knowing that someone cares will help make their “wilderness” journey easier to bear. Both you and your child will be victorious if you take a step back from your own pain, watch your health, and remember that.

children grieve too.

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