



1

Understanding the Experience of Loss

Bereavement: the objective *event* of loss; sense of being deprived, of being robbed

Grief: *reaction* to the loss, encompasses thoughts and feelings, as well as physical, behavioral and spiritual responses

Mourning: the *process* by which a bereaved person integrates the loss into his or her ongoing life

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2

Understanding the Experience of Loss

Anticipatory Grief: grief that begins before a loss occurs.

Disenfranchised Grief: when a person suffers a loss that is not acknowledged by society.

Cumulative Grief: when a person suffers numerous losses in a short period.

Ambiguous Loss: Grief mixed with confusion and the unknown

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3

Understanding the Experience of Loss

Grief

- Is a result of loss
- Is natural
- Is expected
- Is a reaction that affects the entire human experience
 - ❖ Cognitive
 - ❖ Emotions
 - ❖ Physically
 - ❖ Behaviors
 - ❖ Relationships
 - ❖ Spirituality

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4

Understanding the Experience of Loss

Grief

- Purpose
 - ❖ To adjust to the loss so that we can live in the present
 - ❖ Constructive work
 - ❖ Can't not grieve and be healthy
- Unique to everyone
- Never completely over

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5

Understanding the Experience of Loss

Loss

- Primary loss-clearly recognized by both the mourner and society
- Secondary loss-physical or psychosocial loss that coincides with or develops as a consequence of the initial loss
 - ❖ Normally not recognized by others but most often the hardest to adjust too

Mourning

- Processes related to the deceased, the self and the external world
- Stroebe & Schut's, "Dual Process Model of Grief"

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6

"Typical" Grief Reactions

Behavioral: Changes in behavior	Emotional: Changes in feelings	Cognitive: Changes in thinking
• Crying • Fidgeting • Fighting • Tantrums • Lack of energy • Hyperactive • Nightmares • Overeating / not eating • Stomachaches • Clingy and insecure • Telling accident • Thumb sucking	• Sad • Longing • Lonely • Hopeless • Overwhelmed • Resentful • Fear • Numb • Relieved • Guilty • Angry • Embarrassed • Anxious	• Avoidance • Shock/disbelief • Difficulty concentrating • Inability to focus • Confused • Preoccupied with death • Fantasy

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7

"Typical" Grief Reactions

Physical: Physical Changes	Spiritual: Changes in beliefs	Social: Changes in relationship
• Lack of energy • Hyperactive • Nightmares • Stomachaches • Headaches • Change in bowel and bladder patterns • Muscle weakness • Nausea	• "Why" questions • Anger at God • Questions about the meaning of life • Feelings of being alone in the universe • Doubting or questioning previous beliefs • Sense of meaninglessness about the future • Change in values, questioning what is important	• Withdrawn • Isolated • Argumentative • Oppositional • Attention seeking • Rebellious

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8

Grief Styles

Instrumental Grief

Based on work by Terry Real and Dr. Elizabeth Doherty

- Grief is experienced in more physical or cognitive ways
- Grief is experienced in more physical, cognitive or behavioral ways
- More likely than feeling
- Less likely to express and identify feelings to grief
- More "hands-on" way of grieving



www.dohertygrief.com

Intuitive Grief

Based on work by Terry Real and Dr. Elizabeth Doherty

- Grief is experienced in more of emotion
- Grief is experienced in more feeling and emotion
- More likely than feeling
- Less likely to express and identify feelings to grief
- More "hands-on" way of grieving



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Blended Griefers
(It is a combination)



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9

Understanding Grief in Children

Children are concrete in their thinking:
Use words dead, death and died to avoid confusion

Children generalize:
If someone dies at a hospital = all hospitals result in death
If someone dies in their sleep = I might die in my sleep

Children are physical in their grief:
The older the child is, the better they are able to express themselves; What they do with their bodies speaks their feelings; A child's feelings are most often expressed through behavior and play.

Children grieve in doses or in cycles:
Children will grieve within the parameter and limitations of their developing abilities. A child may grieve again at different developmental stages. A child may also grieve at major milestones in their lives or other trigger events.

A child has a mature understanding of death when they realize the following:
Death is not temporary but permanent.
Death is not magical or personified but a biological process.
Death cannot be avoided or outsmarted; it is universal

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10

Developmental Grief: Ages 2-4

Developmental Stage

- Don't understand that death is permanent and universal.
- Express themselves through behavior and play.

Concept of Death

- See death as reversible and are starting to wonder if death happens to everyone.
- "My mom died? When will she be home?" and "Will you die too? "What about me?"

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11

Developmental Grief: Ages 2-4

Common Responses to Grief

- General anxiety, clinginess
- Crying
- Irregular sleep
- Irritability, temper tantrums
- Consistently retelling the story, repetitive questions
- Behavior regression

Ways to Help:

- Create a consistent routine
- Provide short, honest explanation of the death and answers of questions
- Use the words dying, dead and died; avoid euphemisms
- Set limits but be flexible when needed
- Provide opportunities for play
- Give choices whenever possible
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.

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12

Developmental Grief: Ages 5-8

Developmental Stage

- Explore their independence and try tasks on their own
- Concrete thinkers, with a tendency towards magical/fantasy thoughts

Concept of Death

- See death as reversible
- Can feel responsible and worry that their wishes or thoughts caused the person to die

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13

Developmental Grief: Ages 5-8

Common responses to grief

- Disrupted sleep, changes in eating habits
- Repetitive questions – How? Why? Who else?
- Concerns about safety and abandonment
- Short periods of strong reaction, mixed with acting as though nothing happened
- Regressive behaviors
- Using play and talk to recreate the event

Ways to help

- Explain the death honestly using concrete language
- Use the words dying, dead and died; avoid euphemisms
- Be prepared for repetitive questions
- Provide opportunities for big energy and creative play
- Allow children to talk about the experience and ask questions
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturing
- Give choices whenever possible

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14

Developmental Grief: Ages 9-12

Developmental Stage

- May still be concrete thinkers, but are beginning to understand abstract ideas like death and grief
- Making closer connections with friends and activities outside their home and family

Concept of Death

- Begin to understand that death is permanent
- Start to think about how the loss will affect them over the long-term
- Some children will focus on the details of what happened to the body of the person who died
- Feelings of guilt and regret can lead to concern that their thoughts and actions made the death happen

Common Responses to Grief

- Express big energy through behavior sometimes seen as acting out
- Anxiety and concern for safety of self and others
- Worries about something bad happening again
- Nightmares and intrusive thoughts
- Detailed questions about death and dying
- Hyper vigilance/increased sensitivity to noise, light, movement, and change
- Withdrawal from social situations

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15

Developmental Grief: Ages 9-12

Ways to Help

- Answer questions honestly, simply and age appropriately
- Use the words dying, dead and died; avoid euphemisms
- Provide a variety of activities for expression: talk, art, physical activity, play, writing
- Help children identify people and activities that help them feel safe and supported
- Maintain routines and limits, but be flexible when needed
- Give children choices whenever possible
- Model expressing emotions and taking care of yourself
- Be a good active listener
- Avoid giving advice (unless they ask for it), analyzing, or dismissing their experiences
- Talk with teachers about providing extra support and flexibility with assignments

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16

Developmental Grief: Ages 13-18

Developmental Stage

- Able to understand and process abstract concepts about life and death
- See themselves as unique individuals, separate from their role in the family and may wrestle with identity and who they want to be in the world
- Can be significant changes in their priorities, spirituality/faith, sexuality, and physical appearance
- Often rely on peers and others outside the family for support

Concept of Death

- Begin to understand that death is permanent
- Understand death is permanent, they may have unspoken magical thoughts of the person being on a long trip, etc.
- May have questions about the meaning of life, death, and other traumatic events

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17

Developmental Grief: Ages 13-18

Common Reactions

- Able to understand and process abstract concepts about life and death
- Withdrawal from family or other support networks/focused on connections with peers
- Increased risk taking: drugs/alcohol, unsafe behaviors, reckless driving
- Uncomfortable discussing the death or their experiences with parents and caregivers
- Worry about safety of self and others
- Fear about death or violence happening again
- Confusion over role identity in the family
- Attempts to take on caregiving/parent role with younger siblings and other adults
- May have thoughts of suicide and self-harm
- Hypervigilance/increased sensitivity to noise, movement, light.

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18

Developmental Grief: Ages 13-18

Ways to Help

- Reinforce assurances of safety and security, even if teens don't express concerns
- Maintain routines and set clear expectations, but be flexible when needed
- Allow for expression of feelings without trying to change, fix, or take them away
- Answer questions honestly
- Provide choices whenever possible
- Adjust expectations for concentration and task completion when necessary
- Assist teens to connect with support systems, including other adults
- Model appropriate expressions of grief and ways to take care of yourself
- Ask open ended questions ("What is it like for you?") and listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or placating
- Have patience with teens' wide range of reactions and questions

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19

Grief Reactions at School

- **Changes in Behavior:** Lack of energy, distractibility, difficulty completing work, needing to be reminded of instructions and expectations frequently, difficulty getting along with others, isolation
- **Regression:** Separation anxiety, attention seeking, baby talk, desire for cuddling, bed wetting/accidents, thumb-sucking, neglecting self-care, regression of social skills
- **Acting Out:** Aggression, explosiveness, fighting with others, temper tantrums, rage
- **Hyper maturity:** Assumes role of parent/adult
- **Changes in academic functioning:** Overachieving, focus on perfection, drop in grades (regression in achievement)

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20

Supporting Children in School

- Identify the needs of a student (breaks during the school day, calling home, stress relief tools) to create a comfortable and safe environment so that the child is able to focus on school
- Create and document a plan for responding to triggers (Where can they go? Who can be available to talk with them? Who are their trusted adults?)
- Sharing the information about a struggling student with key staff and teachers can aid in creating a consistent, supportive network
- Staying engaged with the school is the best way to stay up to date on accommodations for the student

Goodman, R., Cohen, J., Epstein, C., Kleithammer, M., Layne, C., Macy, R., & Ward-Wimmer, D. (n.d.). Childhood Traumatic Grief Educational Materials. PsyEXTRA Dataset.

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21

What Do I Do to Help?

- Create an atmosphere where questions and emotions are allowed and welcomed
 - Use the "D" words: death, dying and dead
 - Talk about the person who has died
 - Let the child know that all emotions are normal and okay—it is okay to be sad, mad, glad, etc.
 - Answer all questions in an age-appropriate, open, honest and loving way
 - Don't leave out details about the situation to "protect" the child
 - Adults should be aware that they model emotions and how to grieve to the children
- Tell them what to expect when grieving, according to age and maturity
 - Explain that they may feel like crying a lot, or they may feel mad, etc.
 - They may not want to do things that they used to like doing, they may have a hard time concentrating at home and school, etc.
 - All of these feelings are normal and natural when grieving
- Explain about triggers and have a plan when the triggers occur

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22

What Do I Do to Help?

- Give the child coping strategies
 - Having plans for when the grief is triggered
 - Find out what is the most beneficial way the child processes; everyone is different
 - Talking, writing, poetry, art, building, exercise, etc.
 - Find appropriate avenues for the child to express feelings in a healthy way
 - If angry and physically acting out, have the child exercise, participate in physical activities, or do breathing exercises
 - Have the child join a local peer support group for grieving children
- Advocate for the child in school, community, etc.
- Identify support people
- Self-care

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23

What Do I Do to Help?

Common Mistakes: Words and Actions to Avoid

- Do not suggest that the child has grieved long enough
- Do not indicate that the child should get over it and move on
- Do not expect the child to be able to perform at normal activities or stay focused
- Do not act as if nothing has happened
- Do not say things like:
 - "It could have been worse, you still have....."
 - "I know how you feel."
 - "You'll be stronger because of this."
 - "I'm sorry," *adds what you are sorry for...* "I'm sorry your friend died and you won't be able to talk to him anymore," "I'm sorry you are going through all this pain right now")
 - "He or she lived a full life."
 - "He or she wouldn't want you to feel this way"
 - "It was their time."
 - "He or she is in a better place."
 - "You're young enough to deal with it."
 - "You're the man of the house now" or anything suggesting that they are to take on a more mature role, a supporting role, or a care taker role.

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24

What Do I Do to Help?

- Practical examples of coping strategies:
- Create a scrapbook or special memories box
 - Recordable stuffed animals or books
 - Photo blankets, pillows, frames, other items
 - Create a family art project (i.e., handprint tree)
 - Create a goodbye or I miss you video
 - Scream box
 - Feelings pillow
 - Tell stories, write a poem, journal
 - Exercise, join a sport
 - Mindfulness, breathing techniques
 - Memorialization
 - Etc.

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25



26
