



# Developmental Stages and Reactions to Grief

## Babies to 2 year olds

are able to sense changes, sense emotions around them, and realize someone is missing.

- ♥ React physically- changes in sleeping, eating, bladder/bowel function, irritability, crying

### How to help

- ♥ Provide physical touch
- ♥ Maintain routines
- ♥ Avoid changes or trying to teach new skills such as potty training

## 3 to 5 year olds

view death, changes and events as temporary. They question cause of death and the possibilities of others dying. They are concrete thinkers and cannot grasp the concept of Heaven.

- ♥ React and express themselves through behaviors and play
- ♥ Ask questions repeatedly
- ♥ Seek security- "Who will take care of me?"
- ♥ Repeat the story to anyone, including strangers
- ♥ Utilize play for relief and expression
- ♥ Regressive behaviors- bed wetting, thumb sucking, temper tantrums, clinginess
- ♥ Physical changes- changes in sleep, crying

### How to help

- ♥ Provide short, honest answers, using concrete words such as "dead" and "died"
  - Ex. "Mommy died. Her body stopped working."
- ♥ Avoid euphemisms such as "passed away", "gone", "asleep", "better place"
- ♥ Maintain routines and structure, but be flexible when needed
- ♥ Provide physical touch
- ♥ Listen and acknowledge feelings, without offering advice
- ♥ Offer choices whenever possible
- ♥ Do activities together (draw, read)
- ♥ Provide opportunities for energy release, creativity, and play
- ♥ Utilize books to help explain
- ♥ Provide opportunities to connect to the deceased such as talking about memories or engaging in activities that remind them of the deceased
- ♥ Model/share your own grief and self-care

## 5 to 8 year olds

increase their understanding of death, changes, and events as final. They may feel responsible and worry they caused the person to die due to their wishes or thoughts. They are more interested in the physical details and may exhibit unrealistic fears such as others becoming ill or dying.

- ♥ Express feelings through behaviors due to difficulties using words to express
- ♥ Repetitive questions- How? Why? Who else?
- ♥ Concerns about safety and abandonment
- ♥ Regressive behaviors- bed wetting, tasks they previously could do before
- ♥ Behavioral changes- aggression, withdrawal, changes in energy, difficulties concentrating, clinginess, nightmares, changes in school performance
- ♥ Physical changes- changes in sleep, eating, stomachaches, headaches, body pain

### How to help

- ♥ Provide short, honest answers, using concrete words such as "dead" and "died"
- ♥ Provide the truth about cause of death and circumstances
- ♥ Avoid euphemisms such as "passed away", "gone", "asleep", "better place"
- ♥ Provide physical touch
- ♥ Listen and acknowledge feelings, without offering advice
- ♥ Encourage discussion about the changes, events, and death
- ♥ Offer choices whenever possible
- ♥ Do activities together (draw, read)
- ♥ Inform other supportive adults- teachers, counselors, coaches
- ♥ Provide opportunities for energy release, creativity, and play
- ♥ Provide opportunities to connect to the deceased such as talking about memories or engaging in activities that remind them of the deceased
- ♥ Model/share your own grief and self-care



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# Developmental Stages and Reactions to Grief

## 8 to 12 year olds

recognize death as final. They increase their understanding that death occurs for everyone, including themselves. They begin searching for their own philosophy on life and death. They are beginning to understand abstract ideas and think more about how the death will affect them long-term. They may feel responsible and worry they caused the person to die due to their actions, behaviors, or words.

- ♥ Express themselves through behaviors that may be viewed as “acting out”
- ♥ May experience anxiety, worries about bad things happening
- ♥ Behavioral changes- difficulties concentrating, withdrawal, sensitivity to changes, nightmares
- ♥ Physical changes- headaches, stomachaches, body pain
- ♥ Emotional changes- wide range of emotions

## How to help

- ♥ Provide honest answers about cause of death and circumstances
- ♥ Maintain routines and structure, but be flexible when needed
- ♥ Listen and acknowledge feelings, without offering advice
- ♥ Provide ways for expression- talking, art, physical activity, play, writing
- ♥ Offer choices whenever possible
- ♥ Inform other supportive adults- teachers, counselors, coaches
- ♥ Help them identify supportive people and coping tools
- ♥ Provide opportunities to connect to the deceased such as talking about memories or engaging in activities that remind them of the deceased
- ♥ Model/share your own grief and self-care

## 12 to 18 year olds

begin to see themselves as individuals separate from the family, searching for their own identities. They may try to imagine the deceased as being away temporarily as they explore questions about life, death, and other life experiences.

- ♥ Fear their own death and may “test” their immortality through risk taking
- ♥ Seek support from their peers
- ♥ May experience anxiety, worries about bad things happening
- ♥ Behavioral changes- withdrawal, anger, changes in sleep, changes in eating, difficulties concentrating or higher level of school pressures, changes in school performance
- ♥ Physical changes- headaches, stomachaches, body pain
- ♥ Emotional changes- unpredictable; quiet, angry, depressed, repressed sadness, worries
- ♥ Attempt to take on role of caregiving

## How to help

- ♥ Provide honest answers about cause of death and circumstances
- ♥ Maintain routines and structure, set clear expectations but be flexible when needed
- ♥ Explore their thoughts/feelings about the death/deceased
- ♥ Listen and acknowledge feelings without offering advice or trying to fix or change their experiences and ask open-ended questions
- ♥ Offer physical outlets for feelings (punching bag, drawing, ripping up paper)
- ♥ Offer choices whenever possible
- ♥ Inform other supportive adults- teachers, counselors, coaches
- ♥ Help them identify supportive people and coping tools
- ♥ Provide opportunities to connect to the deceased such as talking about memories or engaging in activities that remind them of the deceased
- ♥ Do not make promises you cannot keep
- ♥ Respect privacy
- ♥ Avoid power struggles
- ♥ Model/share your own grief and self-care



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