

## Counselling Connection:

# Grief and Loss

For more information on Grief and Loss contact Paula Knox, School Counsellor.

### HELPING CHILDREN IN YOUR CARE WITH LOSS

Grief is a natural human response to loss. It can be overwhelming for caregivers to know where to start when talking about loss to children. Children and adolescents need to know they are not alone in their grief, and that their physical, social, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive responses are normal. There have been theories that support grief following linear stages, until a state of acceptance is eventually reached. However modern grief theories support the grief experience to be nonlinear and unique to each individual. Grief can manifest at home, school and with peers. Although coping can become easier as time passes, children do not understand this and are often confused with the messy process of grief. Caregivers can play an important role in companioning children and adolescents through their grief journey.

Grief cannot be resolved. Rather, it can be worked through and carried differently over time. It will transform us forever as the loss is integrated into our life.

(Alan Wolfelt)

“Hurting is a part of the journey on the way to healing” (Alan Wolfelt)

### GRIEF AND DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL

Children will process death differently than adults. It is important to be aware of a child's developmental understanding of death. This will depend on a child's age and cognitive ability.

**INFANCY:** Infants will experience a sense of separation/absence and will be affected by change in routines. They might be more agitated during times of separation, and show changes in sleep and eating patterns.

**PRESCHOOL AGE:** Children view death as temporary and reversible/ not permanent. Preschoolers might believe parent will come back for a special day. They might experience regression in behavior and change in sleep patterns.

**ELEMENTARY:** Children begin to understand death as a permanent/external event that happens to others, not them. They might have lots of questions about death, and experience changes in sleep/dreams, and have physical symptoms of grief.

**PRE -ADOLESCENT:** Children understand death as irreversible and something that will happen to all living beings. They might try to hide emotions. Children this age might feel responsible for the death.

**ADOLESCENT:** Death is viewed as certain and permanent. Teens might develop curiosity about death, purpose of life and what happens when a person dies. Teens might withdraw from social interactions and be more explosive.

### MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN AND LOSS

- Children are too young to understand loss, so do not feel the same depth of grief as an adult
- Children should be protected from the suffering associated with loss
- Exposure to a dying loved one or dead body will create trauma in children
- Adults should encourage *only* happy memories when a loved one dies
- Attending a funeral is too upsetting for a child
- Talking about or touching the dead body should be discouraged
- Terms such as “pass away” and “gone to rest” should be used to replace telling a child a loved one has died
- Adults should not talk about grief with children. This will help them forget and move on (Lancaster, 2011).

## COMMON REACTIONS TO LOSS

PHYSICAL	COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL	SOCIAL/BEHAVIORAL	SPIRITUAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Headaches</li> <li>-Chills</li> <li>-Changes in heart rate</li> <li>-Nausea</li> <li>-Numbness</li> <li>-Insomnia</li> <li>-Lack of appetite</li> <li>-Stomach Aches</li> <li>-Lack of Appetite</li> <li>-Weakness/Fatigue</li> <li>-Stomach and head aches</li> <li>-Nightmares</li> <li>-Repetitive tapping/rocking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preoccupied with thoughts of:</li> <li>-Events leading up to death/funeral</li> <li>-Memories of deceased</li> <li>-Reasons for this happening to them and not others</li> <li>-Others dying</li> <li>-Future events that wont include deceased</li> <li>-Beliefs about life and death</li> <li>-Self blame</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feelings of:</li> <li>-Guilt</li> <li>-Blame</li> <li>-Shock</li> <li>-Anger</li> <li>-Confusion</li> <li>-Hopelessness</li> <li>-Shame</li> <li>-Sadness</li> <li>-Anxiety</li> <li>-Panic</li> <li>-Jealousy</li> <li>-Fear</li> <li>-Relief</li> <li>-Resentment</li> <li>-Loneliness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Withdrawal from friends</li> <li>-Daydreaming /Apathetic</li> <li>-Angry/unpredictable outbursts</li> <li>-Regressive behaviors (baby talking, bed wetting)</li> <li>-Clinging to loved ones</li> <li>-Restless/Difficulty with focus</li> <li>-Oppositional</li> <li>-Overprotective/clingy</li> <li>-Attention Seeking</li> <li>-Risk Taking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Loss/increase of faith</li> <li>-Preoccupied with meaning of life</li> <li>-Feel presence of deceased</li> <li>-Confusion about where the deceased is</li> <li>-Questioning of existing spiritual beliefs</li> <li>-Anger towards higher power</li> <li>-Irritation with others' imposed views of spirituality</li> </ul>

### What You Can Do As A Caregiver:

- Maintain structure and routines as much as possible.
- Welcome conversations about grief, including spiritual beliefs or what happens when a person dies.
- Allow child's questions to guide the information you share. Be honest about reasons for the death (keep language simple/concrete for younger children). You do not need to give all of the details (for ex: if the death was suicide). Refrain from statements such as "he/she has gone to rest."
- Validate Feelings of child/adolescent (help the child to name the feeling and to know it is normal to have many different feelings at once. For example, anger, loneliness and sadness).
- Share your own experiences of grief feelings, thoughts, behaviors (keeping in mind child's developmental understanding). Validate that death changes us.
- Allow the mourning process to take time in order for the loss to be integrated into the child's life. Refrain from pushing a child to let go and move on. It is adaptive for humans to take time to mourn the death.
- Model authentic empathy and compassion where a child can be heard. You don't need to "fix" anything.
- Encourage healthy distractions from grief (grieving activities along with distracting activities are healthy. It is okay to feel happy one minute and sad the next).
- Don't force *conversations* about the deceased (some children will grieve through music, physical activity, art, play, etc). Some children/teens might be more comfortable talking to someone else about their grief.
- Explore books and computer resources on grief/loss (lots of material for children and adults).
- Communicate with child's teacher/counsellor about the impact loss is having on him/her.
- Explore grief support groups in area (sharing common feelings allows children to know they are not alone).
- Assist with remembering/meaning making activities such as creating a collage or scrapbook, making a Christmas ornament, writing a poem/song about the values the deceased passed on, making a memory space with objects and photos, sleeping with object that reminds him or her of deceased, visiting favorite places of deceased, sharing pleasant memories, ceremonies on special days etc.
- Use hopeful "we " statements, such as "we will figure this out," we will be okay."

#### References:

- O'Connor, J. (2004). *Helping your child understand death: children and grief*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing
- Wolfelt, A. D. (2006). *Companioning the bereaved: a soulful guide for counselors and caregivers*. Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press