

Child Grief & Life-threatening Illness in the Family

Families grieve numerous losses and ride on a roller coaster of changes when someone close to them is living with a life-threatening illness. There are similarities and differences between the way children and adults manage this difficult time. A child's age, developmental stage, and experiences will determine their understanding of the illness and the way they cope. Children tend to alternate between playing and expressing strong emotions. Children may re-experience grief as they move through different developmental stages.

A child's expression of their grief can be a challenge sometimes for parents/caregivers who are coping with their own loss. This guide is intended to help those supporting children to understand and prepare for common responses to illness and death at different developmental stages. Please remember that grief responses are individual and that each child's grief experience will be unique.

Infants and Toddlers

- They respond to the reactions of those around them and sense that something is wrong.
- They are most affected by disruptions in routine and caregiving.
- They do not understand the permanence of death and they experience a continuous temporary absence.

Common Reactions may include:

- Crying more than usual.
- Changes in sleep - may not fall asleep the way they did and/or may be more sleepy than usual.
- Changes in eating patterns and likes/dislikes.
- Show distress when separating from parent/caregiver.

What Helps?

- Keep routines and physical surroundings as consistent and familiar as possible.
- Offer their familiar comforts as much as possible (rock, hold, sing, talk to etc).

Preschool Age

- Under the age of 6-7 years children do not understand that death is irreversible, that we will all die someday, that there is a cause, and that the body no longer functions.
- They may talk about the person coming back for a special day.
- Magical thinking may lead children to believe that something they said or thought caused the illness or death - *"I didn't put my toys away and she was angry, that's why she is sick."*

Common Reactions may include:

- Repeatedly asking questions related to changes in the body during illness or after death.
- Sharing their experience and story in a matter of fact way with others.
- Thinking that they caused the illness.
- Physical symptoms (eg. headaches and stomach aches).
- Fearing that others close to them may get sick.
- Becoming more clingy and reluctant to separate from parent/caregivers.
- Regression in behavior (eg. baby-talk, thumb-sucking, bedwetting).
- Changes in sleep (eg. bad dreams, difficulty going to sleep, afraid to be alone in the dark).

- Forgetting the person after they die and feeling sad when they remember them.
- Asking questions of people who will talk with them about the illness, burial and/or cremation.

What Helps?

- Patience when they ask the same questions repeatedly.
- Encourage them to ask questions and share their feelings (verbally and through play, art, or exercise).
- Provide concrete and honest explanations to their questions.
- Maintain or create schedules and routines to provide a sense of safety and control.
- Offer comfort, affection, reassure them that they are safe and explain that the illness is not their fault.

9-12 Years of Age

- They can have a more refined understanding of the seriousness of the illness and death.
- They wonder how the illness and death will impact themselves and others.
- They show interest in what happens to the body during illness and after death.

Common Reactions may include:

- Covering up emotions, try to appear normal to fit in, and not worry anyone.
- Showing concern for the safety and future of other family members.
- Experiencing increased anger, challenging behaviors, difficulties in school, and lack of focus or interest.
- Experiencing bad dreams and physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, etc.
- Asking themselves and others many questions about illness and death.

What Helps?

- Honest, accurate information.
- Regular invitations to ask questions and opportunities to share their feelings without being judged.
- Reassurance about their future as well as the future of other family members.
- Request and consider their input in regards to the changing circumstances.
- Respect their need for privacy.
- Provide opportunities for connection with significant adults in their lives.