

Signs that a Child Needs Loss Support

Various signs may be present and can be quite normal when an individual initially experiences grief. A range of responses is quite normal, from no response at all to a number of the responses below.

Adults, such as parents, teachers, and counselors, may be concerned if these signs persist over time. If such concerns exist, the student(s) should be referred to a professional, such as a counselor, clinician, or other mental health professional. You may also simply notify the principal or your child's teacher, who will direct the appropriate assistance for the student(s).

You Can Help a Grieving Person

Listen without trying to cure. Being truly present to a grieving person, without judging or denying their pain, without trying to fix the unfixable, is the single most important gift you may give someone who is grieving.

Understand that this will take time. This is not like a cold or a cut that will continuously get better. Grief will come in unexpected waves, affecting a person throughout their lifetime. Each person, even within a family, will have a different time schedule and, sometimes, it gets worse before the intensity and frequency of the waves change.

Be direct and honest. Use real language (e.g., "he died") versus euphemisms such as "passed away" ... "gone to a better place" ... "not with us anymore" ...etc. In our well-intentioned way, we are frequently overprotective and tip-toe around issues of death and dying. This language especially confuses children. "If he's in a better place, why am I not there?"

If you don't believe it, or you don't have an answer, don't say anything. It is always better to remain quiet, or admit what we don't know, rather than responding to fill the space. This will create a sense of trust between you and the person grieving.

Don't avoid topics that include the deceased. After a death, we need outlets to create the significance of the person who died. We do that through talking about that person, memories and legacies.

Allow for humor and lightness. Grieving people need breaks from their grief, and time to remember what it feels like to be 'normal' while adjusting to the 'new normal.'

Take the lead from the person who is grieving. In public places (supermarkets, school grounds, etc.), reflect their mood and their words, allowing them the room to be where they are at the moment.

Be aware of your own limitations. Many people cannot sit with another person in pain, especially when there is nothing functional that can be done. There are many ways to

support the grieving person - assisting with childcare, distracting them with movies and meals, offering a second home, helping with the household bills and mail, etc.

Normal Grief Responses

Physical Reaction such as:

- Tightness in the throat or heaviness in the chest, legs/arms Empty feeling in the stomach and loss of appetite Constant sense of hunger and increase in appetite Physical sense of restlessness, jittery
- Hot or cold flashes, dizziness
- Shortness of breath, fatigue, weakness
- Sensitive skin; heightened sensitivities to noises, light

Behavioral/ Social Responses such as:

- Shock, numbness, disorientation, bewilderment Disbelief, denial, detachment
- Inertia, withdrawal, listlessness
- Social withdrawal
- Overly involved in keeping busy
- Crying, screaming, temper tantrums, whimpering Clinginess, fear of being alone or leaving a parent Absent mindedness, clumsiness, sleeplessness Too much sleeping

Emotional Responses such as:

Sadness, relief, guilt, anger, anxiety, panic, mild depression, hopelessness, fearfulness, feeling unreal, dazed, mood swings, loneliness, yearning, helplessness, confusion, disoriented

Thought Patterns such as:

- Inability to concentrate
- Desire to “join” the dead person Difficulty making decisions Disbelief
- Generalized confusion
- Guilt, regrets
- Chronic worrying
- Low self-esteem
- Increased sense of compassion Envy of non-grievors

What Grieving People Need

Children and adults need the facts. Explain simply and accurately what has happened and don't speculate beyond what you are sure is true. Ask them if they have any questions or particular worries about the disaster; if there are particular people they are concerned about, Do your best to obtain the information they need.

Children and adults need opportunities to share feelings and experiences. Ask them how they are feeling about what has happened and bear in mind that sharing some of your own feelings will help them talk about their own feelings and concerns. Remember that children may express their feelings through behaviors rather than words so be alert for behaviors that indicate they might be worried and not talking about it. Inviting children to make drawings, a clay sculpture or playing with puppets are other ways of helping them get at unexpressed feelings. Remember that children typically deal with grief in short spurts and can seem very upset one minute and unconcerned the next: also remember that children will differ in their pace and style of grieving... for example, some will act out angrily, others will withdraw sullenly.

Children need to feel safe. Stay with your children if possible; try not to leave them alone or with strangers. Keep assuring them of what is safe and stable in their lives. Many children will become very anxious about being separated from their parents and family members and this may last for a number of weeks. Assure children that they will be cared for and implement a buddy system if you are in charge of a classroom or a large group of children.

Children need to feel a sense of control. Keep your regular routine if at all possible; give children specific tasks to do that they are sure to succeed in; this not only keeps them productively busy but gives them a sense of mastery and control (i.e. cleaning out a drawer, setting a table, tidying a room). If appropriate include them in decisions and plans that follow the tragedy.

Children and adults need to learn their own coping techniques for dealing with the crisis. Remember to allow for different understandings of and reactions to the situation. Traumatic grief reactions are natural and normal – and remember that most people can manage their own reactions best if they get some rest, good food, exercise and have access to people who can listen, who can tolerate their pain without trying to make it go away prematurely, and don't criticize their coping techniques.

Children and adults need to slowly, and in their own way, be allowed to absorb the range of losses that trauma can cause. These include loss of control, loss of trust, loss of security and safety, loss of innocence, loss of assumptions about the world, loss of a sense of fairness, loss of personal belongings, loss of relationships.

Children and adults deserve to have their pain validated. If our own issues with grief and trauma are causing us to deny, prejudge, or wish another's pain away it can eclipse their healing. Their pain is real and true even if it frightens or angers you; to deny their pain is to deny them.

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