The Grief Process in Children

While you cannot protect your children from the cruel realities of death, you can help them cope with their loss in constructive and growth-producing ways. In many ways, children grieve differently than adults. However, if you understand some likely reactions, helping them grieve will not be such an overwhelming task for you.

Children have difficulty understanding and expressing their feelings in words; instead they are likely to act them out. When they are stressed, newer, unproven ways of handling situations are dropped for older ways. For example, a boy who has outgrown fighting to get his way at school may start fighting again. Another young child may become clingy and needy. This regression is an expression of grief.

Children see themselves as the center of the universe. For everyone, death arouses feelings of insecurity. However, to a child who is largely dependent, the death of a significant person is the ultimate threat to their personal survival. They need and deserve nurturing and security.

To children, death is a cruel monster that wrecks havoc with their lives. A child may think, “If death can affect me so much, he can easily take other members of my family including me.” A child’s experience of death is more raw than an adult’s.

Consequently, grieving children need reassurance that there will always be adults to take care of them. Don’t be surprised if your child asks you, “What will happen to me if you die too?” First, recognize and admit to your child that his fear is legitimate. Second, explain that it is unlikely that you will die soon. And third, discuss the tangible provisions you have made for your child if you die. “If that happens, you would go to live with...”

When with children who are grieving, remember that they have a limited understanding of death which makes them anxious. Their fear may show itself in ways that don’t seem related to the death. They may develop school phobia, the fear of going to school, because they want to stay at home to make sure Mom is going to be okay.

They may have increased anxiety when someone close is ill or injured. Children find it reassuring to talk about the illness or injury in a direct way. We can support and nurture them by respecting their feelings and allowing them to share their anxiety.

Children can discuss issues of death and dying, indeed they want to, as long as the adult respects their need to control the discussion. This means letting them choose the time and subject matter of these talks. Answer their questions in a direct and honest way, but don’t go beyond what they’re asking.

Frequently, children also feel guilt about the death. Because children see themselves as the center of the universe, they often feel responsible for what goes on around them. For example, a young boy whose grandmother died in his home felt he caused the death by arguing with his mom.

If you ask children directly about their sense of responsibility for the death, they are likely to deny it, especially if they feel criticized. It is better to address children’s fear that they may have contributed to the death in more general ways. For example, you might say something like, “Some children worry that they may have made their mom die by ___.”

If that assumption is wrong, what else may have caused the death even if you felt angry or wished that she was dead.”

Dear Friend

As the months pass, you may experience new challenges as you follow your path through loss and grief. Others can provide support, but only you can walk the path of your grief. As you work through your grief, we hope that you are not alone and that you are receiving the support you want. We hope that this month’s bulletin will help you reflect on your personal journey through grief. Use it to examine whether you are “on course” or if your direction needs to be altered slightly. Each bit of information gives you a different insight for reflecting your own grieving process.

As you continue through this first year of bereavement, reach out to receive support. Pain in isolation is far more intolerable than pain which is shared. We support you in your journey.

Three Operations of Mourning

Therapeutic biochemist and author, Theresie Rando uses the word “mourning” to describe the active, purposeful part of grief: the work. She talks about mourning as promoting three operations and six separate processes. The first operation is the undoing and changing of the ties with your loved one and the creation of a new relationship. The second helps us to adapt to the loss, revising our perceptions and assumptions about the world, and adapting to new roles, skills, behaviors and a new identity. The third promotes mourning by helping us to go on to live in a healthy way without the deceased.

The Six Processes of Mourning

1. Recognizing and Understanding the Reality of the Death

   This process involves allowing ourselves to gently confront the reality that someone loved has died and will not return. It means allowing ourselves to fully understand this and move from an intellectual understanding to an acceptance in our hearts.

2. Experiencing and Expressing the Pain of Grief

   This process involves allowing ourselves to embrace all the thoughts and feelings that result from the death of someone loved. We all need permission to mourn. Sometimes what we need most from others is an awareness that it is okay to talk out our many thoughts and feelings, both positive and negative. You may feel the pain of losing not only what you had, but what you never had as well. All feelings must be felt, reacted to and expressed in some form which may be different for each person such as crying and sharing with others, writing about your grief or journaling, using exercise as a means of expression or an art process.

3. Recollecting and Re-experiencing the Deceased and the Relationship

   This process entails a review of the relationship with the person who died. What was good and what was not? Were there any unfinished issues that were not resolved that may have been left even early on in the relationship? It means coming to a completion of the relationship; forgiving, asking forgiveness, expressing gratitude and offering a final goodbye.

4. Developing a New Self-Identity and Revising our Assumptions about the World

   Of course, you do not want to stop loving the person who has died, or stop cherishing your memories. Yet, your fourth task of mourning is to separate the love you have for the one who has died and rediscover the part of loving which belongs in this world; your ability to give and receive love here on earth. Often in working through this process we discover some positive aspects of our changed self-identity. It also means revising our assumptions about how we thought about the world. We may have assumed that we would grow old together with our spouse, or that we would die before our children. If that assumption is wrong, what else may have changed? When you have integrated your loss into every part of your life and find that the pain gradually changes and shifts, you will know that you are adjusting.

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In a very personal sense, you face a new and unfamiliar world. Just as an immigrant needs to adjust to the language and culture of a new country, you must adjust to your new world. You need to develop and get used to new routines, learn to handle new responsibilities, and interact with people in new ways. The process of discovering your new world and learning how to cope with it is the fourth process of mourning.

We often ask “why?” questions about the deaths that have affected us. “Why now?” “Why in this way? “Why did this happen?”. However, when you have a new awareness of your life, you will always continue to have a new awareness of your life. Questioning your beliefs can be frightening, but it also can help you find something meaningful in whatever one does. The way you cope with grief is probably similar to the way you have coped with difficulty and change throughout your life.

One of the issues we all need to face is finding meaning in your life. Finding meaning with life is excellent resources as you seek coping methods that work for you. It is not unusual to question your religion and doubt your faith. Your grief will not follow a “logical progression” of step-by-step progression. Grief usually involves an “identity crisis.” You may need an opportunity to heal old wounds and to free yourself of burdens which you may have been carrying for a long time.

How you grieve will depend on how you perceive the loss. Certain dates, events, and places may trigger sudden upsurges of grief. Even after you have thoroughly worked through your grief, you may find that the stress of daily living has the potential to evoke old wounds. You may grieve for your loved one you have imagined.

In your grief, you will not follow a “logical progression” of decreasing intensity. The grief process is more like a roller coaster, with dramatic ups and downs, than it is a logical, step-by-step progression.