

What is Grief?

Grief is a normal and natural reaction to death. Love and grief are inseparable – they are yin and yang. So when we lose those we love we experience grief. It is a normal response and it has been a part of the human condition since the beginning of time. You can see grief in every culture. Some cultures embrace this experience more directly than others. Some, unfortunately, sweep this experience under the rug or pathologize it as an abnormality.

GRIEF IS NOT JUST AN EMOTIONAL REACTION, THOUGH, GRIEF IS AN EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL, SPIRITUAL, AND INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCE.

EMOTIONAL – It is not uncommon to feel anger, numbness, relief, uncertainty, anxiety, fear, depression, apathy, sadness, and joy as a part of the grief experience. All emotions are valid and they vary based on all sorts of circumstances. See some of the variables that influence the grief experience below.

INTELLECTUAL – We experience a range of thoughts about grief, which can include blame, the idea that we could have prevented the death, we often try to “wrap our heads” around the fact that someone is gone, we frequently try to make sense of things, we may try to make meaning, and we may think that the death and our consequential circumstances are unjust. This component also forces us to reimagine our lives and change our expectations, hopes, and plans.

SPIRITUAL – As humans, we try to understand “how” and “why” bad things happen. Often times, this is where we do our meaning making. Religion may play a role, but our understanding of our lives and the meaning of life itself is often at play here. “He was such a good person. How could this have happened to him?” or “why didn’t she ask for help?” etc.

PHYSICAL – Grief is exhausting! For adults, fatigue and feeling like you’re in a fog is not uncommon. For kids, they often experience bellyaches and headaches. Without a safe environment to express their grief, kids often bottle it all up which leads to behavioral expressions that may get a child into trouble. It is not uncommon for grief to cause people to overeat or undereat. It is also not uncommon for a grieving body to be susceptible to illness, as the immune system is often weak during intense grief.

Here are a few variables that can influence grief:

- Culture
- Support system
- The nature of the relationship
- Religion
- How the person died
- Comments that people make
- Stigmas
- And many external variables that are outside of the grieving person’s control

This resource is from **Good Grief**, an organization that builds resilience in children, strengthens families, and empowers communities to grow from loss and adversity. <https://good-grief.org/>

Tips for Supporting Grieving Kids

1. Grief is normal

Grief is a normal part of the human experience. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but there are healthy and unhealthy ways to express that pain. Grief for kids is both emotional and physical. Kids benefit from physical outlets since they often don't have all the words to talk about it.

2. Grieving kids can feel alone

Grief can be very isolating and many kids feel alone or misunderstood. Peer groups are highly effective because knowing someone going through something similar helps a child know they are not alone.

3. Don't assume

Kids will work hard to have their needs met. Don't assume what they are feeling or think you have all the answers. Just because a kid looks fine doesn't mean all is well and just because a child is having a hard time does not mean something is wrong or that they need to be fixed.

4. You don't have to fix it

Kids benefit from open, honest, and understanding adults who validate their experience and don't assume. Listening to a child and being a consistent presence in their lives matters. Kids need consistency.

5. Try to understand

It is more important that you understand a child's perspective than try to fix their pain.

6. Be willing to not know

It's okay if you do not have all the answers to a child's questions or if you don't know their every thought. Every grief experience is unique and sometimes there's a lot of uncertainty or confusion.

7. Children need the truth

Children understand their feelings, death, and the future through facts and the truth. Lies never help. Use facts and not euphemisms or clichés to talk about death. With the truth, kids can learn and develop healthy coping skills.

8. Modify your expectations

A child or teen's grief does not look like an adult's grief. Don't expect a child to think or feel like an adult. Kids grieve in spurts, their questions vary as they try to understand death and their feelings, and they emote differently from adults.

9. Everyone's grief is unique

No two kids or adults grieve the same. Everyone experiences grief differently depending on where they are developmentally, their support systems, the nature of their relationship to the deceased, and many other factors. Everyone is different and it is important that everyone's feelings are affirmed and supported even if a child's truth differs from yours.

10. Be prepared

Knowledge is power. Use teachable moments to educate a child about death. Learn how to talk openly about this subject matter, using honest language and creating a safe space for present and future needs.

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Additional resources for managing grief can be found here:

- Tips for Communicating with Grieving Kids:
<https://good-grief.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/10-Tips-for-Communicating-with-Grieving-Kids.pdf>
- Tips for Supporting Someone who is Grieving:
<https://good-grief.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/10-Tips-for-Supporting-Someone-Who-is-Grieving.pdf>
- Common Myths about Grief:
<https://good-grief.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/10-Common-Myths-About-Grief.pdf>
- How to Tell a Child Someone has Died:
<https://good-grief.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/How-To-Tell-a-Child-Someone-Died.pdf>
- Ways to Say “I Care”:
<https://good-grief.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/10-Ways-to-Say-I-Care.pdf>
- Ways to Care for Yourself while Caring for Others:
<https://good-grief.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/50-Ways-to-Care-for-Yourself-While-Caring-for-Others.pdf>
- How to Create a Safe Space for Someone who is Grieving:
<https://good-grief.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/How-To-Create-a-Safe-Space-for-Someone-Who-is-Grieving.pdf>