

PARENTS CORNER

The Grief Process in Children

In many ways, children grieve differently than adults. Children have difficulty understanding and expressing their feelings in words; instead, they are likely to act them out. If you understand some likely reactions, helping them grieve will not be such an overwhelming task.

When stressed, children may try newer, unproven ways to handle situations and drop 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.

As with adults, death arouses feelings of insecurity in children who are largely dependent. The death of a significant person is the ultimate threat to their personal survival. They need and deserve nurturing and security.

Death is a cruel monster that wreaks havoc on children's lives. A child may think, "Death can easily take other members of my family, including me." Consequently, grieving children need reassurance that there will always

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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 live with ..."

Children who are grieving have a limited understanding of death, which can cause anxiety. Their fear may surface in ways that are unrelated 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 OK. 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.

When children want to discuss issues of death and dying, respect 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 have feelings of guilt about the death. Because young 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 her 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 provide some facts about how the person died and address children's fear that they may have contributed to the death in more general ways. Say something like: "Some children worry that they may have made their mom die by what they might have thought. I want you to know that you did not cause this even if you felt angry or wished she were dead."

SHARP Hospice Care

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"The grief within me has its own heartbeat. It has its own life, its own song. Part of me wants to resist the rhythms of my grief. Yet, as I surrender to the song, I learn to listen deep within myself."

— Alan Wolfelt

bringing comfort to each day

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SHARP Hospice Care

ISSUE **03**

Healing Through Grief

Dear Friend,

As you continue through this first year of bereavement, remember that Sharp HospiceCare bereavement counselors are available to support you during your grieving process.

This issue of *Healing Through Grief* is designed to help you reflect on your personal journey through grief, as well as your progress. Each article will provide you with new insight to help you face your obstacles.

We're here to help. If you would like to talk about your loss, reactions or concerns, or if you have any questions about our services, call 1-800-681-9188 to speak to a bereavement counselor.

Sincerely yours,
The Bereavement Department of
Sharp HospiceCare

Strategies for Coping With Grief

Individuals who survive the death of someone close usually face intense conflicting emotions and profound changes in their way of life. Moving through the inner and outer turmoil toward a new sense of equilibrium and hope is an enormous challenge for anyone. Each person finds a unique way to cope with this challenge. The way you cope with grief is probably similar to the way you have coped with difficulty and change throughout your life.

These positive coping strategies will help you take care of yourself:

- Crying
- Laughing
- Listening to music
- Exercising
- Writing
- Nurturing yourself
- Traveling
- Sharing your feelings
- Reading
- Participating in activities
- Setting goals
- Respecting your own needs

Although the following coping strategies may ease the pain temporarily, they are harmful in the long run:

- Alcohol and drugs
- Smoking
- Enshrinement (keeping a room as a permanent shrine to the dead person)
- Escape (avoiding all reminders of loss)
- Oversleeping or overeating
- Somatization (suppressed emotional pain resulting in physical symptoms)
- Preoccupation with suicide
- Recklessness (careless or fast driving, gambling, overspending, etc.)
- Overactivity, overwork
- Self-neglect and pushing past limits
- Social isolation

For additional resources, consider reading *The Courage to Grieve* by Judy Tattelbaum and *Living Through Personal Crisis* by Ann Kaiser Stearns.

Sharp HospiceCare strives to bring comfort to those working through the grieving process. Bereavement counselors provide a supportive, confidential environment for families and friends dealing with the loss of a loved one. To learn more about Sharp HospiceCare, including support groups, call 1-800-681-9188.



Challenging Myths About Grief and Establishing Realistic Expectations

Myths in American culture influence our beliefs about dealing with death and grief. In our society, we rarely learn about the emotional benefits of talking about our feelings. Our losses change us forever, and we need a long time to integrate the loss and pain into our personal identity.



If you establish realistic expectations for yourself, you will ease your burden and facilitate your grieving.

Consider these common myths and how they may affect you and your loved ones:

- All losses are the same
- All bereaved people grieve in the same way
- It takes two weeks to three months to get over grief
- Once grief is resolved it never returns
- Painful thoughts should be put out of your mind
- Anger should not be a part of grief
- Children need to be protected from grief and death
- The relationship will end with your loved one who has died
- The intensity and length of your grief prove your love for the deceased
- Only sick people have physical problems in their grief
- Funerals and rituals are unimportant in the healing process
- It's important to stay in control and keep a "stiff upper lip"
- You should put memories of your loved one in the past and go on with your life
- You should be involved in activities and stay busy
- Crying doesn't solve anything

Holding on to society's myths about grief can hinder your healing process and cause unnecessary frustration. However, if you establish more realistic expectations for yourself, you will ease your burden and facilitate your grieving.

It's important to understand the following realities about grief:

- Your healing will take longer than most people think
- Working through grief will require more energy than you might have imagined
- Grief evolves and unfolds; it continually changes and develops over time
- Your grief will impact all areas of your life: social, physical, emotional and spiritual
- Your grieving process encompasses dramatic ups and downs, contrary to a step-by-step progression
- How you grieve will depend on how you perceive the loss
- Your grief will involve a wider range of feelings than those typically recognized as "grief"; give yourself permission to feel and express whatever emotions you are experiencing
- Your current loss may trigger feelings of grief from earlier, unresolved loss; take the opportunity to heal old wounds and free yourself of burdens from the past
- Grief usually involves an identity crisis — you may evaluate who you are now, without your loved one
- At times, you may doubt your sanity
- Grief is unpredictable; it may come in waves of intense pain that occur without warning
- Grief will impair your capacity to think clearly, make decisions or solve problems; minor problems or annoyances become huge and feel more burdensome than they would have prior to this loss
- Your behavior in social situations may change
- Certain dates, events and places may trigger sudden surges of grief
- No two people will grieve in exactly the same way, even if they are grieving for the same person
- You will sometimes be disappointed by how others respond to your grief because our society has many unrealistic expectations — myths — about grief, and you may encounter people who respond inappropriately to you

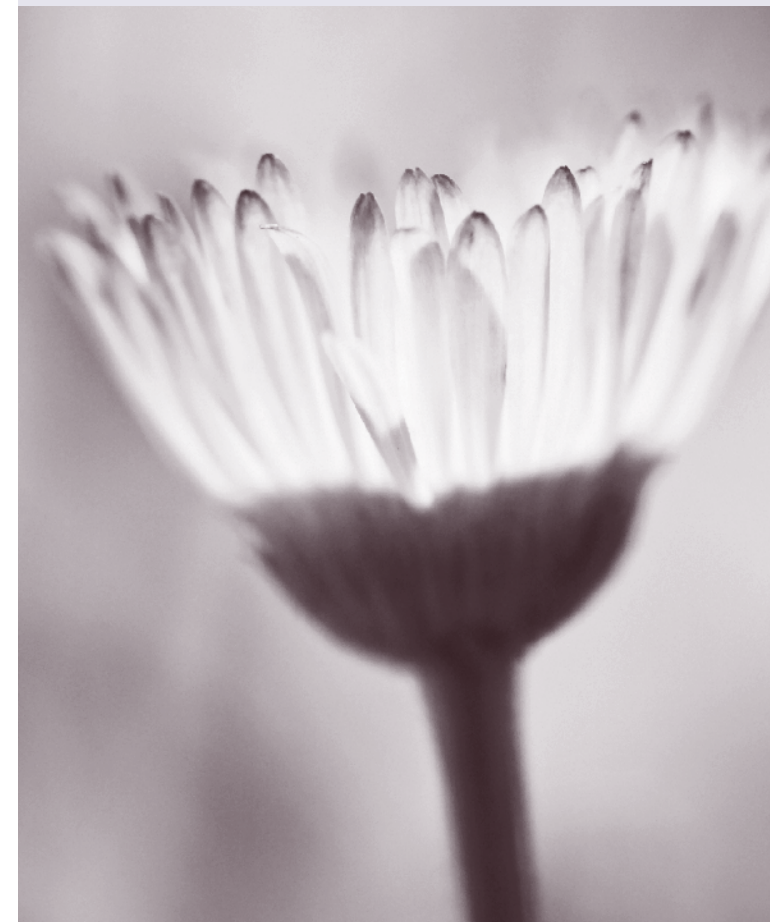
Grateful acknowledgment for the inspiration of *Realistic Expectations* from Mary Ann Harter Janson, RN, MS.

Mourning in American Culture

Beyond the funeral, there are few gestures or symbols (such as a black armband) to acknowledge that you are grieving. Our society seems to find displays of grief unacceptable beyond a week or two of the death. You may feel pressure from family, friends or your employer to behave "normally" — as if nothing has changed in your life. Americans haven't learned that people are not having emotional breakdowns just because they are showing overt symptoms of grief.

Many other cultures are far more realistic about the duration of time mourning requires. Many have the custom of dressing in black for six months or a year. And Orthodox Jews, for example, offer formal prayers daily for 11 Hebrew months and mourn for 12 months.

If you would like to provide your family, friends or employer with an explanation for your grieving behavior, consider using the following letter.



Dear (Family, Friend, Pastor, Employer),

As you know, I have recently experienced the death of my_____. This loss has devastated me and it will take time for me to work through my grief. Sometimes, I fear that you may expect me to heal quickly, but grief cannot be rushed.

For a while, I will cry more often than usual. My tears symbolize the release of my feelings and are a sign that I am recovering. These tears are neither a sign of personal weakness, nor a lack of faith or hope.

Because my emotions are heightened by the strain of grief, I may seem irrational at times. Please be patient and forgive me if I become irritable and angry for no apparent reason. Grief comes in unpredictable waves.

I know that you are probably at a loss for what to do or say to help me. Your presence and understanding are all I ask. I need you to listen to me. There are no magic words you can say to take my pain away. Something as simple as a hug lets me know you care.

Please don't wait for me to call you. I am often too overwhelmed to think of reaching out for help. I need you more than ever in the months ahead, but my pride sometimes prevents me from telling you. Give me space to heal, but don't allow me to withdraw from you.

Pray for me, if you wish, that I will find the courage and the strength I need to deal with my grief constructively. If, by chance, you have had a similar loss, please share it with me. It will not make me feel worse. Grief shared is grief diminished.

Telling me to "Cheer up, it could be worse," makes me feel discounted and angry. While there are still painful days ahead for me, I will not always feel as I do now. One day, I will be able to laugh again and find new joy in living.

I appreciate your concern and caring. Your understanding and support are gifts that I will always treasure.

Sincerely,

Social Support During Bereavement

Support from others is essential to your recovery from the loss of a loved one. This support may be less available, not only because your loved one may have been your primary source of support, but also because friends and family often withdraw from one another during bereavement.

Consider and evaluate the following social networks. If their support is not adequate for your needs, it may be time to consider reaching out to new groups or individuals, or to improve the quality of your present involvements.

Family

Do you live with or near family members? Can you talk openly about the feelings and changes you are experiencing?

Friends

Do you live with or near any close friends? Do you tell them what you need or how you feel? Are you open to their support even when it's less than perfect?

Spiritual

Do you belong to a church or spiritual community? Do you find emotional support from attending services, or visiting with your priest, minister or rabbi?

Work

Are co-workers supportive of you?

Clubs and Groups

What interests do you enjoy sharing with a group? Would a loss support group help? If so, consider asking a friend to attend a group with you.

Doctor

Do you have confidence in your doctor? Does he or she know about your loss? Remember that grief often affects your physical well-being.



Other Sources of Support

Are other people part of your life? Are you satisfied with the quality of these relationships? Do you also find comfort in contact with other living things such as pets, plants, trees or nature?

Like all new undertakings, reaching out socially may seem frightening at first, but it becomes easier as you persist. It is part of your healing.