

PARENTS CORNER

How Children View Death



Children who are grieving will sometimes ask their parents questions that demonstrate their curiosity and concern about death. After experiencing the death of a loved one, children may feel anxiety and develop defenses. This process lasts through the school years and may continue into adulthood. Understanding children's concepts of death at different ages will help you answer their questions.

“Always express your feelings. Let out your grief. It is hard, but it will make you feel better.”

— Maria, age 11

Defenses That May Develop in Young Children

Young children become aware of death as “nonlife” when they see a dead leaf, insect or pet. They may associate this nonlife with the nonexistence that occurs when Mom leaves the room. Mom disappears (stops existing) until she reappears. Children may be working this out by playing peek-a-boo, or throwing things off the high chair (where they disappear from sight) so Mom can bring them back again.

This awareness of death, as nonlife or not being, brings about anxiety. Children work at mastering this anxiety and discover two lines of defense. The first defense is thinking: “I am special. I'm not like the others out there; this can't happen to me.” Second, the child believes someone will rescue him or her similarly to when he or she falls down or loses a toy.

Young children's defenses often are challenged by the belief that death is contagious. A child may think, “If Aunt May got sick and died, so can Mom.” When someone close to a child dies, the death can weaken the child's emotional defenses, especially if the one who died protected the child from danger.

The child's observation that something may disappear (stop existing) and then reappear (exist again) leads to their belief that death is reversible. This is a subtle form of rescue. When 5-year-old Jody's grandpa died of cancer one summer, she was convinced he would come back at Christmas.

“The first hour after hearing about the death, I was feeling unhappy, angry, sad, uncomfortable, upset and weird all at once.”

— Jessica, age 12

Preschool children are magical thinkers. Their world revolves around them and they feel responsible for what happens. To them, Mom and Dad fighting must be a result of something they did, said or thought. When someone dies, children often feel responsible and guilty. Children should be told how the person died and reassured that their words, thoughts or actions did not cause the death.

Defenses That May Develop in School-Age Children

Even though school-age children have improved thinking ability and increased understanding about death, their defenses against anxiety associated with death are still the same as those of young children. For example, a 9-year-old boy believed he caused his grandmother's death. He said, “Mom told me that when she got angry at me it made Grandma's pain worse, and she died from that pain.”

Children of this age begin to understand that death is final, but they want to believe it happens only to the elderly (a lifetime away) or at least to other people. They see death as a person; someone who comes to get his prey. This is the age when children are most vulnerable to the effects of a loss by death. They have a more complete understanding of death, but their defenses are not well-developed.

SHARP Hospice Care

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ISSUE **06**

“Courage is not the absence of fear and pain, but the affirmation of life despite fear and pain.”

— Rabbi Earl Grollman

bringing comfort to each day

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ISSUE **06**

Healing Through Grief

Dear Friend,

Our philosophy of bereavement encourages each individual to understand and respect his or her own pace for grieving. This issue of *Healing Through Grief* addresses the duration of the grieving process and adjustment to a life without the person you love. We hope the following information will support you in this personal task.

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

My Peers

It is my most sincere belief,
as I sit here with my peers,
they understand my grief,
and will excuse my tears.
We'll all go through this,
eventually.

When the rivers of life flow past,
we'll lean upon strong shoulders,
and know our tears won't last.
They're not embarrassed or feel ashamed,
of emotions raw and deep.
They understand finality,
and allow me space to weep.

I feel I'm safe among my peers,
to be my own real me,
and when I choke upon my words,
they show true sympathy.
So it is my most sincere belief
I am safe to show my pain.
And to share my deepest sorrows,
until healing comes again.

— Helen Joyce Baker



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.

How Long Does Grief Last?



The search for recovery from deep loss can lead to the discovery of previously hidden ability, talent, strength and courage.

Grief — A Journey Into the Unknown

Imagine a journey where the destination and time of arrival are unknown. Grief takes you on this type of journey. The uncertainty of not knowing how long it will be before you can return to normal, or what your life will be like when you do, can be difficult to bear.

Grief Holds No Timetable

Many bereaved people and their friends are tempted to develop timetables and expectations for the grieving process, but no one is able to predict how much time an individual needs to heal.

You or your friends may think that you should feel better weeks, months or a year after your loss. Even though there is no timetable for individual grief, many people experience their most severe pain four to eight months after the death of their loved one. You may need 18 to 24 months to regain your equilibrium alone. Healing to the point where you feel hope and an appetite for life may take longer.

You may have seen books that describe typical stages of grief, but these should not be misinterpreted as expectations or timetables. People show their loyalty to their loved ones in many different ways. You can demonstrate your loyalty to your loved one simply by respecting pain when you feel it, and moving on with your own life when the time is right for you.

How the Past Can Affect Your Grief

It's normal to hold onto the past, especially after experiencing a painful loss.

The journey through grief may change you. Having the willingness to follow your unique path of pain and healing can lead to a new sense of you and new ways of shaping your life. The search for recovery from deep loss can lead to the discovery of previously hidden ability, talent, strength and courage. You may also discover new power to create value in your life.

Tasks of Mourning

Psychotherapist William Worden uses the word “mourning” to describe the active, purposeful part of grief: the work. In his book, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, he explains four main tasks of mourning:

1) Accepting the Reality of the Loss

When someone dies, even if the death is expected, there is a sense that it hasn't happened. You may perceive your loved one's presence as you go about your daily activities. Each time you fail to find your loved one, you acknowledge a little more deeply the fact that he or she is gone. Acknowledging this absence slowly, one day at a time, is the first task of mourning.

2) Experiencing the Pain of Grief

Enduring the pain is the second task of mourning. This includes experiencing waves of sorrow, explosions of rage, restless searching and questioning why this happened. Many people try to mask painful feelings by “being strong,” avoiding painful thoughts or “keeping busy.” You must allow yourself to experience and express your feelings.

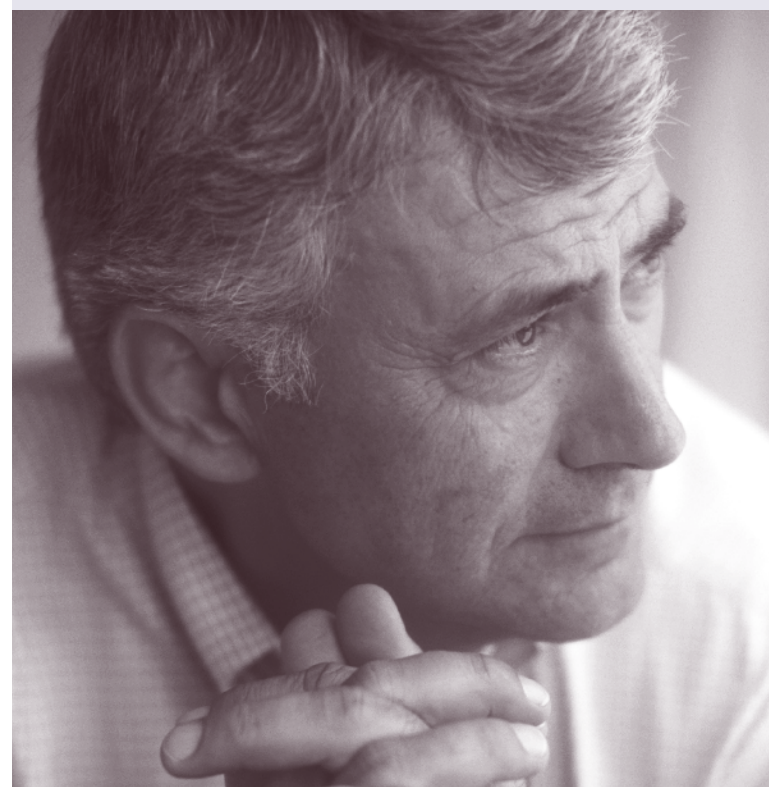
3) Adjusting to a World Without the Person Who Died

In a very personal sense, you face a new and unfamiliar world. Just as an immigrant adjusts to the language and culture of a new country, you must adjust to your loss. This includes developing new routines, learning to handle new responsibilities and interacting with people in new ways. The process of discovering your new world and learning how to cope with it is the third task of mourning.

{ **Just as an immigrant adjusts to the language and culture of a new country, you must adjust to your loss.** }

4) Emotionally Relocating the Deceased and Moving on With Life

You do not want to stop loving or cherishing your memories of the person who died. Yet, your fourth task of mourning is to separate the love you have for one who has died, and discover people with whom you can share love. Whether or not you enter similar relationships such as remarriage or having more children, your task is to reach out to people who can satisfy your need to be loved, or to find activities and causes in which you can reinvest. You will never lose the memories of your loved one and will continue to have a relationship with that person. However, when you have integrated your loss into every part of your life and can tolerate the pain on a daily basis, you will know that you are healing.



Adjustments Take Time

If you've accepted that you must find a new way to live, now is the time to do it. The question is “How?”

Distractions — A Temporary Reprieve

Even though you know it is important to feel and express the painful emotions of grief, sometimes you need a rest from pain. In addition, sometimes you need to manage work, home or family responsibilities. You have probably learned to distract yourself by keeping busy and by avoiding reminders of your loss. Maybe you have put away photographs, avoided places and routes that are full of memories, begun to sit in a different chair or to lie on a different side of the bed. These things can help temporarily, but after periods of distraction, painful memories may return with surprising force.

For most people, the pain of loss eventually erupts, despite all attempted distractions. You may succeed at distracting yourself from emotional pain, only to confront physical illnesses caused by the stress of suppressing emotions.

Some people who believe that distractions are helpful decide to permanently escape their grief by selling their home or moving to a different city. Leaving their familiar surroundings often results in greater confusion and uncertainty.

No Shortcuts Through Grief

While several months have passed since your loss, keep in mind that you are still in the beginning stages of grief and may still be experiencing difficulty. Remember, it is important not to rush the grief process; getting used to a new life takes time, and there are no shortcuts. Lightness of heart, spontaneity and laughter can return only as pain is allowed to run its natural course.



{ **As you consciously decide to re-involve yourself with determination and purpose, you will rediscover meaning and answers.** }

Learning to Live With Loss

The questions of how to live without the person you love have no quick and easy answers. Somehow, as time passes, you develop strength from coping with the feelings and challenges that you are experiencing in your new situation.

To care is to risk the pain of loss. It takes courage to grieve your loss fully and regain the capacity to care deeply. Remember to sense and respect your own pace for moving through grief. You can learn to live with your loss, but learning takes time.