

STAGES OF GRIEF - HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

Shock

Initially, a loss produces a kind of numbness which protects us from the impact of a death. This experience can last for several days, weeks, or months, depending upon the impact of the blow and the readiness of the mind and body to move on. Shock allows a person to continue normal activities for awhile, make decisions, and take care of immediate needs. It is normal for shock to reoccur from time to time, and complete acceptance is a slow process.

How Parents Can Help

Be near your child and available to help. Offer affection and a listening ear. Encourage questions. Provide available facts and discourage rumors. Provide encouragement when the feeling of shock reoccurs.

Release

Each child may express his feeling differently. Your child may release his emotions by crying, talking, shouting, running or working. Holding back may be a sign of trouble rather than a symbol of bravery.

How Parents Can Help

Allow your children to release as much grief as they are feeling at the moment. Show approval for this display. Do not try to stop this natural expression. Let your genuine concerns and caring show. Recognize your child's pain. Let them be alone at their request, but stay in close proximity and let your child know you are readily available.

Depression/Anxiety

No two people face grief in exactly the same way. But whatever the experience, it brings an isolated, lonely feeling. Thoughts that nobody cares or understands are not unique. Your child may feel that he won't be able to function and may experience increased anxiety about death, nightmares or insomnia. He may appear visibly distressed and not be able to concentrate. This could hinder his ability to carry on daily activities and cause him to panic. His real fear may come from not having an advanced understanding of the grief process.

How Parents Can Help

Assure your child that his feelings are normal. Encourage your child to be patient with himself and to talk about his feelings. Encourage participation in regular activities even though he may not feel like being sociable. Do not take away tasks that your child can do for himself. Remind your child that working through grief is hard work.

Physical Symptoms

When the stress of the emotional wear and tear begins to take hold, your child may experience physical distress. Physical distress may take the form of excessive fatigue, digestive problems, over or under eating, insomnia and/or nightmares. These reactions are indications of the need to continue working through the grief process.

How Parents Can Help

Accept the reality of the physical distress. Keep listening as your child works his way through the barriers. If you sense that your child is having a particularly hard time, counseling may be indicated. Long term physical distress may require medical care.

Guilt

Normal guilt may include your child's thinking of some things he did not do to enhance the relationship or things he did to hurt the other person. Unresolved guilt and misunderstood emotions can result in lengthening the grief process.

How Parents Can Help

Encourage your child to talk about his feelings of guilt. Provide a trusting relationship in order to communicate that this is a natural feeling. Remind him that bad thoughts or words do not cause others to die. Likewise, "if only's" could not have prevented the death.

Anger/Resentment

Feeling anger at the person who dies, the person responsible for the death, or the world in general is normal in grieving. Your child may become hostile or argumentative.

How Parents Can Help

Accepting and acknowledging these feelings rather than avoiding them helps relieve the pain of the grief experience. Encourage alternative methods of expressing anger. This could be accomplished through exercise, art, writing or talking about his anger.

Acceptance

The length of time it takes to move through the grief stages varies from one child to another. Most grieving individuals go through several well-defined stages of grief before they find relief from their emotional pain. Children may not progress through these stages in any particular order. Recovery is not a straight shot but takes place in an upward and jagged pattern. There will be good and bad days.

How Parents Can Help

Provide warm affection and encouragement. Physical contact is often very helpful. Hold your child's hand or give him a hug. Young grievers need to be taught the stages of grief and helped through this process.