

Supporting young people through grief



Young people navigate a lot of change and uncertainty as they journey through life. Experiences of loss (death of someone they love, family separation, friendships, jobs) and the grief that can accompany such experiences can also be part of the landscape of adolescence. Being present to their experiences and offering timely and appropriate support is critical. This factsheet provides some information that might help.

What is grief?

Grief is a normal and natural response to the hurt we experience following major change and loss in our lives. It can affect our entire bodies, including our thinking and emotions. Grief can challenge the way we think about ourselves and the world, including our values and beliefs, and often influences our relationships, too.

How do young people express grief?

It is important to remember there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each young person will experience grief in their own unique and personal way. They may perceive that the intensity of their grief is much greater than that of those around them, and can fear they are losing control.

Here are just some of the many wide-ranging reactions commonly experienced by young people.

How young people may feel ...

- angry, frustrated or disillusioned
- confused, anxious and overwhelmed
- lonely and isolated from peers
- consumed by their sadness.

Thoughts young people may have ...

- consumed by thoughts associated with the loss
- wondering if they are to blame
- worried about the future
- if bereaved by suicide, they may be more susceptible to suicidal thoughts.

Behaviours young people may show ...

- masking their feelings
- withdrawing from family and/or friends
- engaging in risk-taking behaviours
- 'lashing out'.

Physical reactions young people may experience ...

- sleeplessness
- fatigue, feeling distracted, lethargic, and unable to concentrate
- panic attacks
- digestive problems
- physical aches and pains.

Grief can impact on the important process of identity formation ('Who am I?') that is part of the adolescent journey. Sometimes it can be difficult to tell whether changes the young person is experiencing are connected to their grief or simply part of their journey towards adulthood. Working out the difference does not really matter; the main thing is to support young people as they navigate these changes.

The grief process

Grief is a challenging and complex time of hurt, but it is a normal part of life. It is important to remember that young people who are grieving are not 'unwell.' They can cope with grief, and grow through the experience, if they understand what is happening and have appropriate support. In thinking about how best to support them it can be helpful to understand the grief response as a process or journey.

How to support a young person who is grieving

If we think of grief as a journey, our role as adults is to help young people navigate it. Young people are unlikely to want an adult with them every step of the way, but they need opportunities to reflect on how they are travelling. Most importantly they need adults who proactively and regularly check in and who are also available for advice when they need it.

Young people need:

- a strong, loving relationship with a parent or primary caregiver who they can rely upon and trust
- opportunities to talk through and make sense of what has happened
- space to express a wide range of emotions (such as sadness, anger, fear, guilt and humour) without hurting themselves or others
- help to make sense of their emotions and reactions, with someone who won't judge them
- the security of usual boundaries and expectations
- opportunities to be involved in decisions linked to their loss or any further changes.

As a parent or carer, don't be afraid to ask other trusted adults to help support your child. Some young people may find it easier to speak with someone outside the family. Encourage young people to talk over their feelings with the school counsellor if they are feeling overwhelmed.

Involving young people in decisions

At school, talking with young people about new arrangements can be a way of acknowledging their loss without focusing on it directly. For instance, a nominated teacher might discuss possible ideas or special arrangements with the student to help them cope at school (such as use of quiet spaces, permission to phone home, deadline flexibility). The teacher might also ask the student (and/or their family) how they would like the school to respond to questions from other students.

How to help as relative, family friend, teacher or other professional

- let young people know their loss is recognised
- identify yourself as a safe person who is open and willing to listen (although don't force young people to talk)
- help young people to manage their feelings in different contexts (such as at school)
- monitor their progress on their studies and identify if they need additional support (this helps prevent schoolwork becoming a further source of stress)
- check in with the young person regularly to keep communication open over time.

Further support - Seasons for Growth

Seasons for Growth is an evidence-based, social and emotional learning program, facilitated in small groups by a trained adult Companion. Drawing on the rich metaphor of the seasons, and using safe, creative learning activities, young people learn and practise new ways of thinking and responding to experiences of change and loss. This learning enhances protective factors (building personal resilience and social skills) while minimising risk factors (such as isolation) that impact their mental health and wellbeing.

MacKillop Seasons train and support professionals to deliver our small group programs in schools and community organisations.

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