

STRATEGIES TO HELP CHILDREN THROUGH PAINFUL TIMES

SOME HELPFUL THINGS TO SAY

What can I do for you?

It isn't fair, is it?

Would you like to talk about it?

I'll call you tomorrow.

What's the hardest part for you?

You must really be angry.

How are you doing with all of this?

I don't know why it happened.

I can't imagine what you are going through.

Please tell me what you are feeling.

This must be so hard for you.

I'm here and I want to listen.

Take all the time you need.

You must really be hurting.

Thank you for sharing your feelings.

STRATEGIES TO HELP CHILDREN THROUGH PAINFUL TIMES

Prepared by Annemarie Bezold, LCSW
Coordinator, Fairfax County Grief Program

1. Offer them reassurance and support.
 - Let them know you will be there for them.
 - Tell them that they will not have to go through this alone.
2. Give them extra time and attention.
 - Spend time just being with them.
 - Physical closeness may be helpful initially.
3. Cultivate an environment of openness to the expression of all feelings.
 - Let them know that feelings aren't right or wrong.
 - Tell them that there are healthy ways to deal with painful feelings.
4. Explain and answer questions honestly.
 - Don't avoid using words like death, died.
 - Don't be afraid to admit that 'you don't know'.
5. Provide structure and continuity in their daily routines.
 - Set appropriate limits while being patient and understanding.
 - Maintaining their usual daily routine is important.
6. Expect some regression.
 - Acting as they did when they were younger is normal.
 - Children may need transitional objects and more comfort at bedtime.
7. Listen to their fears and concerns.
 - Let them know that no topic is 'off limits' to you.
 - Don't minimize feelings or avoid uncomfortable topics.
8. Allow them to tell and retell their experience.
 - Reassure them you don't mind hearing it over and over.
 - Keep in mind that this is how they process the experience and move on.
9. Encourage time to play.
 - Play relieves stress for children (allows them to reenact the experience).
10. Try a variety of techniques to help them creatively process their experience.
 - Drawing pictures, writing poems or stories, or creating collages are examples.
11. Work to improve their self-esteem.
 - Identify their good qualities, talents and strengths.
12. Help them begin to develop a hopeful image of themselves.
 - Remind them of the progress they have made so far.
 - Help them visualize themselves recovering and moving on.

The Dougy Center list Six Basic Principles of Teen Grief:

<http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/how-to-help-a-grieving-teen/>

1. Grieving is the teen's natural reaction to a death. Grief is a natural reaction to death and other losses. However, grieving does not feel natural because it may be difficult to control the emotions, thoughts, or physical feelings associated with a death. The sense of being out of control that is often a part of grief may overwhelm or frighten some teens. Grieving is normal and healthy, yet may be an experience teens resist and reject. Helping teens accept the reality that they are grievers allows them to do their grief work and to progress in their grief journey.

2. Each teen's grieving experience is unique. Grieving is a different experience for each person. Teens grieve for different lengths of time and express a wide spectrum of emotions. Grief is best understood as a process in which bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors surface in response to the death, its circumstances, the past relationship with the deceased and the realization of the future without the person. For example, sadness and crying may be an expression of grief for one teen, while another may respond with humor and laughter.

While many theories and models of the grieving process provide a helpful framework, the path itself is an individual one, and often lonely. No book or grief therapist can predict or prescribe exactly what a teen will or should go through on the grief journey. Adults can best assist grieving teenagers by accompanying them on their journey in the role of listener and learner, and by allowing the teen to function as a teacher.

3. There are no "right" and "wrong" ways to grieve. Sometimes adults express strong opinions about "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve. But there is no correct way to grieve. Coping with a death does not follow a simple pattern or set of rules nor is it a course to be evaluated or graded.

There are, however, "helpful" and "unhelpful" choices and behaviors associated with the grieving process. Some behaviors are constructive and encourage facing grief, such as talking with trusted friends, journaling, creating art, and expressing emotion rather than holding it inside. Other grief responses are destructive and may cause long-term complications and consequences. For example, some teens attempt to escape their pain through many of the same escape routes adults choose: alcohol and substance abuse, reckless sexual activity, antisocial behaviors, withdrawal from social activities, excessive sleeping, high risk-taking behaviors, and other methods that temporarily numb the pain of their loss.

4. Every death is unique and is experienced differently. The way teens grieve differs according to personality and the particular relationship they had with the deceased. They typically react in different ways to the death of a parent, sibling, grandparent, child, or friend. For many teens, peer relationships are primary. The death or loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend may seem to affect them more than the death of a sibling or grandparent.

Within a family each person may mourn differently at different times. One may be talkative, another may tend to cry often, and a third might withdraw. This can generate a great deal of tension and misunderstanding within the already stressed family. Each person's responses to death should be honored as his or her way of coping in that moment. Keep in mind that responses may change from day to day or even from hour to hour.

5. The grieving process is influenced by many issues. The impact of a death on a teen relates to a combination of factors including: * Social support systems available for the teen (family, friends and/or community) * Circumstances of the death - how, where and when the person died * Whether or not the young person unexpectedly found the body * The nature of the relationship with the person who died - harmonious, abusive, conflictual, unfinished, communicative * The teen's level of involvement in the dying process * The emotional and developmental age of the teen * The teen's previous experiences with death

6. Grief is ongoing. Grief never ends, but it does change in character and intensity. Many grievers have compared their grieving to the constantly shifting tides of the ocean; ranging from calm, low tides to raging high tides that change with the seasons and the years.