

When children experience grief

12 positive ways to help children with grief and loss

Madhavi Nawana Parker



Positive
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“If you are old enough to love,
you are old enough to grieve.”

Dr A Wolfhelt
Center for Loss

Like all uncomfortable feelings, grief needs to be acknowledged, felt and allowed, to give young people the best chance of adapting resiliently over time.



1

All feelings are okay

Create space and opportunities to talk openly about feelings without judgement.

Offer your quiet presence and empathetic, reflective listening. If you think your child is uncertain, embarrassed or not ready to openly share their feelings and thoughts, casually offer a daily journal with a padlock on it, with no expectations they use it. Younger children might prefer opportunities to express their grief through creative endeavours like art, music, play and drama.

2

Feelings like grief don't need fixing

Feelings arrive for a reason.

They usually indicate something needs time and attention. If you try to fix uncomfortable feelings by squashing them using distractions like devices, material possessions, or changing the subject, they will take longer to recover.

3

Give a goodbye moment

Think carefully about how a young person says goodbye following the death of a loved one.

Base this decision on your personal values, faith and good common sense. Most children need to say goodbye in a formalised way. It might be by attending a funeral, memorial or burial. As painful as these experiences are, they openly reflect and acknowledge what's happened.

While they will need your emotional support, avoiding formal farewells to avoid the inevitable sadness can show up later in other ways. Your intuition, support and guidance from those who know you and your child's emotional and developmental capabilities, plus trusted resources, will help you make the right decision for your family.



4

Talk about it

Don't pretend the sad event never happened.

Sadness and grief don't have set healing times. Often people get through the initial stages reasonably well. It's after the funeral or even the first or second anniversary that the permanence of what's happened really hits. This is especially noticeable in children who might not see the extent of what's happened until the passage of time is placing its weight on their shoulders.

While it can be hard to talk about what happened or too painful to talk about the loss, hiding your own grief or not talking about the person who has passed, can add to the burden young ones already carry. Don't however put yourself in a position like this, sooner than you're ready. There's no rush and counsel from family, friends and health professionals should be accepted as much as you need.

5

Don't fixate

Avoid excessive philosophising about your loss.

Sometimes terrible things happen and there's no explanation for it. Young people need to know for certain, that what happened is not their fault and there's nothing they did to cause it and nothing they could do to stop it. Some things don't always make sense.

6

Help them feel hopeful

When you're young and going through grief for the first time, it can feel like your whole world has come to a crashing halt.

You can help young people feel hopeful that tough times don't last forever, or define them and that in time, things will get better. Going through a terrible loss is part of their story, but not all of their story.



7

Keep the fun times

Continue treasured rituals and celebrations.

Even if they are scaled back for a while, avoiding celebrations like childhood milestones, achievements, Christmas and birthdays can be hard for a young person. Grieving children often wonder how life will go on without their loved one. Not celebrating may confirm their fears that life, has come to an abrupt end for everyone, reducing hope that everything will be okay. The same applies for keeping them involved in their school life, friendships, extra curricular, hobbies, sports and whatever adds meaning to their life.

8

Honour anniversaries

On special days and anniversaries, children often need to do something positive to help move those tough feelings through in healthy ways.

Ask them what might help before the day arrives, so the feeling of dread that can build up, doesn't have time to fester. Some children like drawing pictures of their loved one...writing stories about their past together...sharing funny memories...wearing an item of their clothing...bringing photos out...cooking their loved one's favourite dish...watching their loved one's favourite movie...going to their favourite place or writing them a letter and sending it off in a helium balloon. Rituals like these help shift the sadness by doing something loving or joyful in their loved one's memory.

9

Be open to joy

Allow positive feeling to return.

Young people need to know it's okay to be happy, excited and joyful - even though they are also sad. Many grieving children and teens become captive to their grief. The truth is, even in the deepest of sadness, you can find joy. Human resilience is amazing. Children need to know it's okay to feel happy sometimes, even though their loved one has passed.



10

Self compassion and care

Be kind to yourself during this difficult time.

You're allowed to feel devastated and it's okay to ask for help - often. Make sure you and the young people you're supporting through grief are eating, sleeping and moving well. While this is easier said than done, without these self care tools, uncomfortable feelings build up quickly, mood and perspective blur, leaving grief as the sole and primary focus in your life.

11

Practice gratitude

It's natural to feel swamped by negative and painful thoughts when your family experiences grief.

Pointing out things that went well at the end of each day, can help keep the neurological pathways for optimism alive and flourishing, uplifting moods and your ability to cope. If this seems too much, don't rush it, give it time. When you're ready, have a go and see if it helps.

12

Don't rush

Let everyone take their time.

Give everyone time to heal, recover and make sense of things their own way, in their own time. Things might never be the same, but you will make it through. Seek counselling and support as much as you need and don't ever think you need to soldier on alone. Above all, follow your intuition about how to best support your child through their grief.



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The ideas in this ebook can help navigate a young person's grief. Adapt them accordingly by following your intuition about what's best for your situation. Tips are not intended to replace the advice of a health professional.

For further support call Lifeline 131 114, Kids helpline 1800 55 800 and Beyond Blue.

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