

Issues You May Encounter When Someone's Impacted By Trauma Or Death

AGES 3-6

- Child may think he/she caused death by thinking bad thought
- Experience grief in brief heavy outburst
- Child may think the dead person will awaken and return
- May fear loss and abandonment by close friends / family members

AGES 6-9

- May resort to superstitions
- Begin to realize others close to them will die
- May anticipate grief by associating death to someone close that has a non-threatening illness
- May become fascinated by death & destruction
- Some aspects of death may seem funny

AGES 9-12

- Develop a more realistic sense of death and become unrealistically fearful
- Feel death is sudden and unpredictable
- Fear of what happens after death
- Fear that others close to them may die

ADOLESCENCE

- Begins to develop philosophical view of death
- May idealize the deceased—close friend, parent, famous rock star
- May regress developmentally—suspend the process of “breaking away” from parents and cling to them for support. Causes a great deal of angst.
- Fear that others close to them may die

Stages of Grief

The psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her book *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969), developed a set of five stages commonly seen in dying patients. The same five stages conceivably characterize students trying to come to grips with a loss, e.g., the death of a friend. Although adolescents don't necessarily manifest the characteristics of each of these stages, and they don't necessarily progress from one stage to the next in the following sequence, some of their behaviors might be more understandable seen in this context.

Stage 1: Denial

("This can't be happening.")

Denial acts as a buffer. It gives the person time to regroup, take stock, and eventually mobilize other defenses.

Stage 2: Anger

("I hate her for doing that.")

Anger allows the full force of emotions to be felt by the person. It may be directed, e.g., by railing at the person who died, or diffused, e.g., by acting belligerent with everyone.

Stage 3: Bargaining

("If I become a better person, maybe he'll get better.")

Bargaining is an attempt to postpone something that will inevitably happen or even to negate something that already happened.

Stage 4: Depression

("What's the use of even trying anymore?")

Depression is the preparation for acceptance. It is the initial realization of what will happen or already has happened, and it brings with it the full sadness of reality.

Stage 5: Acceptance

("What's done is done. I have to get on with my life now.")

Acceptance is the beginning of the end of the struggle with a death or other loss. It is a demarcation point for reconciling with the past and progressing into the future.

The Grieving Elementary School Child

Common Behaviors to Expect

- Regression to earlier behaviors
- Fighting, anger
- Difficulty in paying attention and concentrating
- Daydreaming
- Not completing homework or assignments
- Sleepiness
- Withdrawal

How to Help

- Answer questions as clearly and accurately as possible
- Provide art, journal, music, and dance activities
- Make time for physical outlets, sports, games, walks, etc.
- Help the child identify and use support systems
- Encourage the child to take a break and have some alone time
- Allow for expression of feelings and emotions
- Maintain routines and structure but allow for flexibility
- Give the child choices whenever possible
- Let the child know you care and are thinking about her

Common Mistakes: Words and Action to Avoid

The following words and actions can be harmful to children and teens

- **DO NOT** suggest that the child has grieved long enough.
- **DO NOT** indicate that the child should get over it and move on.
- **DO NOT** expect the child to complete all assignments on a timely basis.
- **DO NOT** act as if nothing has happened.
- **DO NOT** say things like:
 - “It could be worse, you still have one brother.”
 - ”I know how you feel”
 - You’ll be stronger because of this.”

The Grieving Middle School Youth

Common Behaviors to Expect

- Argumentative
- Withdrawal, sullenness
- Anger, fighting
- Sleepiness
- Lack of concentration and attentiveness
- Risk-taking behaviors [drugs, sexual acting out, stealing]
- Unpredictable ups and downs or moodiness
- Erratic, inconsistent reactions

How to Help

- Expect and accept mood swings
- Provide a supportive environment where the youth can share, when needed
- Anticipate increased physical concerns including illness and body aches and pains
- Allow the student to choose with whom and how she gets support
- Encourage participation in a support group
- Allow flexibility in completing school work

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The Grieving High School Youth

Common Behaviors to Expect

- Withdrawal from parents and other adults
- Angry outbursts
- Increased risk-taking behaviors [substances, reckless driving, sexual behaviors]
- Pushing the limits of rules
- Lack of concentration; inability to focus
- Hanging out with a small group of friends
- Sad face, evidence of crying
- Sleepiness, exhaustion

How to Help

- Allow for regression and dependency
- Encourage expression of feeling such as sorrow, anger, guilt, regret
- Understand and allow for variation in maturity level
- Answer questions honestly and provide factual information
- Model appropriate responses, showing the students your own grief
- Avoid power struggles and allow choices
- Help child understand and resolve feelings of helplessness
- Assist child with plans for completion of assignments

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- **DO NOT** expect the student to complete all assignments on a timely basis.
- **DO NOT** act as if nothing has happened.
- **DO NOT** say things like:
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