

Grief is a natural response to a death or a loss, such as a divorce, an end to a relationship or a move away from friends. Grief may produce physical, mental, social or emotional reactions. Physical reactions can include change in appetite, headaches or stomach aches, sleeping problems and illness. Emotional reactions can include anger, guilt, sadness, worry and despair. Social reactions can include withdrawal from normal activities and the need to be near others or to be apart from others. The grief process also depends on the situation surrounding the death or loss, the relationship with the person who died and the person's attachment to that person. Grief is normal, but when the symptoms are very intense or last a long time, professional help may be needed.

### How it affects my child

The way in which children are communicated with and managed at the time of a loss will affect how they are able to grieve and how they manage loss in the future. Children are often confronted with both natural death and death through unnatural means such as murder or suicide. The media may bring this issue to life for children, and they need an outlet to deal with the grief of unsettling images and thoughts.

Children who grieve may display many symptoms that impact their functioning. Some examples include:

- **Young Children**
  - Bedwetting
  - Thumb sucking
  - Clinging to adults
  - Exaggerated fears
  - Excessive crying
  - Temper tantrums
- **Older Children**
  - Physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, sleeping and eating problems)
  - Mood swings
  - Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
  - Increase in risk-taking and self-destructive behaviors
  - Anger, aggression, fighting, oppositional behavior

- Withdrawal from adults and/or peers and activities they enjoyed prior to the loss
- Depression, sadness
- Lack of concentration and attention

### What can we do about it?

#### **Be a constant source of support in your child's life.**

Research shows that maintaining a close relationship with a caring adult after the loss can help.

**Provide a structured environment that is predictable and consistent.** Limit choices; introduce small, manageable choices over time.

**Contain "acting out" behavior.** Insist that children express their wants, needs and feelings with words, not by acting out. This is also true for teens, who have a tendency to act out in anger rather than expressing how they feel directly.

**Encourage children to let you know when they are worried or having a difficult time.** Crying can help children release their feelings of sadness and help them cope with the loss.

**Let your child know that they are safe.** Often when children are exposed to trauma they worry about their own safety and the safety of their family members. It is a good idea to keep them from seeing too many pictures of the event.

**Encourage your child to ask questions about loss and death.** Children often have many questions about death and may need to ask again and again. Be patient and answer these questions as openly and honestly as possible. Talk to your child about death in a way they can understand.

**Give your child affection and nurturing.** Attempt to connect with them.

**Help your child maintain a routine.** It is helpful for your child to continue with daily activities. Offer suggestions on how to eat and sleep well.

**Be patient with regressive behaviors such as thumb sucking and bed wetting.**

**Put together a memory book.** This is a good exercise to help your child experience their emotions in a positive way.

**Be aware of your own need to grieve.** Parents have often experienced the same loss as their children, and should allow themselves to experience grief and get support.

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## Resource Links

### **Children's Mental Health Matters!**

Facts for Families — First Steps in Seeking Help  
[www.ChildrensMentalHealthMatters.org](http://www.ChildrensMentalHealthMatters.org)

### **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry**

This site contains resources for families to promote an understanding of mental illnesses.  
[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

#### *Children and Grief*

[https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Grief-008.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Grief-008.aspx)

#### *Children's Sleep Problems*

[https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Childrens-Sleep-Problems-034.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Childrens-Sleep-Problems-034.aspx)

#### *Helping Children after a Disaster*

[https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Helping-Children-After-A-Disaster-036.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Helping-Children-After-A-Disaster-036.aspx)

### **The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families**

<http://www.dougy.org/>



Coordinated by



The Children's Mental Health Matters! Campaign is a collaboration of the Mental Health Association of Maryland (MHAMD) and the Maryland Coalition of Families (MCF) with support from the Maryland Department of Health - Behavioral Health Administration. The Campaign goal, with School and Community Champions across the state, is to raise public awareness of the importance of children's mental health. For more information, please visit [www.ChildrensMentalHealthMatters.org](http://www.ChildrensMentalHealthMatters.org)