

CORONAVIRUS DISEASE COVID-19

How children and teens experience bereavement

Like adults, children and teenagers can experience the loss of a dear one at any time and especially in these days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The death of someone cherished is always a very upsetting and painful experience, one that is difficult and complicated to cope with.

The current pandemic has a major influence on bereavement, making it much more difficult to get through due to isolation, suspension of sports and social activities, and distancing in the home. Stress caused by these changes may aggravate peoples' reactions and make communication within the family more challenging. The changes to and/or lack of availability of funeral rites amid the pandemic also affects the understanding of death. Information provided in this brochure should be nuanced in the context of the current special circumstances.

How do children and teenagers experience bereavement?

Children and teenagers are unique individuals, each trying to understand death and express sorrow, uneasiness and worry in their own way. How they react depends on their age, maturity, culture, relationship with the departed and support network, to name but a few factors.

It isn't easy to tell a child that they have just lost someone they hold dear and support them during the mourning process—you yourself are probably just as shocked by the news as they are. So, what can you say, and how can you say it?

Unfortunately, there is no magic recipe for avoiding the pain caused by the loss of someone who is loved. However, a better understanding of how your children conceive of death and react to it may be of use when trying to find the words and deeds to comfort them.

The ways children mourn

CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO TWO YEARS OF AGE

“Hi, I’m Anouka and I am two months old.”

“What happened to the nice person who took care of me, fed me and hugged me?”

Very young children have no consciousness of the notion of death. But they deeply feel the physical absence of the person that always cared for them and gave them the attention and love that made them feel safe, which are so essential to normal development. Even without a clear understanding of what death is, children can experience the same deep feelings as older people, like sadness and disarray, and can easily act out.

Potential manifestations in children within this age group:

- Crying, wanting to be held more often, clinging to you.
- Becoming more agitated and irritable.
- Experiencing insecurity and fear of separation.

CHILDREN FROM 3 TO 5 YEARS OF AGE

“Hi, my name is Charlie and I am four and a half.”

“Mommy told me that daddy was dead for always. That bothers me, because it’s been too long and now I think he should come back. When I feel like this, I cry a lot but not for a long time, then I go play.”

Children in this age group more or less understand death. While they feel separation and abandonment, they don't understand what “always” means. They believe that old people can die but only for a time before coming back to life like in cartoons. Young children need to quickly expel their feelings of suffering by doing things like physical activity. They may also play games that evoke death, funerals and burial. They also need to keep the disappeared in their imagination by speaking to them or keeping an object that belonged to them, etc. This is how they come to terms with the reality of death. Magical thinking is still part of

their experience and helps them believe that their thoughts can change events. They may feel that they are responsible for the death or that they have the power to bring this person back to life.

Potential manifestations in children within this age group:

- Sadness and feelings of abandonment.
- Thumb-sucking and bedwetting.
- Insecurity and anxiety tummy and headaches.
- Nightmares, restless sleep, problems falling asleep.
- Changes in appetite.
- Aggressive or choleric behaviour such as hitting a plush toy or quarrelling with their friends.
- Relationship issues with friends at the daycare, possibly due to fear of becoming attached or loving someone who they could lose.
- Rapidly changing behaviour: sadness immediately followed by elation and the need to play.
- Worry about the welfare of the person that is gone.

CHILDREN FROM 6 TO 8 YEARS OF AGE

“Hi, my name is Takomi and I am 7 years old...almost 8.”

“My cousin died, he was 10. I thought only old wrinkly people die. I wonder what it’s like to be in the ground. How long does it take before you become just a skeleton?” Or, “I don’t know how he feels in his little box. It must be pretty uncomfortable.”

Children in this age group are starting to have a better notion of time but still have problems adjusting to the idea that the person who passed away will never return. For these children, death is something that only happens to old and sick people. When they have to confront the fact that even young people can die, they can also develop the fear of dying themselves. Children from 6 to 8 years of age are a lot more sensitive and are influenced by the reactions of people around them. This may include sadness and suffering but can lead them to ignore their own sadness so as not to upset their parents and friends even more.

Potential manifestations in children within this age group:

- Feelings of guilt and responsibility for the death—not necessarily conscious ones.
- Fear of becoming sick or dying. May be expressed in words like, “I’m afraid when I am alone in my bed,” by having a tummy or headache, an upset stomach, etc., or even by not speaking at all.
- Especially in relation to COVID-19, asking if they will die because they are coughing.
- Problems with attention or concentration at school, lower performance level, lack of interest, refusal to go to school (when classes start up again) for fear of leaving their friends or family, etc.
- Behavioural problems like aggression, anger and fighting.
- Feeling strange to not be like other kids.
- Sadness, crying spells, fear of abandonment or, contrariwise, elation.

CHILDREN FROM 9 TO 12 YEARS OF AGE

“Hi, my name is Tania and I am 11 years old.”

“I also feel bad but I don’t cry in front of others. I wonder what happens when we die—do we go somewhere? Do the soul and heaven really exist?”

At this stage of development, children know that everyone will die one day, even themselves. They continue to try and understand the irreversible finality of death. Like younger children, they may feel guilt and responsibility for a death. They are also very sensitive to what their friends and family are feeling and may copy their feelings and reactions. They may also feel that they are not up to the situation or want to console their sad parent, moving back and forth between being a child and being older. They ask questions such as “What happens after you die? Where does the soul go?” Children in this age group may also ask for details about the funeral ceremony and what happens to the body of the deceased.

Potential manifestations in children within this age group:

- Fear of the future and what will become of them.
- Sadness, tears or contrariwise, indifference to emotional pain.
- Problems at school, inability to concentrate, attention issues, lower academic performance and indifference.
- Mood swings, irritability, aggression, provoking conflict with a sibling, parent or friend more often.
- Insecurity, stress, anxiety.

TEENAGERS

“My name is Harry, but my nickname is the Big H, and I am 16.”

“It’s unbelievable, my pal Louis died. It’s so unfair. He was too young to die. The whole gang got together with a distance app during our confinement to laugh and share our memories, but it was pretty painful after all.”

Teenagers feel invulnerable and that nothing can harm them. They know that death is the end of life, but believe it only happens to others, not to them. The death of a friend or family member muddles their thoughts and makes them aware of their own mortality. Their reactions to loss swing back and forth between those of a child and those of an adult. But at this age, the impression of invulnerability and the desire to be independent, free from their parents and stand on their own feet may elicit reactions that confuse adults.

Potential manifestations in children within this age group:

- Indifference and insensitivity to what happened. It’s teenagers’ way of dealing with the shock.
- Refusal to be open with the family and reject its support. Teenagers remain nonetheless upset and in need of reassurance. They need to feel and know that the adults will be there for them.
- Prefer to hang out with friends (virtually in the time of confinement).
- Aggressiveness toward family members and often critical of them.
- Skip school, disinterest when classes restart.

- Anger, sadness, guilt.
- Anxiety and insecurity.
- Consume alcohol and drugs.

Some ways you can make things better

Perhaps you are also experiencing the death of a loved one and may not feel up to being able or available to provide the necessary support to your child. This is normal and you need not feel guilt. Don't hesitate to call on the available resources for advice, or ask a friend or family member to help you out by calling your child, especially in this time of confinement.

CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO TWO YEARS OF AGE

- Be aware that very young children will be greatly affected by the loss of the emotional relationship that is of prime importance to their safety and development. This is why it is so vital that a significant person steps in to ensure that their care, love and security needs are taken care of.
- As for infants, visual contact is imperative, and so is being soft-spoken, cuddling and cradling them.
- Ensure that the child is familiar with the people who are part of the family circle.
- As much as possible, maintain a set routine for meals, naps and bedtime.
- Explain what has happened lovingly. If the message is not fully understood, at least the sound of your voice will be comforting.
- Use words that are true and simple. Even if the child does not fully understand, this will help you to continue to talk about the event as time goes by.
- Take photos of bereavement events you attend and things you see without the child being there. One day, when the child wants to see the photos in order to better understand, it will be possible.

CHILDREN FROM 3 TO 5 YEARS OF AGE

- Avoid pretending that nothing happened because you want to protect a child in this age group or believe they are too young to understand. Children need to know what's really going on. Prepare them for the news. Don't wait for them to learn the truth in another way with no advance preparation.
- Explain what has happened in easy-to-understand words. You might say that daddy, mommy, a sibling or a friend has passed away and won't come back. Say that it's normal to feel sorrow. Even if the child does not fully understand, your words will be of comfort.
- Be truthful. Don't say that Dad has gone to sleep forever or is in heaven. Children in this age group know that when they fall asleep, they wake up. Do not elicit fear of falling asleep in a child.
- Be reassuring, and say to the child that no one will abandon them.
- Help the child express its emotions by playing games or drawing.
- Be reassuring by repeatedly telling a child that there is no need to feel guilty because they did nothing wrong and are in no way responsible for the death. Tell them that even if we all really want this person to come back, it won't happen.

- If the children show an interest, bring them along to the funeral parlour or ceremony and if there is a burial, to that also. Explain how everything will take place and that the people gathered around the coffin may cry. When a child shows no interest in this, why not suggest a little mourning ritual at home to say goodbye to the departed?
- Explain that because of the COVID emergency, the funeral rites will take place once the pandemic danger has passed and that attending is up to them. Sometimes, funerals that take place far away are broadcast or recorded, so if a child expresses a wish to participate by watching, you should watch too and be there to answer any questions that come up.
- Reassure the child by explaining in specific terms what will happen to them now, for example that they will continue to go to their daycare and will be picked up, etc.
- Let the children play games that include death, funerals, and such. This provides a way for them to express the ordeal they are going through.
- Inform the daycare about the situation. The staff members are your allies and can help your child go through the bereavement process.
- Listen when a child expresses concern for the well-being of the deceased person. Be reassuring and say that they feel no pain, hunger or fear.
- As much as possible, keep to the same routine for meals, naps and bedtime.

CHILDREN FROM 6 TO 8 YEARS OF AGE

- Answer the child's questions, be frank and admit that you do not have all the answers.
- Express your own feelings to the child. Do not feel ashamed to show your reactions and emotions.
- Tell the child that there is no need to feel ashamed, angry, frightened or sorrowful, and that you feel these emotions too from time to time. In a way, you are giving the child permission to be like you.
- Help children express what they are going through by playing games, drawing, doing activities and sharing.
- Show respect for the way a child experiences bereavement. Some—but not all—children cry. The absence of tears does not mean absence of sadness, only that children mourn in their own individual way.
- Tell the school what has happened. Teachers and staff are your allies and can help your child cope with bereavement.
- Reassure the child by explaining in specific terms what will happen to them now, for example that someone will wait for them to get off the school bus, help with their homework, etc. Repeat how much you love them and that the whole family is there for them.
- As much as possible, always keep to the same routine. Boundaries are reassuring for children and habits like going to school, playing sports and such will help maintain a balanced life.
- Offer the child something that belonged to the person who died and let the child choose it.

CHILDREN FROM 9 TO 12 YEARS OF AGE

- Feel free to share your feelings of grief, anger or guilt with your child and insist on the fact that this is normal in the situation. Encourage your child to talk to someone trustworthy.
- Be open and receptive to the child's questions. Ask the child about how they understand the meaning of death.
- Reassure and comfort the child and repeat that they are in no way responsible for the death of the loved one.
- Suggest writing a letter to the deceased or keeping a diary with entries about how they feel or what they would have liked to say to them.
- If your child becomes aggressive or enraged, encourage activities that can evacuate its emotional overload.
- When classes recommence, let the school know what has happened.
- Explain the forthcoming funeral rites to children and how you respect and support them, as previously mentioned for other age groups.
- As much as possible, always keep to the same routine. Boundaries are reassuring to children, and habits like going to school, playing sports and connecting with friends will help maintain a balanced life.

TEENAGERS

- Explain the situation and the circumstance of the death of the loved one.
- Respect the teen's way of coping with death, including the need to be alone or with friends. Be ready to listen: "If you feel like talking, I'm here for you." Do not try to force a teenager to talk. What's important is that the teen knows that you can be counted on. Adolescents want to feel that adults are available even if they resent being overprotected.
- Share memories of the departed with your teenager. Suggest a symbolic activity such as a scrapbook of photos and anecdotes, etc.
- Tell your teenager about your own feelings and repeat that there is no shame in crying or being afraid. Avoid making fun of the teen's worries and fears. Do NOT say something like, "Stop behaving like a baby."
- As much as possible, don't change the family rules including curfew, what is permitted and disallowed, etc.
- Encourage your teenagers to continue with their usual activities and stay in contact with their friends while obeying the measures that have been put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19.
- When classes recommence, let the school know what has happened.

Clues that tell you when things are improving

Children and teenagers in bereavement do not necessarily have the vocabulary to express their feelings about loss and will often want to conceal their reactions from their parents. This makes it more difficult for parents to know what's really going on. But observing non-verbal behaviour, emotional outbursts and the physical state of the teen since the death of the loved one can help you gain a better understanding.

Watch for these cues. If you see them, it means that your child is on the right track.

- Reactions are gradually ebbing in strength and frequency.
- The child's general health is good.
- There are times when the child feels joyful.
- The child expresses emotions and reactions and asks questions.
- The child shows an interest in a variety of activities.
- The child sleeps and eats enough.
- The child cries or remains silent (let's not forget that a major tragedy has just occurred).

Your child or teen will do even better if:

- Their friends accept the fact that they are going through the mourning process at their own pace.
- Adults in the family circle help sufficiently as time goes by.
- Adults do not think in place of the child but wait until the child's own needs are expressed.
- Things are going better in the family on the whole.

Important!

A child or teen may do better for some months then suddenly relapse into painful feelings of mourning. This is because as children become more mature they understand death better. It is a passage of life that all children have to go through and develop a healthy reaction to a loss that occurred very early in the child's life. This is normal. In fact, the process may continue throughout the child's life. Bereavement is not calculated as a function of time, but is measured in love.

