

Grief Reactions

With many types of crisis and emergency situations, individuals are faced with losses - loss of a loved one, loss of a sense of security and safety, etc. Throughout the handbook, reference is made to being aware of "grief reactions" in staff and students. Included is a brief outline of what to look for and how to best assist someone who is experiencing grief. It should be noted that grieving takes time and that there is no one "right" way to grieve or to help someone who is grieving. (Further information about grief is also available in Section 4. 1.)

Grief is a natural and normal healing

response, which is initiated whenever a loss is experienced. Grief is not a single emotion, but rather it is a collection of feelings that can be expressed through a variety of behaviours and thoughts. Because there are many ways to express grief, there are many ways to resolve grief

Grief is the healthiest way to accept a loss and gain perspective on the changes the individual now faces. Loss occurs when someone is deprived of someone or something that gives that person meaning,

safety or identity. Grief helps a person face the reality of the loss, to recover and to grow through the experience.

Each person experiences grief differently, yet there are common patterns that have been called "the grieving process." No matter what type of loss is experienced, the same process is generally worked through, although the duration and intensity will differ depending on the circumstances, the

age of the child/adolescent, and the openness of those around the individual to assist in the process of healing. Individuals generally move back and forth between the stages in the grieving process and there is no

set time when a person reaches the final stage. Some individuals believe that those who grieve cycle through all of the stages many times, but the emotional reaction is less each time.

The Grieving Process

Shock and Denial

("This can't be true!")

- numbness, expressionless, disbelief
- quiet, random, disorganized
- unwillingness to talk about the loss; keeps busy
- loses appetite, forgets appointments

Anger and Guilt

"Why did this happen? Who's at fault?")

- blames self, others or God
- emotional reactions - yelling, arguing
- rude and uncooperative with others
- may punish self, feels guilty

Bargaining

("If only, I wish

- tries to think of how it could have been different
- wishes that earlier interaction could be undone
- makes promises to self or others about being a "better" person

Depression

("He/she's not coming back.")

- & feelings of isolation, sadness, emptiness
- cries frequently
- becomes passive, listless and disinterested in 'normal activities
- withdraws into silence

Acceptance

("I can't change what happened I need to continue my life.")

- lets go of anger and depression and begins to share memories
- & begins to care for self and others
- makes plans for the future; reorganizes life and feels hopeful

Common Reactions to Grief

Emotional Reactions

- numbness
 - denial
 - confusion
 - euphoria
 - sadness
 - guilt
 - yearning
 - despair
 - depression
 - hopelessness
 - helplessness
 - fear/anxiety
- anger
 - rage
 - hysteria
 - bitterness
 - loneliness
 - peacefulness/relief
 - spiritual connectedness
 - feeling of being lost
 - sense of unreality
 - sense of depersonalization
 - mood swings

Physical Reactions

- tightness in throat
 - dry mouth
 - tightness in chest
 - breathlessness/deep sighing
 - irregular heartbeat
 - hollowness in stomach
 - headaches
 - diarrhea /constipation
 - weakness in muscles/muscular tension
 - lack of energy/fatigue
 - numbness
 - increased sensory awareness
- shortness of breath
 - over-sensitivity to noise
 - dizziness
 - sweating
 - rash
 - increase in activity/decrease in activity
 - sleep disturbances
 - decreased resistance to illness
 - weight changes/appetite changes
 - neglect of self increase in self-care
 - stomach aches

Thought Patterns

- inability to concentrate
 - difficulty making a decision
 - self-destructive thoughts
 - low self-image
 - **forgetfulness**
 - preoccupation with the loss or the death
- confusion
 - disbelief
 - questions about heaven
 - questions **about faith and god**
 - excessive daydreaming
 - absentmindedness

Behavioural Reactions

- searching for what was lost
- detached from surroundings
- disoriented to time and place
- withdrawn from friends and activities
- overactivity/hyperactivity
- listlessness
- sleeplessness
- blaming others
- apathetic
- crying
- clinging
- fighting
- loss of appetite
- seeking solitude
- * extreme quietness
- seeking and providing forgiveness
- spontaneity
- dreaming of the deceased
- "seeing" the deceased
- avoiding reminders of the deceased
- treasuring objects that belonged to the deceased
- regression in mannerisms
- over-dependence on parent
- poor grades
- bed-wetting in children

Age 13-17.- Concept of death is self-absorbed

Teens understand mortality and death as a natural process of living. However they often feel immortal and omnipotent so it is difficult for them to accept death.

Teens have increased ability to think symbolically, philosophize, daydream, criticize, and imagine.

Teens often have a difficult time with death because they are absorbed with shaping their own lives. Death seems remote - something that will not happen to them.

Teens tend to bottle up their emotions at the time and then let their feelings out in other, sometimes unrelated, circumstances.

Common Reactions:

- o judgmental
- o mortality crisis
- o move to adult responsibilities to assume control
- a suspicious and guarded
- o angry, fighting with others, disrespecting authority
- o abrupt reaction shifts - from anger to fear, from denial to guilt
- o dropping old friends/forming new peer relationships
- o rebellion against authority
- o running away from home
- o eating and sleeping disorders
- o alcohol and drug abuse
- o loss of impulse control
- a becoming preoccupied with thoughts of suicide

Information: needs to be truthful; be available when teen is ready to talk or ask questions; show you are present, committed, and concerned

Helping Someone Grieve

Acknowledge the emotional pain of the loss and allow the individual opportunities to tell you about what they are experiencing, feeling or thinking.

If we encourage individuals to "keep their grief to themselves" we are in effect telling them to "bottle up their feelings" and "don't think or feel anything about the person who has died." In order to heal, people need to work through their feelings and memories.

Set aside your expectations about how the person or child should grieve. Everyone grieves differently based on the unique relationship they had with the individual. Allow for different expressions of grief

Realize that grieving has it's own timetable. Sometimes a wave of emotion hits and the person grieving starts to cry; at other times, they may have an angry outburst unrelated to the situation they are in.

Seek opportunities to be with the person who is grieving. There is a tendency in our society to avoid people who are touched by death because we don't know what to say. The bereaved individuals often feel alone and withdraw; they need people who will walk with them through their grief. Include mention of the deceased in your conversations. Don't encourage the person grieving to run away or hide their pain. Talking about the person who has died acknowledges the

person's worth, importance and impact on others.

Grieving is a lengthy process. Individuals who are grieving ask themselves many questions about love, life and faith. Allow them time to search their hearts, minds and souls for the answers to these important questions. Be there when they want to talk; listen carefully; avoid giving cliché answers.

Children, teens and adults all have "faith questions." If you are asked these questions, be filled with the compassion of Christ in your response, not with the "wisdom" of the Pharisees.

Carefully consider your own feelings about the death and your beliefs about grieving.

Summary

- be available and ready to listen
- show affection and caring
- be honest
- encourage expression of feelings by the person grieving
- avoid giving advice, judging or redirecting the conversation

Parent Information

When a classmate has a serious-illness...

For many students, learning that a classmate has a life-threatening illness is startling news. They have often witnessed serious illnesses, like cancer, occurring to people who are older. To realize that someone near their age has a serious illness threatens their understanding of the world. They may have feelings of anger, uncertainty, anxiety, or sadness. They may fear for their own future or for the future of friends and family. Often, children and adolescents don't know how to express these feelings in words; instead, the feelings come out in actions and/or behaviours. You may find your child to be very irritable and argumentative; quiet and withdrawn or moody; very edgy and emotional; or extra loud and obnoxious. As a parent, you know how your child usually behaves so you will be the first to notice these differences.

Another common effect is exhaustion and restlessness. Coming to grips with the facts of a serious illness takes a lot of emotional energy. Even though it may appear that your child is listening to you, their mind may be very far away trying to sort out what this all means. With time, your child will begin to resume all of the activities and responsibilities they were involved in; for now, realize that this is a significant time of growth and change. Be available to listen as your child searches for understanding and meaning.

Some suggestions for talking to your child about serious illness:

Tell the facts as you know them.

Even though it is difficult to understand, it is important to remember that God does not punish people by giving them cancer or other diseases.

Be honest about what is happening. If you do not know the answer to a question, admit it, instead of making up an answer.

Ask your child what they think, feel, or want to know.

Allow your child to express sadness, anger, and fear.

Allow your child to reach out in ways that are meaningful. Discuss together

(then follow through) what they would like to do to support the person and their family.

Don't force your child to talk about it when your child isn't ready. If they know you are open and available, they will come to you when ready.

Sometimes children and teens want to forget, to pretend for a while that nothing has happened.

Get support from others when you need it. Talk to other parents, staff members, or individuals who you know have had cancer in their family for suggestions about how to help your child.

Reassure your child often of your love and support.