

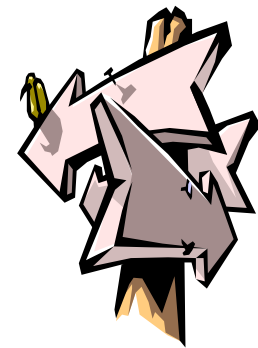
# HOW CHILDREN EXPRESS GRIEF

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We cannot always know what a child is thinking or feeling. WE MUST TAKE OUR CUES FROM THEIR BEHAVIOR. A child grieves his losses with the same hurt as an adult ... perhaps with different understandings, but the hurt is just as deep and no less painful simply because the surface area is smaller. GRIEF HURTS!

Grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss, loss of any kind. It is a physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological response. The death of a loved one may be the most devastating loss one experiences, yet grief occurs following ANY change in our lives. Even positive changes can bring a momentary grief response.

Grief is a complex issue, guided by our past experiences, our religious beliefs, our physical health, our socio-economic situation and the cause of the loss. Grief is the internal response to loss. Mourning is the external response, the one that is visible to the rest of the world.



Love, anger, fear, frustration, loneliness and guilt are all a part of grief. It is important to understand that grief is not a sign of weakness nor a lack of faith. Grief is the price we pay for love.

Children tend to cope with change by expressing themselves in ways of behaving. They **ACT OUT** their feelings and fears rather than talk about them. Children may not mourn (public expression) but all will grieve. They may not always understand **WHY THEY HURT, BUT THEY CAN**

IDENTIFY THAT THEY HURT. All children react differently, but some of the most common expressions of grief in children are:

- **SHOCK/NUMB/FROZEN**

Grief often begins as a frozen state of being. One simply feels little or nothing. The grieving process therefore, could be likened to the process of thawing or defrosting from this frozen state. You can be frozen for a few minutes or up to a year. Everyone has their own internal time clock for thawing.

- **HURT**

Bodily distress, emotional pain, psychic pain. Young children will often complain of a “BooBoo” or an “Owie” when in fact, the pain is more than likely emotional in nature rather than physical. Do not negate, however, the possibility that grief is also very real physical pain as it causes extreme stress on the body. If a child tells you he hurts, please believe him. Grief can be an internal or invisible injury with no outward signs or physical wounds.

- **ANGER**

Children may be angry at the person who died, God, people who were involved with the death (or should have been). They may direct their anger towards family members, siblings, friends, pets and everyone else in their world. They may target you as well. They may be angry with themselves for things they perceive they should or shouldn't have done. Guilt is a close bedfellow of anger in many cases. Anger can be internalized or eternal in nature. Anger can also be a powerful and effective mask or block for other emotions as well.



- **DENIAL**

Many people believe one should “jump into grief” as quickly as possible in an effort to “get over it” quickly. Many times what appears to be denial is simply postponement because one does not know how to cope with something; does not want to deal with something or can't address something in what some would consider to be “timely manner”. And don't forget, there is the defrosting factor as well. Some do not begin to thaw for many months. Use compassion rather than judgment to help children through this difficult period.

- **ENVY-JEALOUSY**

Children may believe they have to assume deceased's role in family in order to get attention. "Would you love/notice me more if I were dead, too?" Surviving siblings often feel they are competing with a "saint" who was perfect in life and even more so in death. "Dead people can't make mistakes, only lives ones can, like me."

- **GUILT & MAGIC WISHES**



Children are very ego-centered and believe that much (if not all) of the world revolves around them. They often believe they have played a role in the death of a loved. Perhaps it is something they did or said (or didn't say) that places the burden of guilt on their shoulders. Much of what all of us carry as guilt can be categorized in the "I could have" or the "I should have" or the "If one" boxes. Children, especially young ones, also believe in the power of magic wishes and if you had wished someone to "go away" or "I wish you were dead" and then you happen to die...the fear and guilt of being a part of something so unexplainable is a heavy burden to bear silently. Few children will admit to making those kind of wishes, although they are quite common.

- **REGRESSION**

The desire to return to safer time in one's life is often the motivating factor for a child's regressive behavior. Wanting to return to a less confusing, less painful, less complex time is a natural tendency for all of us. Regressive behavior is also a way of commanding attention and receiving some level of comfort. Treat it with compassion rather than punishment.

- **INCREASED DEPENDENCY UPON SIGNIFICANT OTHERS**

Children may seek attention and become "clingy" out of a need to remain in contact with loved ones. They wonder what else might happen and who else might leave them. Young children, especially, may need additional reassurances that a parent will return or that they are safe and protected. Kindness and understanding work much better than punishment and ridicule.

- **PANIC**

Children often begin to wonder who will take care of them now? They may fear that others in their life will leave as well. Panic comes when there is no clear plan of action and we are left to improvise. Open communications and honesty, tempered with compassion and understanding will help children weather this particular part of the storm.



- **SILENCE, WITHDRAWAL**

Sometimes a child will withdraw rather than engage with others, following a death. They may need some private time, but make sure they also know they do not have to retreat into the background and become invisible. Unfortunately, the children who are swinging from the ceiling fan always get noticed. Pay attention to those who begin to withdraw or retreat into silence as well. Grieving children can also experience situational depression following a death of a loved one. While it is a normal and natural consequence of grief, if the depression becomes debilitating or incapacitating, professional support is needed.

- **DIS-INTEREST**

Children may lose interest in previously engaging activities. The bereaved often experience a change of perspective following the death of a loved one and children are no exception. Do not force activity, but do encourage some level of engagement. If the dis-interest progresses to lack of attention to daily routines and activities, seek professional guidance.

- **BEHAVIOR CHANGES**

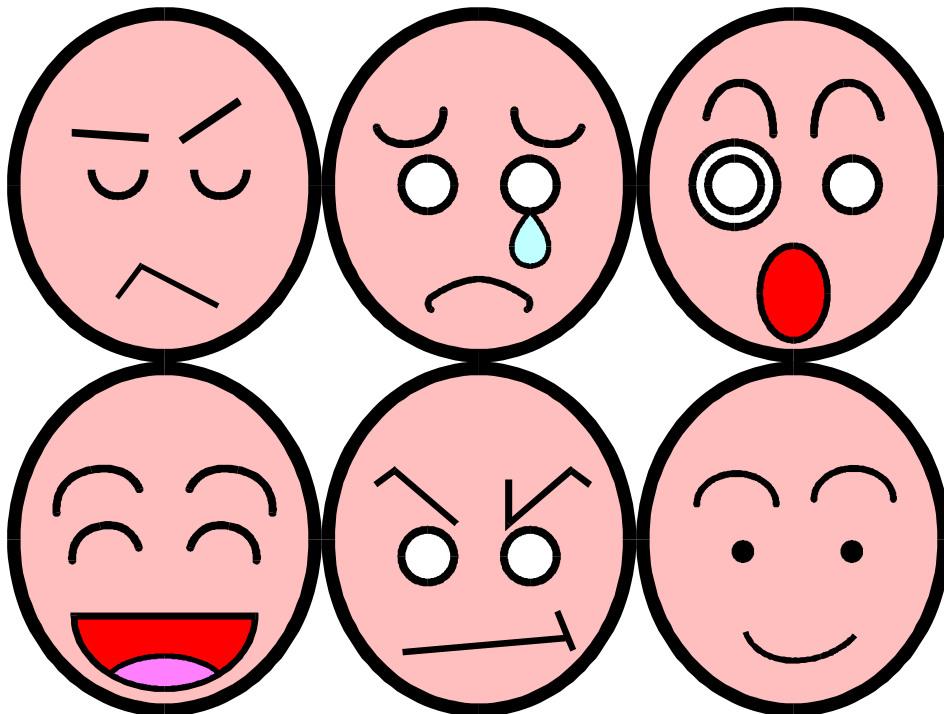
Any changes in behavior should be noted. Lack of energy, physical distress, emotional stress and a wide variety of other factors can lead to behavior changes. Most are temporary in nature. However, any time a behavior change leads to destructive behavior, seek immediate professional guidance. Everyone needs education, information and support throughout the grief process. Sometimes something more is needed as well and professional intervention can help both the child and his family walk through the valley of grief.

- **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

Children, like all people, need to be acknowledged for who they are, what they do and how they do it. To be invisible is one of the greatest fears of mankind. To be able to feel acknowledged in one's grief is a great gift to receive. To be noticed when one is sad or unhappy or not having the best time, is a powerful reassurance that we, too, did not die when our loved one did. Many believe one must work towards acceptance, but I believe it is easier to work towards simple acknowledgement of what happened. "My Dad died" not "I lost my Dad" is far more accurate. Once we can say that, we can begin to work towards healing.

- **HEALING**

You never get over grief. It takes a lifetime of work to put the death of someone you love into perspective. It is an on-going, never-ending process and one step up and one step back. You never get OVER grief, but you can get THROUGH it, one footstep at a time.





## **CHILDREN AND CHANGE**

Grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss and change. It is a physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological response. The death of a loved one is perhaps the most devastating loss one may experience. Yet, grief occurs following ANY change in our lives. Even positive changes can bring a momentary grief response.

We cannot always know what a child is thinking or feeling. We must take cues from their behavior. A child grieves his losses with the same hurt as an adult...perhaps for different reasons, but the hurt is just as deep and no less painful simply because the surface area is smaller.

Children tend to cope with change by expressing themselves in ways of behaving. They ACT OUT their feelings and fears rather than talk about them. They may not always understand WHY they hurt, but they can clearly identify THAT THEY HURT! All children react differently, but some of the most common expressions of grief in children (whether they are coping with a death, divorce, abandonment, family move or friendship dissolution) are:

**ANGER**  
**FEELINGS OF ABANDONMENT**  
**GUILT**  
**APPARENT DENIAL**  
**BODILY DISTRESS**  
**TEMPER OUTBURSTS**  
**REGRESSION**  
**INCREASED DEPENDENCY**  
**SILENCE**  
**WITHDRAWAL**  
**PANIC**  
**DEPRESSION**  
**OVER ACTIVITY**  
**BEHAVIOR CHANGES**  
**DISINTEREST IN PREVIOUSLY ENGAGING ACTIVITIES**

