

## **GRIEF AND LOSS**

The key to move through grief effectively is to see grief from God's perspective. Unfortunately, we've not always been taught how to do that. We **MUST** see the big picture, not our limited earthly picture. Our loved ones intercede for us—that great cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 11.

*1 Thessalonians 4:13, "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope."*

*Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose."*

God will ultimately redeem everything that we go through.

### **GRIEF IS A JOURNEY—A PROCESS**

When it comes to grieving the death of a loved one, there are no linear patterns, no "normal" reactions, no formulas to follow.

We can also grieve other losses:

- A divorce
- A loss of career
- A loss of friendship or any relationship
- A loss of health
- A loss of financial security

The word "grief" is derived from the French word meaning "heavy burden." Indeed, they physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual implications can be overwhelming.

Following a death or loss, everyone works through these stresses differently.

- Some are instantly devastated.
- Others feel numb and disconnected.
- Some withdraw socially.
- Others reach out for support.
- Just when the initial shock begins to subside, a deeper sense of reality and despair sets in.

Those who grieve may need to learn new skills, adopt different habits and adjust to daily life without the physical presence of the person who died.

## Grief and Loss

Although grieving is an individual experience, there are symptoms many people share after suffering personal loss:

- Feels physically drained
- Can't sleep at night
- Forgetful and unable to think clearly
- Noticeable change in appetite
- Physical distress such as chest pains, headaches or nausea
- Stays extremely busy to avoid thinking about his or her grief
- Eats, drinks, watches television, etc., excessively
- Participates in harmful activities
- Senses or dreams about the deceased
- Becomes withdrawn, lonely and apathetic
- Frequent sighing and crying

Each person sets his or her own pace when grieving. There will be ups and downs, moments of relief followed by moments of anguish.

The first few days after someone dies are generally the most intense, marked by chaos, strong emotions and a "dreamlike" sensation.

Over time, a host of emotions may emerge. From guilt to remorse to anger, reactions vary from person to person. It's not uncommon for grieving loved ones to ask questions like *"Why did this happen?" "Where was God?"* or *"Why didn't the doctors find the cancer sooner?"*

Among those mourning a death, some find the pain diminishes within weeks or months. They arrive at a place of acceptance, peace and hope for the future. They reminisce about their deceased loved one instead of feeling consumed by memories.

For others, the healing process persists and it is difficult to enjoy a reasonable quality of life. Everyday events and significant life markers are painful reminders of what could have been.

If debilitating symptoms continue longer than six months, we suggest seeking individual help.

The intensity of grief may relate to the following factors:

- Whether the death or loss was sudden or expected
- Your feelings about the person who died
- Your personality, family background, coping style and life experience
- Your belief system and view on death
- How those around you react and support you

The grieving process can be long and isolating, yet it's crucial to accept support rather than grieve alone. Talking about grief is an essential part of healing. Receiving reassurance and feeling understood will help make the recovery process more complete during one of life's most challenging times.

*ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FROM FOCUS ON THE FAMILY:*

**HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD GRIEVE**

Death is an ever-present fact of life, yet even adults face it only with difficulty. Here are some tips to help your children through the grieving process.

**Teach that death is part of life.** Parents often avoid talking about death in an effort to protect children from unpleasantness. Instead, look for teachable moments. Wilting flowers, changing seasons or the death of a family pet provide an opportunity to show death as a part of life. Visit elderly friends or relatives to show children that aging is normal. Children will accept and confront death if adults allow it.

**Be honest.** Present the information in a straightforward manner with age-appropriate information by explaining, "Granddad died last night." Avoid saying, "He went to sleep" or "He's gone away." These terms leave children wondering if they will die when they go to sleep or if the person is coming back.

**Don't delay telling about a death.** Delaying can do more harm than good. If you wait, someone else may tell your child or he will overhear it in conversation. Learning the news from you is less frightening.

**Answer questions.** Some children are satisfied with the facts. Others will ask a multitude of questions. Allow questions and answer them, even admitting when you don't have the answer.

**Recognize fears.** Death can be a scary concept for children. If your child expresses fear about seeing the body or going to the funeral, don't force the issue. Comfort and reassure your child following a death of somebody he knows.

**Let them see you grieve.** Children need to know that grieving is acceptable. Allow children to see you cry. Emotional pain is part of losing a loved one.

**Cherish the memories.** Continue to talk about the loved one who died. Look through photo albums, talk about funny things the deceased said, or reminisce about pleasant experiences. Children take cues from us and model their reactions accordingly. Show them that death and grief are parts of life.

### **0- TO 3-YEAR OLDS**

Children under age 3 do not understand death, but they do grasp the concept of “here” or “not here.” For toddlers, use words that will explain why the loved one is not “here” in concrete terms. “Daddy was very sick, and he is no longer here.”

The most important thing in young children’s lives during this time is consistency. Pay careful attention to physical needs, such as proper rest and nutrition. Then let children know through affirming words and actions that they will be cared for and safe.

### **4- TO 7-YEAR OLDS**

Beth K. Vogt’s son Josh was 4 when his grandmother died. Josh wanted to know how NaNa knew the directions to get to heaven. Beth told him Jesus helped NaNa get there. Josh looked at her and then into the sky and asked, “Mom, is Jesus an astronaut?”

When loss affects 4- to 7-year olds, they often become verbal, asking where the person went and why. They may believe death is temporary and expect their loved one to return. When children realize their loss is permanent, they may become clingy, throw tantrums, wet the bed or suck their thumb. Normal behavior will return in time, but children need to figure out how to express their grief in a more positive manner.

Be patient with their temporary behavior, but give them an opportunity to express their grief in more creative ways, such as making a book out of photos of their loved one. When kids can work with the photos and add words, they are learning to face their loss and say or write things that have formerly been kept inside. To help them in their process, you can read their book out loud with them and ask them if they want to add anything. The book becomes a tangible, touchable reminder of their loved one.

### **8- TO 12-YEAR OLDS**

When Teresa Grigg’s daughter died, her son Ryan was at the hospital the last few days before her death. He and his cousin played in the waiting room or the hospital playroom. When Mallory unexpectedly died, he felt guilty for playing. His sister was younger, and they had a lot of fusses with each other. He struggled with these additional feelings of guilt.

It’s not unusual for children this age to personalize the death of a loved one. Teresa says, “We let Ryan know that it was normal for brothers and sisters to fuss. We let him know that she did not die because he didn’t give her more attention or because he was playing at the hospital. We assured him, not just one time, but many times.”

Parents can help tweens celebrate the life of their loved one by planting a flower or tree in their own yard. The plant is a reminder that the person actually did live.

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Parents can also do the things their child liked to do with the loved one and do it together to make new memories. At holidays, such as Christmas, the family can make an ornament to honor the loved one, and celebrate the loved one's birthday in gratitude for the time they had that person in their life.

**TEENS**

Concerned adults hugged the 16-year-old and asked questions. The quiet teenager struggled with losing his dad and wanted life to be normal again. He was angry. He hadn't had time to process his own feelings, much less comfort or assure adults or family members that he was going to be "OK."

When a teen loses someone he loves, he often assumes an adult role. Explain that it's OK not to have or know the right words, to feel a lot of different emotions and to mourn his changing world. Then make sure he knows you are available when he is ready to talk.

The first few days after a death and the holiday periods are often the most difficult times for a grieving teen. Here are two ways to help teens through these times:

- Give teens a video camera. When visitors arrive or ask probing questions, teens can ask a friend or family member to share a special memory instead of answering their questions. Behind the camera, the focus is shifted from the teen to a special or fun memory.
- As a holiday approaches, come up with a new tradition that honors the person—your relationship—and nurtures a sense of family.

A Harvard University study lists four tasks that all children, no matter their age, need to deal with concerning grief:

- Accept the reality of loss.
- Experience the emotional aspects of loss.
- Adjust to an environment in which a loved one is missing.
- Find ways to remember or honor that person.

Teresa Griggs concludes, "Don't expect children to get over it in a few days, or even a few weeks. When children lose a loved one, their lives are changed. Grief is truly a process."