

Navigating grief with children and adolescents



For many families, December is a month of joy and giving. However, major holidays can also trigger grief related to the loss of a loved one. Grief is the profound sadness we feel when someone we care about is no longer with us. There is no single right way to grieve, as it manifests differently for each of us. Nevertheless, it is helpful to know what to expect and how to recognize signs of a prolonged grief response. Factors such as a child's age, developmental level, past experiences, emotional health before the loss and the family and social environment all influence how a young person processes grief.

Signs a young person may be in the process of grieving

Behavioral signs of grief:

- **Changes in behavior:** Aggression and irritability
- **Regression:** Behavior that reflects earlier developmental stages (bedwetting, thumb sucking, needing more help with daily tasks)
- **Withdrawal:** Pulling away from family, friends or activities they once enjoyed
- **Clinginess:** Some children may become overly anxious and clingy
- **Acting out**
- **Loss of interest in hobbies/daily activities**

Emotional signs:

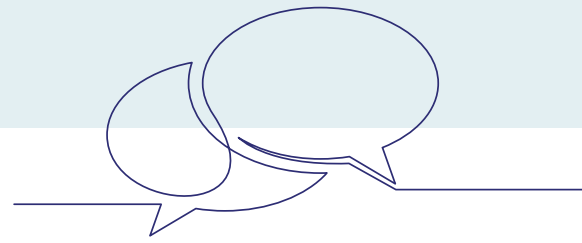
- Sadness
- Anxiety and fear
- Anger
- Guilt
- Confusion

Physical and academic signs:

- **Physical complaints:** Headaches, stomach aches and other general aches and pains can be a manifestation of emotional distress.
- **Changes in eating and sleeping:** Includes loss of appetite, overeating, difficulty sleeping or nightmares.
- **Academic decline:** Significant drop in school grades or difficulties concentrating.
- **Risk taking:** Engaging in dangerous or self-destructive behaviors.
- **Preoccupation:** Young person may believe they are seeing or hearing the deceased and may talk about wanting to "go with" the person who has died.

How to support a child who is grieving:

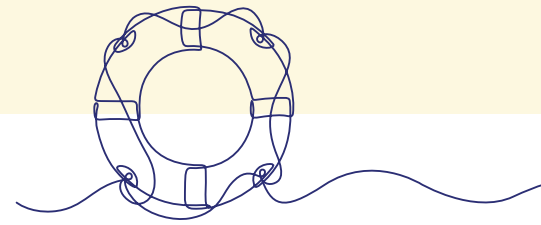
1. **Talk about feelings:** Create a space where your child can express what they are thinking and feeling without judgment.
2. **Use clear language:** Talk about death in an age-appropriate and factual way.
3. **Utilize creative outlets:** Drawing, painting, journaling and music are some creative ways that a young person can express their grief.
4. **Connect with peers:** Encourage play and social time with peers to reduce isolation and promote connection.
5. **Provide stability:** Do your best to keep daily routines as consistent as possible to provide security and consistency.
6. **Consider professional mental health support:** Loss can be hard on a young person. Offering appropriate professional help can allow a young person to process their experience with someone who is objective and is not connected to the loss.



When to seek more help:

If a child's symptoms of grief last longer than 6 months, the child may be experiencing Prolonged Grief Disorder and may benefit from meeting with a mental health professional. At least 3 of the following symptoms need to be present to fit the criteria for Prolonged Grief Disorder.

- Identity disruption (such as feeling as though part of oneself has died)
- Marked sense of disbelief about the death
- Avoidance of reminders that the person is dead
- Intense emotional pain (such as anger, bitterness or sorrow) related to the death
- Difficulty with reintegration (such as problems engaging with friends, pursuing interests or planning for the future)
- Emotional numbness (absence or marked reduction of emotional experience)
- Feeling that life is meaningless without the deceased person
- Intense loneliness (feeling alone or detached from others)



References:

[Psychiatry.org - Prolonged Grief Disorder](https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/prolonged-grief-disorder)
[Coping with Bereavement and Grief | SAMHSA](https://www.samhsa.gov/child/loss/grief)