

The process of grieving
is normal and expected.

Grief

families/
carers

 **headspace**
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

Grief is a reaction experienced in response to the loss of a loved one, whether a family member, friend, or someone else which is close. The process of grieving is normal and expected. It can occur both in the period immediately after a loss, and in the months and years to follow.

Grief is experienced in different ways by different people. Young people may have different reactions to those of adults because of their age and developmental stage, because the consequences for them may be different, and because of their family situation.

It can be particularly difficult for a young person to cope with a loss that results from a disaster such as a flood or bushfire. Disasters are usually unexpected, leaving people little time to prepare. They can have widespread effects, not only on the person experiencing the loss but also on support networks of friends, family and community. Dealing with the trauma of the disaster itself can be challenging, but recovery is likely to be more difficult if the person has lost friends or loved ones, or their home or school. It can also make it harder for you as a parent or carer to support your child through their grief if you have also experienced loss or trauma.

There is no single 'right' way to respond to the loss of a friend or loved one. There are a range of normal grief reactions which you may notice in your child, including:

- Shock and disbelief that the person has died
- Longing for the person – wishing they were around, to be able to touch them or be comforted by them

- Feelings of anger or resentment – for being abandoned, for the unfairness of the loss, or towards those thought to be responsible for the loss
- Feeling sad that the person has gone
- Guilt – for example that they were unable to save the person, or that they survived while their loved one did not
- Anxiety – about the future, how things will be without their loved one around, or their own safety
- Preoccupation with thoughts of the person who has died
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes to sleep patterns and appetite

Your child may act like they are not affected, or appear to be unaffected and getting on with their life, which may cause them guilt. Some choose to express their grief through rituals or creative expression such as art or music, rather than talking about it which is healthy and normal. Others may act out in more challenging ways, through drinking, drug use or other risk-taking behaviours.

Most young people will be resilient and will carry on with their lives while moving through the grieving process. For some, however, the loss may create more serious mental health problems that will require specialist assessment and treatment.

How to support your child in the grieving process

Families are extremely important in supporting a young person who is grieving and helping them to deal with their loss. Continuing your family life with as little interruption as possible, as well as their social and school life, allows your child to maintain a sense of safety and security, and to feel hopeful about the future.

It can be particularly challenging for families to support each other when a family member has died. Everyone will grieve for the loss of their loved one in different ways, and may not feel able to provide support while grieving themselves.

It is important to acknowledge that your children may respond in ways that are difficult for you to understand. They might respond with defiant or risk-taking behaviour – although this might seem disruptive and frustrating to you, it may be their way of coping and therefore require some understanding. Professional support for the whole family might be helpful if you're finding it difficult to support each other through a loss.



Some other strategies that may be helpful in supporting your child:

- Acknowledge their loss and the need to take time to grieve
- Provide information about normal patterns of grief
- Encourage continued participation in enjoyable activities such as sports or hobbies, and family activities
- Support your child in gathering stories and memories

- of the loved one in ways that appeal to your child – such as writing, photos, journals, talking, blogs or memorials
- Help your child to anticipate times that may be particularly difficult, such as Christmas or anniversaries, and develop a plan for managing these periods
- Help your child find meaning in what has happened and foster a sense of hope for the future

Complicated grief

'Complicated grief' describes grief which continues at a high level and affects the young person's functioning for at least six months. Young people experiencing complicated grief may display:

- Ongoing, intense yearning for the person who has died
- Anger or guilt
- Difficulties in their relationships
- Disruptions to their daily functioning, such as problems with concentration, memory, sleeping, eating, or performance at school or work

They may also experience symptoms of other mental health problems including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, or even thoughts of suicide. These problems can be treated, but they require a proper assessment by a health professional.

If your child is reporting suicidal thoughts or plans to harm themselves, or you feel concerned for their safety, it's important to seek immediate help. Contact your local mental health service, CATT team or hospital emergency department, and stay with them until they can be seen by a mental health worker.

Supporting your child in seeking help

The grieving process can take time, and it is not unusual for young people to experience ups and downs over months or years while dealing with the death of a loved one. Generally, people find that things get easier as time passes, and will experience more good times and less difficult times. However, if your child's grief is persistent and severe, getting help early can reduce the effects on their life and improve the chances of a full recovery.

It is important to support your child in finding a health professional such as a GP or counsellor who they trust and feel comfortable with. If they have had a positive experience with a family GP or another health professional in the past, encourage them to contact them again. You could also support them to contact your local community health centre or **headspace** centre.

For more information visit, and to find out how to get help, visit **headspace.org.au**

Acknowledgements

Raphael, B. (2010), 'Children, Adolescents and Families: Grief and Loss in Disaster', Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network, Australian National University, Canberra. ReachOut Australia

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