



Supporting children facing the illness or loss of a loved one

Frequently Asked Questions

How can I help my child cope with the recent death of a loved one?

Share information about grief

No matter how many losses we experience, grief can feel different and unfamiliar every time. Children may have heard the word “grief” but really not have a clear understanding of what the word even means, let alone how to cope with it. **Sharing information about grief with children** can help them understand that their reactions are normal- an expectable part of being human and connected to other people. Providing **psycho-education**, or information, about grief to children is a little like giving them a guidebook about a country they’ve just been dropped into- not quite as detailed as a map, but useful information about the terrain. Some information that children of all ages might find helpful follows. Use words that match your own child’s ability to understand and check in with them about whether what you’re talking about makes sense

Finding the words to talk about grief

You know your children best- how they have reacted to other losses or difficult times and how they may react now to this loss. This knowledge of your children will help you figure out how to talk about grief. Some parents like to see examples for doing this, so included here are some words that you might use or change to better fit your own family’s needs.

After losing someone we love, people usually have very, very strong feelings (emotions), stronger than how we usually feel and maybe even the strongest feelings we can ever remember having.

Most people feel sad and many also feel anxious or afraid, angry, shocked and like they can’t believe this happened, lonely and like no one else can understand what they are feeling, and sometimes even relief and gratitude, especially if the person had been suffering for a while. Lots of other feelings can come up too. And sometimes, people just feel numb- like they aren’t feeling much at all, or like they don’t know how they are feeling.

What feelings have you been having?

Each of us feels grief in different ways.



Some people notice feelings most in their bodies—a tight chest, a pit in the stomach, balled up fists. Some people notice feelings in the way they think about things—"I don't care about anything anymore," "I can't stop worrying about what our family will do now," or "I can't believe this happened." And, for many, grief can leave us feeling truly broken-hearted, like our hearts hurt.

Where do you notice your feelings?

What feelings do you notice in your body? Your mind? Your heart?

Some people feel mostly one way, like just sad or angry, while others notice a mix of feelings.

Sometimes the mix can be confusing because the feelings don't fit together very easily, like when you feel sad one minute but a little relieved the next or feel angry and guilty at the same time.

Have you had mostly one feeling or lots of different ones?

What are some of the feelings you've been able to notice happening at the same time?

Grief can feel like a big jumble of feelings.

Grief can feel like a big knot with lots of different colors all twisted up together. Sometimes noticing and naming the feelings is a way to untangle that knot, to turn it into something more like a basket with each yarn color in its own ball. Some feelings are hard to ignore, but others stay a little more hidden or in the background—those ones are important to notice and name too.

What is one feeling in the knot of feelings?

Are there others that might be part of that knot?

Which ones take longer to notice?

A lot of people notice that grief seems to come in waves.

At first, the waves are huge and can feel really hard to get through. The waves usually get further apart over time and smaller over time, but certain reminders at particular times of the year can stir up stronger feelings for a while. It will help if we all try to let other people know when we have a wave of grief, and to learn together about what makes us each feel better when those waves get bigger. We can figure out how to plan for those times.



Strong feelings might make you really uncomfortable and you might want to try to ignore them or push them away. Believe it or not, it helps to slow down and pay attention to these feelings, to let the wave pass by or through you, rather than fighting it.

Which feelings do you sometimes try to push away?

The way we feel when we're grieving changes: sometimes very quickly, sometimes more slowly.

Sometimes we move from one feeling to another then another. Sometimes we have the same feeling for a while, and what changes is how strong the feeling is.

Have you noticed your own feelings changing today? This week?

Grief can be confusing because different people who are all dealing with the same loss, probably have different feelings at different times.

It can seem a little easier when everyone feels the same thing together- when they don't, it can be hard to know what to expect from the people around you, and hard to know how to act around those people. It's ok for us all to have our own reactions at different times. There's no one right way to feel. Even people who all love someone who died very, very much might feel, and show their feelings, in different ways. That's ok. Everyone lost the same person, but that person meant different things to all of us.

What have you noticed other family members feeling, and how can you tell?

Are there some reactions that are hard for you to understand?

Are there some reactions that are hard for you to see and hear?

Talking with someone who loves you about your feelings can help you to feel better

- Talking helps you to recognize what you're feeling and why.
- Talking about feelings can make even very strong feelings easier to bear—like having someone to encourage you when you're carrying a heavy load—the weight isn't less but it feels different.
- Talking can make the feelings less strong- like having someone help you carry something heavy.
- Talking can help untangle a big knot of feelings and somehow when feelings are sorted out, they are a little easier to manage.



- Talking with someone you trust can also help you think more clearly about the situation—sometimes when we are upset, the ways we think about things make those feelings even worse.
- Talking to someone else might help you see that there are different ways to understand some parts of what is happening or give you information that helps you feel better.

Some people—children and adults—would like to be able to talk about emotions with other people but find that it’s really difficult. Keep trying—this is a skill like learning to read or draw or play a sport that gets better with practice.

Think about trying these things:

- Figure out who can be most patient with your learning how to do this better and try to talk with them: Is it a parent, grandparent, other family member, teacher, coach, mentor, religious leader, friend or friend’s parent?
- Let those people know what helps you to talk about emotions: Is it easier to answer their questions? To write things down in back and forth notes? To rate how strongly you feel different emotions on a 1-10 scale? To draw how you’re feeling and then talk about the drawing? To use toys to act out how you’re feeling and then try to talk?