

Seasons for Growth

Young People and Grief



Young people's lives are characterised by considerable change and uncertainty. Experiences of loss (death of someone they love, parental separation, trusted friendships, jobs, confidence) and the grief that can accompany such experiences, are also part of the landscape of adolescence. Being present to their experiences and offering timely and appropriate support is critical. This factsheet provides some information that might help.

What is grief?

Grief is a very human reaction to change and loss in our lives. It is a natural and normal response, which can impact on our bodies as well affecting our emotions and our thinking. Grief can challenge the way we think about ourselves and the world, including our values and beliefs, and often influences our relationships, too.

How do young people express grief?

It is important to remember there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each young person will experience grief in their own unique and personal way. They may perceive that the intensity of their grief is much greater than that of those around them, and can fear they are losing control. Below are just some of the many wide-ranging reactions commonly experienced by young people.

How young people may feel...

- angry, frustrated or disillusioned
- confused, anxious and overwhelmed
- lonely and isolated from peers
- consumed by their sadness



Thoughts young people may have ...

- consumed by thoughts associated with the loss
- wondering if they are to blame
- worried about the future
- If bereaved by suicide, they may be more susceptible to suicidal thoughts

Behaviours young people may show ...

- hide their feelings
- withdraw from family and/or friends
- engage in risk-taking behaviours
- 'lash out'

Physical reactions young people may experience ...

- sleeplessness
- fatigue, distracted, lethargic, and unable to concentrate
- panic attacks
- digestive problems
- physical aches and pain

Grief can impact on the important process of identity formation ('Who am I') that is part of the adolescent journey. Sometimes it can be difficult to tell whether changes the young person is experiencing are connected to their grief or simply part of their journey towards adulthood. Irrespective, it is critical they have the support they need to navigate these changes.

The grief process

Grief is a challenging and complex time of hurt, but it is a normal part of life. It is important to remember that young people who are grieving are not 'unwell.' They can cope with grief, and grow through the experience, if they understand what is happening and have appropriate support. In thinking about how best to support them it can be helpful to understand the grief response as a process or journey.



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How to support a young person who is grieving

If we think of grief as a journey, our role as adults is to help young people navigate it. Young people are unlikely to want an adult with them every step of the way, but they need opportunities to reflect on how they are travelling. Most importantly they need adults who proactively and regularly check in and who are also available for advice when they need it.

Young people need:

- a strong, loving relationship with a parent or primary caregiver who they can rely upon and trust.
- opportunities to talk through and make sense of what has happened.
- space to express a wide range of emotions (such as sadness, anger, fear, guilt and humour).
- help to make sense of their emotions and reactions, with someone who won't judge them.
- the security of usual boundaries and expectations.
- opportunities to be involved in decisions linked to their loss or any further changes.

As a parent, don't be afraid to ask other trusted adults to help support your child. Some young people may find it easier to speak with someone outside the family. Encourage young people to talk over their feelings with the school counsellor if they are feeling overwhelmed.



Involving young people in decisions at school

Talking with young people about new arrangements can be a way of acknowledging their loss without focusing on it directly. For instance, a teacher might ask a child how they would like the teacher to respond to questions from other students, or discuss possible ideas or special arrangements that might help them cope in the classroom.

How to help as relative, family friend, teacher or other professional

- Let young people know their loss is recognised
- Identify yourself as a safe person who is open and willing to listen (although don't force young people to talk)
- Help young people to manage their feelings in different contexts (such as at school)
- Monitor their progress on their studies and identify if they might need additional support (this helps prevent schoolwork becoming a further source of stress)
- Check in with the young person regularly to keep communication open over time.

Further support

Seasons for Growth is an education program that gently helps children and young people learn about the grief process. A trained 'Companion' facilitates the small group (4-7 participants) over 8 sessions. There are four levels to support children and young people 6-18 years. All levels have flexibility to cater for participants with different learning needs.

Each session explores a theme such as:

- **Life is like the seasons**
- **Change is part of life**
- **Valuing my story**
- **Caring for my feelings**
- **Making good choices**

The sessions incorporate a range of age appropriate activities involving drawing, stories, discussion, music and journal activities.

Get in touch

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