

PATHWAYS CENTER

for GRIEF & LOSS

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH SUDDEN DEATH

You are never prepared when an unexpected death occurs. The first reaction is often a feeling of shock and unreality. You might feel unable to cope. As an adult, you may be unsure how you should respond, much less how to help affected children.

It is important to understand there is a natural process that follows any loss. The event is abnormal. Both adult and children need to know their feelings are probably normal. Your reactions may be intense and unpredictable. The situation is unusual, and you, and the children around you, are stressed and feel vulnerable. As an adult, you realize the chance of this occurring again, soon, is rare. Children lack that vision and need reassurances that “You are safe now. It is not likely that this will happen again...I am here for you.” Adult reactions around children will have great influence on the children's adjustment to the crisis. The intensity and duration of their reaction will decrease quicker if they feel heard, understood, and reassured.

ADULTS

Common Early Responses

Fear
Disbelief – “like a bad dream”
Numbness
Difficulty focusing/concentrating
Need for details, for information

Possible Later Responses

(No specific time frame)
Sleeping or eating disruptions
Headaches
Apathy or depression
Crying easily
Irritability, anger
Lack of interest
Anxiety about future
Feeling guilty or overwhelmed
Increased colds, flu, allergy

CHILDREN

Common Reactions with Ages 5-12

Fear or apprehension of repeat occurrence
Regression to earlier stage of development
Constant conversation and questioning
Excessive clinging
Bedtime problems – can't sleep, nightmares,
fear of sleeping alone, fear of dark, bed-
wetting
Cries easily
Fear of abandonment

Common Reactions with Ages 13-17

Physical reactions such as headaches,
stomachaches, lack of appetite
Extreme sadness
School problems: avoidance, behavior
problems, poor grades
Behavior problems could include acting out
and increased aggressiveness
Changes in sleeping patterns: difficulty
sleeping, nightmares, excessive sleep
Feeling of confusion
Withdrawal and isolation
Lack of interest in previously enjoyable
activities

Children feel overwhelmed with the intensity of their emotions. Younger children may not know how to identify, much less verbalize their feelings. Play, and fantasies expressed in play, can often give clues about concerns the child may have. Let the children make their own interpretations and express their feelings. You can do this by getting down to the child's level to play, draw, or read with them.

Teens may feel unable to discuss their feelings with family members. More often the peer group, or at times school personnel, may be a safer place for the teen to mourn. Most of the common reactions listed for teens are transitory and resolve within a short time. Teens who withdraw from their peers as well from family members may need close attention. They may be experiencing fears they are afraid to express, for they do not want to appear “different from the crowd”. Provide reassurance that *whatever* they are feeling is normal and give an avenue to express their feelings.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

- * Recognize your own feelings and talk to others about them.
- * Provide information - accurately, completely, but simply.
- * Create opportunities for children to talk with you and with each other. Listen carefully and patiently even if the same questions are asked repeatedly. Model your true feelings and inquire about theirs.
- * Predict and discuss the range of feelings that may be experienced - this legitimizes, normalizes, and prepares them for theirs.
- * Listen to what they say.
- * Look for the questions behind the questions.
- * Encourage stories and drawings, and then ask them to explain and/or interpret their works.
- * Reassure the children of their safety - remember they feel vulnerable.
- * Relax the rules to allow opportunities for expression of feelings but continue to maintain a sense of structure and routine.
- * Talk with other adults who are close to the affected children to assure consistency of information given, reactions seen, interventions planned.
- * Offer praise for positive behaviors, even if you must look for them between times of misbehavior.
- * If you are the parent, spend extra time with your children, especially at bedtime. Hug and touch your children more - it's a physical way of providing the reassurance that you are there for them.
- * Use words or phrases that are accurate. Using sleep for death, for example, or saying that God chooses the best can instill fear.