

Loss of a relative and grieving

Grief is a natural reaction to loss, usually accompanied by a wide range of emotional and physical symptoms. It is a process that helps you to cope with the painful event and move on with your life. Children and adolescents can go through this process just like adults, but some reactions to loss can be unexpected for parents and carers and it is important to become familiar with and understand them.

Grief can be triggered by numerous types of loss, such as:

- the death of a person close to us
- a serious illness of a relative
- moving away from your birthplace/loss of home
- a relationship break-up
- a family separation or divorce
- loss of a close friend
- the death of a pet

There is no right or wrong way to grieve - each person deals with loss in their own way and accordingly, each person's grieving time differs.

How grief manifests itself in children and adolescents?

- blaming oneself for the loss
- lack of focus and forgetfulness
- increased concern for the safety of oneself and one's loved ones
- physical symptoms (e.g. abdominal pain, headaches, exhaustion)
- emotional reactions - anger, sadness, relief, anxiety, guilt or feelings of rejection, aggression, tantrums, defiance
- attempts to suppress emotions in order to protect the adults around them
- avoidance of normal activities, isolation, change in eating and sleeping habits, temporary regression



Grief is often described as an external expression of feelings - something that can be observed. This widespread but misguided belief leads to many issues related to understanding and providing help to the grieving person. If a child is not visibly sobbing and sad, it does not mean that they are not actually going through the grieving process.

A child may well be experiencing internal distress and pain that is not apparent at first sight, and therefore children who are experiencing loss need to be given more attention and care. At the same time, we need to remember that grief can even occur a long time after the loss, and can be long-lasting. It is also notable that the stages of grief can recur with the 'anniversary' of the loss. In any case, it is important to create a safe space for the child to share feelings and process the loss.

The age of the child affects the experience of loss and grief

Very young children can be confused - both by the loss and the subsequent grieving process. Children under the age of 5 may not understand the changes that occur as a result of the loss (e.g. change of school, absence of a loved one, moving). Younger children also do not understand what death is and find it difficult to understand that it is permanent. It is therefore important to remember that they are dealing not only with dramatic changes in their lives, but also with feelings of confusion and uncertainty. Sometimes the loss can cause temporary depression, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, toileting, or disruption of certain developmental milestones. As a parent or caregiver, try to give your child a safe space and enough time to adjust to the changes.

There tends to be a different response in **children aged 6-11**, who are often eager for explanations and ready to understand what has caused the changes or losses they are experiencing. They experience shock, disbelief, or even forget that the loss has occurred, which is a normal and healthy defense mechanism that allows them to take a break from a very overwhelming event. This defense usually comes and goes in waves and can be accompanied by intense emotions.

For **adolescents**, the process of loss and grieving is very intense and overwhelming. Adolescents need reassurance that the intensity of their emotions, or even the times when they forget or do not think about the loss, is perfectly okay and that they do not need to blame themselves for these reactions. They therefore need compassion, understanding and patience from those around them when dealing with loss. The more stable an environment we can provide for children and adolescents, the better they will be able to focus on understanding what has happened and on how to cope with the loss in a step-by-step manner.

What to look for if you, as a parent or carer, have concerns about your child's mental health

Both loss and bereavement are very painful experiences, so it is important to pay attention to whether the child is coping appropriately and to provide suitable support if needed. As a parent or carer, you should be alert and consider seeking professional help if you observe any distress in your child or teenager:

- prolonged emotional withdrawal and isolation
- substance abuse
- impaired self-care and personal hygiene
- persistent irritability, low mood and sadness

How to be supportive to your child when you yourself are going through loss and grief as a parent

It's not necessarily bad for children to see adults grieving. When we are sad about the loss of someone close to us, it is a perfectly natural reaction. It's also important to show children, through your behaviour, that it is possible to manage difficult feelings even though they are painful. However, if you feel very overwhelmed by your emotions and feel that they are getting out of control, it is important not to scare your children or inadvertently put them in a role where they will be caring for you. In these situations, do not hesitate to seek the help and support you need for yourself.

For information and contacts on where to go if you need help, see **Where to seek help for children and adults**.

