

The process of grieving  
is normal and expected.

# Grief

workers



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 death that results from a disaster such as a flood or bushfire. Disasters are usually unexpected, leaving people with 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.

Everyone responds to the loss of a friend or loved one differently. There are a range of normal grief reactions:

- 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

Some young people may act like they are not affected, or appear to be unaffected and getting on with their lives, 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. 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 a young person who has experienced the loss of a loved one

Most young people recover well with the support of family, friends and their community. Workers can provide additional help and support in a number of ways:

- Acknowledge the young person's loss and the need to take time to grieve
- Facilitate and support their continued engagement in caring environments, for example within the family or at school, which will help the young person continue with their learning and social development and maintain a sense of security
- Provide information about the expected responses to a loss and normalise their own experience
- Encourage continued participation in enjoyable activities such as sports or hobbies
- Suggest they gather stories and memories of the loved one, for example through writing, photos, journals, talking, blogs or memorials
- Anticipate times that may be particularly difficult, such as Christmas or anniversaries, and develop a plan for managing those periods
- Help the young person to 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 suicidal ideation. These problems can be treated, but they require proper assessment by a health professional.

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

## Supporting a young person 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 eventually experience more good times and less difficult times. However, if a young person's grief is persistent and severe it can interfere with their functioning and have a significant impact on their social, emotional, behavioural and physical development.

Getting help early can reduce the adverse effects on their life and improve the chances of a full recovery.

Young people are often reluctant to seek professional help, so it is important to find someone they trust and feel comfortable with. If they have had a positive experience with a GP or counsellor in the past, encourage them to contact that person again. You could also support them to contact your local community health centre or nearest **headspace** centre.

## Self-care for workers

Supporting people who have experienced grief, trauma or loss can have an impact on you as a worker. You may feel physically and emotionally exhausted, overwhelmed or distressed by the young person's experience, or feel traumatised yourself. Looking after yourself and getting

support to manage these difficult feelings is important for your own wellbeing, and will also help you to better support the young person.

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

### Acknowledgements

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