

Parent's Corner

HOW CHILDREN VIEW DEATH

Children who are grieving will sometimes ask their parents questions which demonstrate their curiosity and concern about death. Understanding children's concepts of death for different ages will help you answer their questions.

Everyone has some experience of death at an early age. After experiencing a death as a child, you feel anxiety and develop defenses. This process lasts through the school years and may continue into adulthood.

Young Children

Young children become aware of death as "non-life" when they see a dead leaf, insect or pet. They may associate this non-life with the non-existence that occurs to toddlers when Mom leaves the room. Mom disappears (stops existing) until she reappears. Children may be working this out in play such as "peek-a-boo" or throwing things off the high chair (where they disappear from sight) so Mom can bring them back again.

This awareness of death as non-life or not being brings about anxiety. Children work at mastering this anxiety and discover two lines of defense. The first defense is thinking, "I am special. I'm not like the others out there; this can't happen to me." Second, if the unthinkable does happen, the child believes someone will rescue him just like he is rescued when he falls down or loses a toy.

The young child's defenses often are challenged by the belief that death is contagious. The child may think, "If Aunt May got sick and died, so can Mom." With some diseases like tuberculosis, this may be true, but usually it is not. Yet, when someone close to a child dies, the death can weaken the child's emotional defenses, especially if the one who died protected the child from danger and thought the child was special.

The child's observation that something may disappear (stop existing) and then reappear (exist again) leads to their belief that death is reversible. This is a subtle form of rescue. When five-year-old Jody's grandpa died of cancer one summer, Jody was convinced he would come back at Christmas.

Preschool children are magical thinkers. Their world revolves around them and they feel responsible for what happens. To them, Mom and Dad fighting must be a result of something the child did, said, or thought. When someone dies, the child often feels responsible and guilty. He must be told how the person died and reassured that nothing he said, thought, wished or did caused the death.

School-Age Children

School-age children continue to develop these defenses. However, even though they have improved thinking ability and increased understanding about death, their defenses against death anxiety are still the same. For example, a 9-year-old boy believed he caused his grandmother's death. He said, "Mom told me that when she got angry at me it made Grandma's pain worse and she died from that pain."

Children of this age begin to understand that death is final but they want to believe it happens only to the old (a lifetime away) or at least to other people. They see death as a person; someone who comes to get his prey. This is the age when children are most vulnerable to the effects of a loss by death. They have a more complete understanding of death but their defenses are not well developed.

These generalizations are not meant to minimize either the complexities of child development or the individuality of each child. This information can clarify some of the issues concerning the child's understanding of death without oversimplifying it.

Join us at one of our annual events

BUTTERFLY RELEASE

To Be Announced

Details to come
Call for information

LIGHT UP A LIFE

To Be Announced

Details to come
Call for information

All of these events are free and open to the community
For more information, contact the Hope Bereavement Center at (760) 431-4100

Hospice of the North Coast • Hope Bereavement Center

2525 Pio Pico Drive, Suite 301 • Carlsbad, CA 92008 • Tel: (760) 431-4100 • www.hospicenorthcoast.org

Grief's Journey

Grief's Journey, Issue Six



Dear Friend

By now you have received several bulletins from hospice to support you as you move through this first year of bereavement. We sincerely hope this information has been helpful.

To care deeply is to risk the pain of loss. It takes courage to grieve our losses fully and to recover the capacity to care deeply. This bulletin addresses the duration of the mourning process. How long does grief last? How long does it take to adjust to a life without the person you loved?

The Hospice philosophy of bereavement neither hurries nor delays the resolution of grief. Rather it encourages each individual to sense and respect his or her own pace for moving through grief toward healing. We hope the following information will support you in this very personal task.

HOW LONG DOES IT LAST?

Grief – A Journey into the Unknown

What human being would willingly go on a journey where the destination and time of arrival were unknown? Grief is that kind of a journey. No one can predict when you will be able to return to life fully or what your life will be like when you do.

The uncertainty of grief is difficult to bear. Many bereaved people and their friends are tempted to develop timetables and expectations for the grieving process. Unfortunately, books that describe typical stages of grief can be misinterpreted to support these expectations and timetables.

Time of Arrival – Unknown

The most common timetables try to rush the grieving process. Three weeks, three months, or one year may pass, and you or your friends may think that you should be completely better. Even though there is no timetable for individual grief, it may help to remember that many people experience their most severe pain four to eight months after the death. Many people find that they need 18 to 24 months just to regain their equilibrium. Healing to the point where you feel real hope and an appetite for life may take longer.

Less common, but equally harmful, are timetables which try to slowdown the grieving process. You may find the energy to enjoy life before it seems fitting. Your friends may suspect disloyalty to the one who died, simply because their own timetables have not been met.

It helps to remember that the pain of grief cannot be measured, regardless of its duration. People live their loyalty to their loved ones in many different ways. You demonstrate your loyalty to your loved one simply by respecting pain when you feel it and getting on with your own life when the time is right for you.

Destination – Unknown

Thomas Wolfe's title, "You Can't Go Home Again" is an accurate description of the grieving process. You may tend to hold onto the past, particularly when you have suffered a painful loss. In truth, you cannot go back. However, when you try to imagine getting better, your picture of the future is usually based on your past happiness.

The journey of grief changes you. After a loss, you are not the same. Passing through grief, being willing to walk along your unique path of pain and healing, can lead to a new sense of you and new ways of shaping your life.

The search for recovery from deep loss can lead to the discovery of previously hidden ability, talent, strength, and courage. You may also discover new power to create value in your life – even in the face of death and loss.

"What humans do best is wonder!

*We are the species that can
be surprised that we are alive at all!"*

*And be forever awed,
astonished, and fascinated*

by the miracles

which surround us.

What an adventure life is."

Mary Southard

ADJUSTMENTS TAKE TIME

You may have accepted that you must find a new way to live, but now you must find a way to live. The question is, "How?"

Distractions – A Temporary Reprieve

Even though you know it is important to feel and express the painful emotions of grief, sometimes you need a rest from the pain. In addition, sometimes you need to cope with work, home, or family responsibilities. You have probably learned to distract yourself by keeping busy and by avoiding reminders of your loss. Maybe you have put away photographs, avoided places and routes that are full of memories, begun to sit in a different chair or to lie on a different side of the bed. These things can help temporarily.

However after periods of distraction, the painful memories may return with surprising force. Some people have discovered that distractions are helpful and try to distract themselves permanently to escape from their grief. They sell their home or move to a different city. They leave their familiar surroundings only to find greater confusion and uncertainty in the new surroundings.

No Shortcuts through Grief

As a newly bereaved person, your judgment can be confused. Postpone major decisions if possible. It is important not to rush the grief process. Getting used to a new life takes time, and there are no shortcuts.

For most people, the pain of loss eventually erupts, despite all attempts at distractions. You may succeed at distracting yourself from emotional pain, only to confront physical illnesses caused by the stress of suppressing emotions.

One of the saddest ways of getting stuck in grief would be to succeed at permanently distracting yourself from the pain of loss.

Life would be a full-time job of avoiding pain and memories. There would be no time off, no vacations. Life would be a burden. Lightness of heart and spontaneity can return only as pain is allowed to run its natural course. After tears, laughter can come.

*"Courage is not the absence
of fear and pain,
but the affirmation of life
despite fear and pain."*

Rabbi Earl Grollman

Learning to Live with Loss

There are no quick and easy answers to the questions of how to live without the person you loved. Somehow, as time passes, you develop strength from coping with the feelings and challenges that arise in your new situation. One day at a time, you go through new experiences simply because you cannot go around, under, or over them; you must go through them to survive.

Learning to live without your loved one takes time. When you were a baby, you were completely dependent on others. It took time, but you learned to walk on your own. You still possess the astonishing human potential for learning. You can learn to live with your loss, but learning takes time.

A Dream

*"We had a dream that we would build a house upon a hill
so we could see the ocean just by standing at our windowsill.*

*The dream is gone now that he is no longer here,
but I cherish all our dreams,
because it keeps him near.*

*Maybe someday in another time,
I'll have another dream
and I'll make it mine.*

*But just for now I'll hold on to what we had,
because somehow it helps when I feel sad.*

*As time passes, when the pain is not so fresh, I'll sigh."
And find comfort in the memories of these times gone by."*

Sandy Feingold

MOURNING IN THE AMERICAN CULTURE

Part of the difficulty when grieving is that our American culture no longer validates our status as a griever. There used to be a few helps or symbols (such as a black armband) to acknowledge that you were grieving beyond the funeral. Society has now taught us that overt displays of grief are not acceptable past a week or two of the death. You may feel pressure to behave "normally" and "to produce" as if nothing has changed in your life.

People continue to receive messages from their family, friends and employers to "get a grip," "get on with life," and "it's time to get over this" as soon as two or three weeks after a death of a loved one. Americans haven't learned that people aren't having emotional breakdowns just because they are showing overt symptoms of grief.

Many other cultures are far more realistic about how long mourning requires. Many have the custom of dressing in black up to six months or a year. It is the Orthodox Jewish custom to offer formal prayers for 11 Hebrew months and to mourn for 12 months.

If you would like to give your family, friends, and employers something that explains your grieving behavior, consider using this letter.



My Dear (Family, Friends, Pastor, Employer...),

As you know I have recently experienced the death of my _____. This loss is devastating to me and it will take time for me to work through my grief. Sometimes, I fear that you may expect me to heal quickly, but grief can not be rushed.

I will cry more often than usual for a while. My tears symbolize the release of my feelings and are a healthy sign that I am recovering. These tears are neither a sign of personal weakness nor a lack of faith or hope.

Because my emotions are all heightened by the strain of grief, I may seem irrational at times. Please be patient and forgiving if I become irritable and angry for no apparent reason. Grief comes in unpredictable waves.

I know that you are probably at a loss for what to do or say to help me. Your presence and understanding is all I ask. I need you to listen to me. There are no magic words you can say to take my pain away. Touch me or give me a hug to let me know you care.

Please don't wait for me to call you. I am often too overwhelmed to think of reaching out for help. I need you more than ever in the months ahead, but my pride sometimes prevents me from telling you. Give me space to heal, but don't allow me to withdraw from you.

Pray for me, if you wish; but pray that I will find the courage and the strength I need to deal with my grief constructively. Faith is not an excuse from the process of grief.

If, by chance you have had a similar loss, please share it with me. It will not make me feel worse. Grief shared is grief diminished.

Telling me to "Cheer up, it could be worse" makes me feel discounted and angry. This loss is the worst thing for me right now. But I will heal and live again. While there are still painful days ahead for me, I will not always feel as I do now. One day I will be able to laugh again and find new joy in living.

I appreciate your concern and caring. Your understanding and support is a gift which I will always treasure.

Sincerely,