

A LifeCare® Guide to



Helping
Others Cope
With Grief

“Just as despair can come to one only from other human beings,
hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings.”

—Elie Weisel

“Honest listening is one of the best medicines
we can offer the dying and the bereaved.”

—Jean Cameron

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"The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares..."

—Henri Nouwen, from
Out of Solitude

If someone you know has lost a loved one, you may need to provide help and support as he or she grieves. It's natural to want to offer compassion and sympathy to someone who has suffered a loss. However, you may not know how to help someone else who is in such obvious pain. While not everyone wants or needs the same kind of support, this guide provides you with suggestions on how to support a grieving friend or family member.

If you are also grieving a death while trying to support a loved one, you may need additional help. Please refer to the companion piece to this guide, *A LifeCare® Guide to Grief and Bereavement*, for information on managing your own grief.

Supporting Someone Who Is Grieving

Grief is a natural process that affects people when they experience a loss—of a relative or friend; human or animal. Grieving people most often need others to simply listen and care, not offer a lot of advice. If you are trying to be supportive to someone who is grieving, remember that the emotions he or she is experiencing are universal, and the intensity and duration of these feelings will vary by individual—they cannot be rushed. You may not be able to ease another person’s pain, but you can help him or her manage this difficult experience. The following suggestions may help:



TIPS

Tips for Helping a Loved One

- ♦ **Mention the person who has died, and acknowledge your awareness of the loss.** Continue to do this as time goes on, not just right after the death. Many people avoid mentioning the person who has died, fearing it will remind the grieving person of his or her pain. Often, people avoid the topic because they feel uncomfortable or helpless, but behaving as if you don’t remember or are unaware of your loved one’s pain often leaves him or her feeling very alone.
- ♦ **Listen to your loved one.** A grieving person may need to tell his or her story again and again as part of the grieving process. The most important thing you can offer someone who is grieving is your ability to listen without judgment. A good rule to follow is to listen 80 percent of the time and talk 20 percent. Remember, the way you can most help someone is by communicating a willingness to stay with him or her despite the pain.
- ♦ **Insist that your loved one see a doctor if he or she exhibits signs of depression.** Intense grief can lead to depression. If your loved one seems unusually depressed or withdrawn, suggest that he or she seek professional help. Some employers offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), a counseling service to help workers resolve problems; encourage your loved one to find out if his or her organization offers this benefit. See the next section, “Symptoms Associated With Grief,” for more information on when to suggest that your loved one seek help.
- ♦ **Encourage your loved one to make wise choices.** Urge the person who is grieving to pay attention to his or her own needs, and make choices accordingly. You can do this during his or her decision-making process by talking through various scenarios, or advising him or her to take the time needed to make important decisions.
- ♦ **Offer practical help; don’t wait to be asked.** Grieving takes a lot of energy, making the tasks and demands of daily living feel overwhelming at times. Help by bringing over dinner, offering to do the shopping or cleaning, baby-sitting, gardening, etc. Make specific offers several times, and encourage your loved one to take you up on your offers. Avoid phrases such as, “Let me know if I can help.” Usually, he or she won’t let you know for fear of imposing on you. Be direct with your offers and say, for example, “Let me cook you dinner tomorrow,” or “I’d like to watch the kids tonight; why don’t you take a break?”



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- ♦ **Remember that grieving is a long process.** The person you care about may be grieving for a long time. Several months or more after the death, he or she may actually be feeling the loss more acutely, and much of his or her support system will have backed off. This is when your loved one may need your support the most. Birthdays, holidays and other events may also evoke strong feelings for your grieving loved one.
- ♦ **Offer your companionship.** Your presence can be comforting to a grieving loved one; you don't have to do anything special. Often, grieving people just do not want to be alone.
- ♦ **Don't minimize the loss.** Be careful not to say, "I know exactly how you feel." This can minimize your loved one's unique feelings. If you have been through the loss of someone dear to you, you know how you felt, but you don't know just how the grieving person feels now. Instead, use statements such as, "I know this is difficult," "I know how hard it was for me when my mother died," or some other statement that is heartfelt and accurate, but leaves room for the uniqueness of your loved one's experience.
- ♦ **Encourage your loved one to share his or her feelings.** Avoid saying things like, "Be strong for..." or "Don't cry." This sends the message that you are uncomfortable with your loved one's intense feelings and, therefore, you will leave him or her emotionally alone. Since most people feel somewhat overwhelmed by the intensity and unfamiliarity of grief, they may be worried that they will be unable to cope, so these phrases may in fact reinforce their fears rather than help. Instead, encourage your loved one by saying, "It's okay to cry," or "You don't have to be so strong."
- ♦ **Help your loved one create new traditions/rituals/activities.** Because it is so difficult to deal with change, help your loved one re-engage in life. For example, if your loved one used to go for morning walks with the person who passed away, offer to spend mornings walking together or engaging in a new activity. Holidays and other events filled with tradition can also be especially hard to deal with; try to help your loved one discover new ways to experience these events. At the same time, he or she should be encouraged to cherish the memories and/or traditions associated with the person who has passed away.
- ♦ **Give advice cautiously.** Avoid offering advice with phrases such as, "You should..." or "You need to..." Only the person who is grieving knows what is right for him or her. Often, those grieving are told, "You need to get out more," "You shouldn't be alone," or "You should get rid of his clothes; you have too many reminders." Again, the message to your loved one is that you think he or she should not be grieving, and this message may increase, not decrease, his or her sense of isolation. Instead, give advice that encourages the grieving person to trust him or herself and make choices based on his or her needs, rather than on what others think he or she should be doing or feeling.

Symptoms Associated With Grief

Following a loss, your loved one will inevitably experience a variety of physical and emotional reactions to his or her grief (as described on the following pages). These are all a normal part of the grieving process, and each person's reactions will be individual and unique (i.e., they will vary in duration and intensity). However, if these reactions become severe and interfere with your loved one's ability to function on a daily basis, you should insist that he or she seek professional help from a doctor or licensed therapist.

Physical symptoms—These include shortness of breath, headaches, nausea, changes in appetite (either a loss or an extreme increase), insomnia and fatigue. Intense grief also compromises the immune system, so your loved one may get sick more often and for longer periods of time. *Note*—If your loved one is having new, sudden or extreme physical symptoms, such as chest pain, consult a physician.

Denial—Shock and disbelief are natural reactions to the news of a loss. Denying a loved one's death is a coping mechanism that allows people to get through the first few days of grief. Denial (and the resulting numbness) may help your loved one process what has happened and accept the reality of the loss.

Sadness—Most people expect to feel sad immediately after someone's death. But your loved one may feel sadder as time goes on, especially once he or she resumes his or her daily routine; at this point, he or she may acutely feel the absence of the person who has died. Your loved one may also feel sad if his or her support system of friends and family has become more distant. If your loved one has been experiencing extreme sadness for an extended period of time, he or she may be suffering from depression and should seek professional help.

Signs of Depression

Extreme grief may cause a chemical change in a person's body that can lead to depression. If you recognize any of the following warning signs in your loved one—especially if he or she has been suffering for an extended period of time—encourage him or her to consult a doctor or a mental health professional for help:

- ◆ Feelings of intense depression, hopelessness or apathy
- ◆ Decreased interest and participation in activities he or she previously enjoyed
- ◆ Inability to handle routine life and work tasks
- ◆ Noticeable physical changes, such as extreme weight loss or gain, stomach problems, severe headaches, sleep changes, inattention to personal hygiene/appearance, etc.
- ◆ Suicidal feelings (if your loved one mentions suicide—even in a joking manner—take him or her seriously and seek immediate professional help)

Anger—Being angry at a higher power, friends, relatives—and even the person who died—is a very common reaction to grief. Try to help your loved one learn healthy ways to release his or her anger, such as writing in a journal, talking to friends or exercising. Positive thinking also helps; for example, if the person died of cancer, encourage your loved one to volunteer with cancer support/research groups.



If your loved one is extremely angry for an extended period of time, he or she might not be coping well with grief. If he or she has fits of rage and lashes out at others, or if he or she begins to act violently by hurting him or herself or others (especially a spouse or children), encourage your loved one to seek professional help immediately.

Anxiety—Since death is an occurrence that cannot be controlled, many people react by feeling anxious, restless and unusually nervous. Your loved one may be feeling especially vulnerable and helpless, thinking that something else bad will happen to him or her. Help your loved one calm down by taking deep, relaxing breaths; focusing on pleasant (not fearful or anxious) thoughts; and reducing worry.

Lack of concentration—This is one of the most common symptoms of grief. Your loved one may seem more confused than usual, and he or she may become forgetful or easily distracted. A degree of preoccupation is normal, so when your loved one is having trouble concentrating, be patient; suggest that he or she focus on his or her feelings, and return to the task at hand when he or she feels ready. Your loved one should also be careful not to get involved with too many new projects or commitments.

Altered dreams—Dreams are often a combination of events from the past, current experiences, fears, hopes and anxieties. Sometimes, dreams are a signal from the subconscious mind that time is needed for healing. When your loved one has an especially strange dream or a nightmare, encourage him or her to discuss it with you or another friend or family member. If the dreams persist—or become more vivid and/or frightening—encourage your loved one to seek professional help from a physician or licensed therapist.

Guilt—Guilt is a common reaction to grief, often making a person feel like he or she could have made things better or done something to keep the deceased person alive. Your loved one may feel guilt over unresolved conflicts, or have regrets about things he or she said (or didn't say) to the deceased. Some people may also feel bad if they weren't able to be with the deceased at the time of death. If this is the case, remind your loved one that death is out of our control and that he or she did everything possible at the time.

Relief—If the deceased person was sick for a long time or if his or her suffering was significant, your loved one may experience a sense of relief at the death. Reassure your loved one that feeling relieved does not mean he or she didn't love the deceased; it is natural to be glad that a person's pain and suffering has ended.

Hopelessness—Your loved one may feel a sense of hopelessness and feel that his or her current state (physical, mental, social or spiritual) is beyond repair. These feelings generally dissipate over time. Your loved one will gradually develop a sense of hope as he or she begins to experience life again; he or she will have good portions of days, then eventually entire good days. There will undoubtedly be rough times along the way (especially birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, etc.), but it's important that your loved one remain focused on the good times ahead.

For more detailed information on symptoms associated with grief, please refer to *A LifeCare® Guide to Grief and Bereavement*.

Helping a Co-Worker

When grief enters the workplace, complications may arise because the demands of most businesses make it difficult to allow time for comforting and grief. Paid bereavement leave is often limited (your co-worker should check with your Human Resources department regarding your company's policy), and employees may return to work before they are emotionally ready.

Many of the previous suggestions may still apply to a co-worker who has experienced a loss, but since you may not be as involved in your co-worker's life away from work, it's important to consider the following information:

- ◆ If your co-worker notified you of his or her loss, inquire about what details he or she would like you to give out to other co-workers. Find out if your co-worker would appreciate receiving flowers or a fruit basket; you might even make a donation to a charitable organization or support group in the name of your co-worker's loved one. Pass around a card for others in the workplace to sign.
- ◆ When your co-worker returns to work, realize how dramatically his or her life may have changed. The effects on your co-worker's professional behavior may be significant and varied. A grieving co-worker may act eager to be away from the grief, to bury him or herself in work and the daily routine. This should not, however, signal that your co-worker is completely healed.
- ◆ Try to understand that the co-worker may not be able to focus completely on work for a long time. With your manager's help, evaluate how much your co-worker can handle, and offer to share the workload and pull together as a team to help your co-worker get back on track.



TIPS

Tips for Helping a Co-Worker

If a co-worker is grieving the loss of a loved one, you will probably want to approach him or her to express your condolences. If you are good friends, you may want to say something more meaningful about your co-worker's loss or just to offer support. However, there may be times when everything you think to say sounds wrong in your head—and it will probably be worse if the words actually leave your mouth. At these moments, it is simply best to say nothing.

Even though you may feel awkward or embarrassed at times, remember that friends and co-workers can be a significant source of support to those who have recently experienced a loss. The following steps will help to show your co-worker that you care and want to be supportive. You may want to:

- ◆ Become involved in the re-entry process, which occurs when a person returns to work after a loss. Help your colleague manage the transition back to work by keeping connected with him or her. A friendly voice—in person or over the telephone—is always welcome. Ask your company's Human Resources department how you can help.



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- ◆ Stay in touch. Stop by your co-worker's desk or office and ask how he or she is doing. A hug, a gentle touch or a meaningful look will give comfort.
- ◆ Acknowledge your co-worker's grief and offer your support and concern. There are no magic words to take away the pain. Saying things like, "I was thinking about you," or "I'm so sorry" will express your feelings honestly.
- ◆ Be patient with your co-worker as he or she tries to manage his or her grief. Offer help with practical tasks such as driving, making a phone call, preparing a meal or running an errand.
- ◆ Be available for conversation on your co-worker's terms. An open-ended question, such as "How are you really doing?" or "How is it for you today?" will invite your colleague to talk as much as she or he wants.
- ◆ Be sensitive about pushing your co-worker to talk before he or she is ready. Everybody grieves in their own way and at their own pace. Allow your co-worker to take as much time as necessary.
- ◆ Listen. You may have concerns about your co-worker's ability to concentrate on work, and whether he or she will want to talk about the loss. If your co-worker wants to talk, take a break for a few minutes and listen.
- ◆ Ask simple questions. By doing so, you will express interest in what your co-worker needs to say. Asking detailed questions about what happened usually comes across as intrusive. If your co-worker wants to talk in depth about the event or his or her feelings, just listen. Allow your co-worker to repeat the details many times—this is an important part of healing.
- ◆ Share memories. If you knew the co-worker's loved one (even if only through stories), talk about the good times. Feel free to mention the name of the person who died; it's important to acknowledge his or her existence.
- ◆ Choose your words carefully. Say, "I care about you"—not "I know how you feel." Clichés like "It was God's will" or positive statements such as "Now he's out of pain" minimize the person's death and may not be helpful.
- ◆ Be prepared for tears. Don't be embarrassed if, during your conversation, your co-worker starts to cry. Offer him or her a box of tissues, and keep a few extras in your pocket or purse.
- ◆ Meet for a coffee break or go out to lunch. Let your co-worker pick up the tab sometimes; this will help him or her feel more "normal" again.
- ◆ Continue to include your co-worker in regular social and office activities (birthday parties, coffee breaks, happy hours, etc.). Your co-worker is still a person who wants his or her relationships to continue as usual. Your co-worker may look forward to having a good time, and appreciate the stimulation of fun activities and conversation. But sometimes, he or she may prefer to concentrate on work. Don't take it personally if he or she declines a social invitation.

- ◆ Remember your co-worker on important days such as holidays or the loved one's birthday or death anniversary. Send a card, call or visit. Let your co-worker know that you remember, too.

Keep in mind that many co-workers may not want to reach out for help because their loss is so personal or they fear that they may be a burden to others. If your co-worker is struggling after a loss, it may be up to you to take the initiative and offer help.

Employee Assistance Plans (EAPs) are counseling services offered by many employers to help workers and their eligible family members resolve emotional problems (such as alcohol and drug abuse, emotional and personal issues, legal matters, stress reduction, grief and bereavement and more). EAP counselors are fully qualified and licensed in their areas of service. They typically include licensed psychologists, social workers, counselors and other staff. Usually with this service, the employee and his or her dependents are entitled to receive a set number of counseling sessions free of charge. If applicable, check with your employer to find out if your organization offers this benefit or any other type of grief counseling.

Helping Children Cope With Grief and Death

Although there is always a strong desire to protect children from pain, children (like adults) may have to face the pain caused by the death of a loved one. Children may be acutely aware of the absence of their loved one and the emotional tension around them, even if they don't have a full understanding of what has happened.

Children also must work through the tasks of grief, but they must do so with greater limits on their level of understanding, less developed coping skills, and with less control over their external world. While it was once believed that children "got over" their grief relatively quickly, it is now understood that their sadness and grief is a process that they experience differently as they age and mature. Their understanding, not only of death but also of themselves in relationships, grows as they age, and they will continue to re-examine and re-experience their loss. This section discusses how children respond to death, and how to support and guide a grieving child through the grief process in a healthy way.

How Children Respond to Death

A child's developmental level will influence the way he or she understands death and expresses grief. Over the course of childhood, children develop an understanding of the abstract concepts of death and all of the related beliefs. The following information outlines the responses to loss that can be expected, depending on a child's age. *Note*—Although these are typical responses, keep in mind that everyone responds to grief in different ways. The child you know may not fit these descriptions at these ages.

Infants and Toddlers (ages birth to two years)

While an infant will not understand the death of a loved one, his or her behavior may be affected by changes in routine or the grief of others around him or her. Common reactions may include fussiness; clinginess; disrupted sleep patterns; and

physical reactions such as biting, hitting or pushing to express frustration and confusion. Around the age of two, a child may start to show a slight comprehension of the loss, but his or her reaction will tend to be egocentric—in relation to him or herself.

Preschoolers (ages three to five years)

Preschoolers typically have a poor sense of time and permanence and may view the death as reversible. He or she may think death is the same as going to sleep and the child may suddenly fear nighttime, getting ready for bed or falling asleep. A child may also experience confusion, bad dreams and general agitation. Regression in the form of thumb-sucking, bed-wetting and tantrums may also occur. Misunderstandings about what death is may be common; a child may ask repeated questions with little understanding of the answers. Sometimes a child at this age will worry intensely that someone else close to him or her will die soon.

School-Aged Children (ages six to 12 years)

Younger school-aged children tend to understand death in a more concrete way. This is around the age where a child will come to understand that death is final. He or she may become very interested in the process of death, wondering, for example, what happens to the body after death or asking repeated questions about the deceased. Children are now capable of suffering from sorrow, anger and denial, but they still may not view death as something that can happen to them. Younger school-aged children may attempt to avoid emotional pain at all costs; they may play, act silly or become easily distracted whenever the deceased is spoken of.

Older school-aged children are generally mature enough to know something is wrong when a death occurs. They understand that death is final and irreversible, and it can happen to anyone—including them. The child may reach out to you or other adults for help in dealing with intense feelings, or he or she may become withdrawn, quiet or irritable—often a sign that he or she is fearful of loss or change. Children may also become self-conscious about expressing their feelings, or they may cover up the grief by joking about the experience. This may signal that they are confused about what to say or how to act.

Teens (ages 13 to 18 years)

Teens understand death much like adults, but they have fewer coping skills. Because teens are already struggling to find their own voice and identity, the death of a friend or loved one may leave them feeling more bewildered and confused. They may not be emotionally ready to deal with the death alone, yet they may struggle or refuse to share feelings or ask advice from parents or other adults.

Supporting a Grieving Child

If the child who is experiencing grief is under the age of two, you should maintain his or her routine as much as possible while providing plenty of love, reassurance, play and comfort. For all other ages, it is important to communicate about the loss within age-appropriate guidelines—as much as you truthfully and honestly can. Unfortunately, in the desire to protect them, adults often don't give children the information they need to make sense of what is happening. Even the clumsiest statement of truth is better than no information at all. Children have vivid imaginations and will create their own answers when factual information is lacking. Remember, a

child's imagination may create more frightful images than reality ever could. The more accurate and direct information you can give a child (depending on his or her age), the better off he or she will be.

You may have already talked generally about death with the child who is grieving, but if not, a good place to start may be to borrow from nature. Most children have already been exposed to the death of birds, squirrels or pets; even flowers and plants die with the change of seasons. You may want to use these situations as examples to help explain death and its universality. When you speak to the child, choose your specific wording based on his or her age, the way you would when talking about anything. Consider the following suggestions:



TIPS

Tips for Talking to a Child About Death

- ◆ All living creatures are born and at some time must die. Explain that nothing lives forever. There is birth, there is life and there is death for all living creatures.
- ◆ Depending on your spiritual or religious beliefs, address the concept that only the body dies. Explain what you believe happens to the soul, spirit or energy that makes each person unique. Explaining, for example, that the soul of the loved one is now in a loving, peaceful place may bring a great deal of comfort to the child.
- ◆ Explain that death is permanent. For young children, explain that this means the person or animal will never come back. The child may not have developed an understanding of time and permanence yet and may not be able to fully understand this concept; it may need a lot of reinforcement.
- ◆ Explain that dying is not like sleeping. Sometimes people compare the two because a dead body looks very peaceful, the way a sleeping person looks, but in all other ways it's completely different and can cause confusion for a child struggling to understand. Help the child understand the difference—we sleep to make our bodies strong and healthy, but we die when our bodies stop working altogether. Avoid statements like, “He died in his sleep.” This may make the child fear going to sleep. Instead, be specific when you talk about the death. For example, say, “Grandpa died from cancer (or Alzheimer’s, a stroke, etc.). He was very sick for a long time.”

Encourage children to ask questions; listen and respond as honestly as you can. Don't be afraid to say you don't know something, but offer to find out the answer. Ask the child what he or she thinks before responding to the questions.

Remember, make it clear to the grieving child that you are willing to talk about what is going on, and how he or she feels about it. Otherwise, the child may be left emotionally alone to cope with the loss. Here are some basic tips to help a child cope with grief:



- ♦ **Give the child permission to grieve and ask questions about your experience with grief, if applicable.** Many children need help learning the skills to manage their intense feelings of grief. Don't be afraid to discuss painful issues with a child for fear of crying in front of him or her. Not only is it okay to cry in front of children, it is a good example of how strong feelings are expressed and managed, and can be a good opportunity to talk about feelings.

It is important, however, to let a child know he or she is not responsible for taking care of you or any other adult. If you hide tears or emotions, a child can usually sense your pain and may try to protect you by not crying or asking questions that he or she thinks might upset you. Make simple statements like, "I'm sad because I'm going to miss Grandma. Sometimes it makes me feel better to cry. I know you are sad, too. I bet you feel like crying sometimes." This lets the child know honestly how you feel, and shows him or her that it's okay to express feelings.

- ♦ **Continue routines to help the child feel secure.** Adjusting to the loss of a loved one is often significantly life-altering for a child. To reduce the child's stress, try to continue daily patterns and routines. For instance, if the child is used to taking a nightly bath and then reading a story before going to bed, try to continue this routine.
- ♦ **Encourage the child to keep memories alive.** Children can keep memories alive by reminiscing with family and friends, placing a picture of the loved one next to their bed, creating a scrapbook with photos or remembrances, or keeping a favorite gift from the loved one nearby. By helping the child remember, he or she will see that a loved one will not be forgotten after death.
- ♦ **Read age-appropriate books on death and loss.** There are books available on specific losses (i.e., losing a grandparent or a pet). See the *Suggested Reading* list in the back of this guide or visit your local library.
- ♦ **Continue to mention the person who died.** Children take their cues from parents and other adults. If a child gets the message that a loved one is not to be talked about, he or she will be left alone with his or her feelings, questions and fears.
- ♦ **Be careful about using statements like, "Now he (or she) is happy."** These may suggest to a child that the loved one is better off or was glad to leave him or her. Children need to know that, while a loved one now is out of pain or distress, their parent, sibling or friend didn't want to leave him or her.
- ♦ **Older children (generally over age three) should be allowed to participate in events related to death and mourning.** Children want to be included in major family and life events, especially if they have accurate information about what to expect. This will vary depending on the child's age and personality, but as a guideline, if the child can understand what is going on, you may want to give him or her the option of participating. Keep in mind that, if your child is young, he or she may have trouble sitting still through a long service.

Talk with the child about the funeral, wake or other memorial service, and gently encourage him or her to join in. But prepare your child for what to expect: crying people, many people in dark clothes, open casket, etc. *Note*—An open casket may be frightening to many young children.



If he or she doesn't want to attend the funeral event, respect and support that choice. Talk to the child about participating in some other way, such as making something to put in the casket—a card, picture or letter—or planning a time in the future to visit the gravesite or memorial marker.

- ♦ **Remember that children do not usually sustain painful emotions for long periods of time.** Young children typically express feelings of sadness or anger for a brief period of time, then run off to play. They are often unable to sustain or tolerate painful emotions for long periods of time. This does not mean the child has already forgotten or is minimally affected by the loss. It is simply the child's way of signaling that he or she has had all the pain he or she can tolerate for a period of time. The child will probably return to his or her feelings, questions or need to participate in grief-related events later.
- ♦ **Understand how children work through their feelings.** Children work through their feelings in play, and express their feelings through behavior. Don't be alarmed if a child is expressing a great deal of sadness or anger in his or her play, as long as he or she is not harmful to him or herself or others. A child's feelings may only become a problem if they do not have the appropriate outlet.
- ♦ **If a child seems irritable and angry, tell him or her that you understand he or she feels angry, and that it is normal under the circumstances.** If, on the other hand, he or she is getting into fist fights with peers, breaking things or engaging in any other destructive behaviors, the child probably needs more support, and definitely needs help finding constructive ways to channel his or her painful feelings. If this is the case, consider seeking professional help.
- ♦ **Help children understand their feelings.** After a person's death, children may have difficulty understanding their emotions. Help the grieving child know that his or her feelings are normal, even though they are unfamiliar. By helping the child identify his or her feelings, you encourage him or her to build coping tools that will grow over time. For example, if a child is irritable or argumentative, tell him, "I know you feel angry that your mom died. It doesn't seem fair, does it? You know, I feel angry sometimes, too." Or, "I know you're sad; so am I. Sometimes when I'm sad, I cry. Do you?"
- ♦ **Remember that the process of grieving varies throughout a person's life.** As a child grows—and his or her understanding of death and loss evolves—the child may continually rework the meaning of his or her loss. The loss of a parent, for example, may mean something different to a child as he or she goes through puberty, begins to date, graduates high school, leaves home, has a baby, etc. With support, children may find ways to adapt to the loss, keep their loved ones with them and invest in the future.
- ♦ **Anticipate and address the child's fears.** Children, like adults, often feel vulnerable after the death of a loved one. If a parent dies, the child needs reassurance that he or she will be taken care of, and that everything will be okay. Maintain daily routines as much as possible to help the child re-establish a sense of safety.

After the death of a grandparent, parent or other significant person, children often fear that other important people in their life will die. Avoid empty reassurances. Rather than promising that nothing bad will ever happen to you or other adults and friends, stress that people are here now to care for him or her.



Invite the child to talk about his or her fears and acknowledge that it feels scary to have someone die. It will be important for the child to manage his or her grief by developing a sense of mastery over his or her fears, addressing them through words or play, or persisting in spite of them.

- ♦ **Build a support system.** It is important that a child's teacher, child care provider and/or other adults know about his or her loss and what to expect. Caregivers should be told that the child will probably need extra attention and care. They may also see regressive behavior (i.e., whining, thumb sucking, clinging, etc.). For example, young children who are toilet trained may start needing diapers again.

For school-aged children and adolescents, school can be a place where they can resume their "normal" life. It can also pose some difficulties. Because grief often causes difficulty with concentration, schoolwork may become particularly difficult. If necessary, talk to the child's teacher about temporarily decreasing demands, and letting him or her take breaks to go to a counselor, school nurse or some other designated individual. Typically, children will not use this as a "crutch," as is sometimes feared; they want to be like their peers, and will likely resume a normal workload as soon as they are able. If, after a few months, the child is still having difficulty, talk to his or her teacher, guidance counselor or pediatrician about professional counseling.

Seeking Professional Help for a Child

You should expect changes in any child for a while after the death of a loved one or friend, but if the child is having difficulty managing his or her grief, talk to a professional therapist or counselor. The child's doctor, a clergy member and/or local hospices can refer you to counselors and resources in the area who specialize in dealing with children and grief.

The following signs may indicate that a child may need extra help:

- ♦ **Prolonged physical changes**—If a child experiences sleep disruptions or appetite changes leading to weight loss or gain that persist beyond the first few months after the death, seek help from the child's doctor.
- ♦ **Prolonged behavior changes**—If a child is exhibiting disruptive behavior or behavior that is noticeably better than normal (e.g., a loud, overly active child suddenly becomes a quiet, reserved child after the death of a loved one), talk to the child's doctor and his or her caregivers and teachers.
- ♦ **Marked withdrawal from peer groups**—If, beyond the first few months after a death, the child is no longer interacting with friends the way he or she did prior to the death (refusing to call friends, declining invitations to play, preferring to be at home alone, etc.), he or she may need extra attention and help coping with the loss.
- ♦ **Little or no emotional response to the loss**—If you see no reaction whatsoever from a child, as if the death never occurred, the child is probably using an excessive amount of energy to ward off his or her feelings. He or she may need help from you, other adults and possibly from a professional to manage the grief.

- ♦ **Marked change in health status**—If a child is suddenly sick a lot, the illnesses may be a response to emotional stress. The child may need help expressing his or her grief directly, and may benefit from talking with a counselor or attending a children’s grief support group.
- ♦ **Thoughts of suicide**—If a child says anything about not wanting to live, wishing he or she was dead or wanting to join the deceased, always treat this as a serious statement of pain and a need for more attention and support. Even if you think the child is just trying to get attention, don’t ignore these statements or minimize their seriousness. Self-destructive behavior, such as alcohol use, drug use or risky stunts, should be treated similarly. If he or she is ignored, the child may take more severe action to get the attention and help he or she needs.

Finally, remember to listen to the child and encourage him or her to express his or her feelings, whatever those feelings are. You may not always know what the child is feeling, but if you can provide a secure, positive environment where he or she feels listened to, protected and loved, then you are giving a grieving child the best possible support.

Suggested Reading on Helping Others Cope With Grief

I Can't Stop Crying: It's So Hard When Someone You Love Dies, by John D. Martin and Frank Ferris, M.D. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1992.

This book was written for individuals who are recently bereaved of someone very close to them—typically a partner, although the messages have a very wide application. The key message is that it's normal to feel bad, and that healing will come if you find safe ways to experience your emotions. Down-to-earth examples show how grief affects many areas of daily life, relationships with others and hopes for the future. Practical tips in plain language are organized for easy reading.

I Don't Know What to Say: How to Help and Support Someone Who Is Dying, by Robert Buckman, M.D. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

Dr. Buckman, himself diagnosed with a terminal illness, addresses the patient's need for information, as well as the needs of family and friends; the way to support a dying parent or child; and the complications of caring for those afflicted with AIDS or cancer.

Letters to My Husband, by Fern Field Brooks. Franklin Lakes, N.J.: Career Press, 1995.

A book about widowhood, showing one woman's first year of mourning following the sudden death of her husband due to a heart attack. She relives the trauma of his death as well as many warm memories of their life together. The final message is one of hope and comfort despite the pain of loss.

On Death and Dying, by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. New York: Simon & Schuster Trade Paperbacks, 1997.

This is the world-famous bestseller by the woman who popularized the field of thanatology (the study of the phenomena of death and of the psychological mechanisms for coping with them) as a subject for general social commentary. This was her first book on the topic and is considered a classic, introducing the famous "five stages" model.

Safe Passage: Words to Help the Grieving Hold Fast and Let Go, by Molly Fumia. Berkeley, Calif.: Conari Press, 1992.

Words of comfort for those who have suffered a loss move the reader through the raw emotions of grief—denial, anger, confusion, guilt, and loneliness—to acceptance and transformation.

What to Do When a Loved One Dies: A Practical and Compassionate Guide to Dealing With Death on Life's Terms, by Eva Shaw. Irvine, Calif.: Dickens Press, 1994.

From organ donation and planning the funeral to living with suicide and practical matters of trusts and wills, this indispensable reference guides the reader through a wide range of concerns about the death process.

When Bad Things Happen to Good People, by Harold Kushner. New York: Avon Paperbacks, 1994.

A Jewish rabbi facing his own child's fatal illness gives wise, compassionate and practical advice on how to cope with anger, guilt and grief following potentially overwhelming losses. Offers spiritual guidance that goes beyond the limits of traditional religious boundaries.

You Can Help Someone Who's Grieving, by Victoria Frigo, Diane Fisher and Mary Lou Cook. New York: Penguin USA (paper), 1996.

This book gives commonsense advice on how to help a grieving friend. It addresses the problem many of us have felt when we're just not sure what to say or do when someone close to us has suffered a loss. The main appeal of this unpretentious book is its simplicity—there's not a lot of academic jargon, just recognition of human nature and practical suggestions on how to help.

Books for Children

Annie and the Old One, by Miska Miles. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1971.

The story of Annie, a Navajo child, set against a background of Navajo traditions and contemporary Indian life. When Annie's grandmother tells her that when Annie's mother's rug is completely woven that the grandmother will die, Annie tries to hold back time by unweaving the rug in secret.

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children, by Bryan Melloine and Robert Ingpen. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1983.

This moving book for children of all ages and their parents explains life and death in a sensitive and caring way. It talks about beginnings, endings and about living in between.

Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs, by Tomie dePaola. New York: Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 2000.

Recommended for children aged five to eight, this book shows the love between a child and grandparent, and pictures the child's adjustment to death. In a quietly touching story, the author-illustrator depicts loving family relationships so that even a very young reader can understand the concept.

The New King, by Doreen Rappaport. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1995.

When young Prince Rakoto is told of his father's death, he cannot accept it. The new king gives his first orders to his royal advisors: "Bring my father back to life!" When they are unable to do so, Rakoto then goes to the Wise Woman who tells him an enthralling tale that helps him begin to accept what has happened.

Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope With Losing Someone You Love, by Earl Grollman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

This book is for teenagers who have lived through the death of a friend or relative. Grollman discusses normal reactions to the shock of death; how grief can affect relationships; how participating in a funeral can help; how to survive birthdays and anniversaries; and how to work through grief and begin to live again. This book also includes a journal section where readers can record memories, feelings and hopes.

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney, by Judith Viorst. New York: Aladdin Books, 1971.

Narrated by a child whose cat, Barney, has just died, the author succinctly and honestly handles both the emotions stemming from the loss of a beloved pet and the questions about the finality of death that arise in such a situation.

When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving & Healing, by Marilyn Gootman. Minneapolis, Minn.: Free Spirit Publishing Inc., 1994.

This book is for young adults grieving the death of a friend. The author watched her own children suffer from the death of a friend, and here she shares her teenagers' experiences. This book offers help to cope with sadness as well as genuine understanding, gentle advice and compassionate wisdom to guide teenagers through the days, weeks or months surrounding a death.

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death, by Laura Krasny Brown and Mark Brown. Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1996.

For children ages four through eight, this book uses simple language to explain the feelings people may have regarding the death of a loved one and ways to honor the memory of someone who has died.

Note—This reading list is not intended to be entirely comprehensive since new books are published continually. Visit your library or local bookstore for new and noteworthy titles.

Helpful Resources for Coping With Grief

Grief and Bereavement

GriefNet

<http://rivendell.org>

GriefNet is an online system that can connect you with a variety of resources related to death, dying, bereavement and major emotional and physical losses. It offers information and online discussion and support groups for bereaved persons and those working with the bereaved, both professional and lay persons.

Twinless Twins Support Group International

9311 Poplar Creek Place

Leo, IN 46765

219-627-5414

<http://www.fwi.com/twinless/>

This international organization provides support for twins (and all multiple births) and their family members who are suffering from such a loss.

Infant/Pregnancy Loss

A.M.E.N.D. (Aiding a Mother and Father Experiencing Neonatal Death)

1559 Ville Rosa

Hazelwood, MO 63042

314-291-0892

This national organization offers support and encouragement to parents grieving the loss of their baby.

CLIMB (Center for Loss in Multiple Birth)

PO Box 91377

Anchorage, AK 99509

907-222-5321

<http://www.climb-support.org>

CLIMB offers support by and for parents of twins, triplets or other multiple-birth children who have experienced the death of one or more children during pregnancy, at birth, in infancy or childhood. It provides contact listings, articles and telephone and mail support to parents and friends suffering this kind of loss.

National SHARE Office (Pregnancy and Infant Loss Support, Inc.)

St. Joseph Health Center

300 First Capitol Drive

St. Charles, MO 63301-2893

800-821-6819

636-947-6164

<http://www.nationalshareoffice.com>

This national organization serves those who are grieving the death of a baby through miscarriage, stillbirth or newborn death by providing grief support information, education and resources on the needs and rights of bereaved parents and siblings. It sponsors over 100 local chapters nationally and internationally.

National Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Resource Center (NSRC)

2070 Chain Bridge Road, Suite 450

Vienna, VA 22182

703-821-8955 ext. 249

<http://www.circsol.com/sids/>

NSRC is an affiliate of the National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health, which in turn is a service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NSRC provides information, referrals and assistance to parents and friends of SIDS victims, and distributes the Information Exchange newsletter. The center also provides free information sheets on SIDS.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Alliance

1314 Bedford Avenue, Suite 210

Baltimore, MD 21208

800-221-SIDS (7437) (24-hour hotline)

410-653-8226

<http://www.sidsalliance.org/>

This national, nonprofit, voluntary health organization is dedicated to the support of SIDS families, education and research. With help from over 50 local affiliates, the alliance provides support groups, one-on-one contact, and strives to unite parents and friends of SIDS victims with medical, business and civic groups concerned about the health of infants.

Unite, Inc.

Jeanes Hospital
7600 Central Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19111-2499
215-728-3777

This national organization provides grief support following the death of a baby, including miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, stillbirth and infant death. It maintains local chapters and offers educational programs and information to those surviving these losses.

Loss of a Child

The Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation (CCCF)

3910 Warner Street
Kensington, MD 20895
800-366-2223
301-657-8401

<http://www.candlelighters.org>

This is an international, nonprofit organization whose mission is to educate, support, serve and advocate for families of children of cancer, survivors of childhood cancer, and the professionals who care for them. This organization provides education, peer support, an information clearinghouse, referrals to local contacts, publications and advocacy.

The Compassionate Friends

PO Box 3696
Oak Brook, IL 60522-3696
877-969-0010 (toll-free)
630-990-0010

<http://www.compassionatefriends.org>
A national nonprofit, self-help support organization that offers friendship and understanding to families who are grieving the death of a child of any age, from any cause.

MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving)

PO Box 541688
Dallas, TX 75354-1688
800-GET-MADD (438-6233)

<http://www.madd.org/>

Mothers Against Drunk Driving is a nonprofit, grassroots organization with more than 600 chapters nationwide. MADD is focused on finding effective solutions to drunk driving and underage drinking, while supporting those who have already experienced the pain of these senseless crimes.

The National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children (POMC)

100 East Eighth Street, B-41
Cincinnati, OH 45202
513-721-5683

888-818-POMC (7662) (toll-free)

<http://pomc.com/>

This national, nonprofit organization provides ongoing emotional support to parents and other survivors of murdered children. It will also help and assist victims dealing with the criminal justice system. Call or visit its Web page for support, information or to subscribe to its newsletter.

Pet Loss

Pet Loss.com

<http://www.petloss.com/>

This is a Web site for those grieving over the death of a pet or an ill pet. It offers personal support, advice, tribute pages, poetry and more.

Pet Loss Partnership (PLP)

College of Veterinary Medicine

PO Box 647010

Washington State University

Pullman, WA 99164-7010

509-335-1303

TDD: 509-335-1179

<http://www.vetmed.wsu.edu/plp.html>

The goal of PLP is to provide support for people grieving the loss of a pet. Call or visit its Web site to request a newsletter and/or other resource information.

Self-Help

American Self-Help Clearinghouse

100 E. Hanover Avenue, Suite 202

Cedar Knolls, NJ 07927-2020

973-326-6789

<http://www.mentalhealth.net/selfhelp/>

This national organization provides information on local self-help group clearinghouses worldwide, which can help you find and form bereavement self-help groups. The American Self-Help Clearinghouse also provides free consultation on starting new self-help groups.

National Self-Help Clearinghouse

CUNY, Graduate School and University Center

365 Fifth Avenue, Suite 3300

New York, NY 10016

212-817-1822

<http://www.selfhelpweb.org>

This nonprofit, national service refers individuals to self-help support groups all over the United States. It will help you locate a support group in your area or refer you to a clearinghouse that will help you locate one.

Suicide

American Association of Suicidology

4201 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.

Suite 408

Washington, DC 20008

202 237-2280

800-SUICIDE (784-2433)

<http://www.suicidology.org/>

A nonprofit organization dedicated to the understanding and prevention of suicide. It provides resources for anyone concerned about suicide, including AAS members, suicide researchers, therapists, prevention specialists, survivors of suicide and people who are themselves in crisis.

Light for Life Foundation

International

Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program

PO Box 644

Westminster, CO 80036-0644

303-429-3530

<http://www.yellowribbon.org/>

This national, nonprofit organization provides suicide prevention information and youth suicide facts and statistics. From its Web site, you can link to suicide statistics, coping tips, crisis/help groups and survivors' support networks.

ISBN 1-58559-081-9



51095

9 781585 590810

This block contains the ISBN information and a barcode. The ISBN is 1-58559-081-9. The barcode is a standard EAN-13 barcode. The number 51095 is printed to the right of the barcode. The number 9 781585 590810 is printed below the barcode.