



**Chapter 2:
Healthy Minds**

Grief and Loss

How to Deal With Life When the Worst Happens

Kids Help Phone

1-800-668-6868

Abbotsford Hospice Society Resource & Support Centre

Has a wealth of resources and support for the bereaved, including one on one support for kids and teens, "Supporting Children Through Music" Group, Memory Journals, etc.

(604) 852-2456

www.abbotsfordhospice.org

info@abbotsfordhospice.org

Mission Hospice:

(604) 826-2235

www.missionhospice.bc.ca

info@missionhospice.bc.ca

Ridge Meadows Hospice Society

(604) 463-7722

www.ridgemeanowshospice.society.com

contactus@ridgemeanowshospicesociety.com

Resources for Children Experiencing Grief:

www.kidsgrief.com

Abbotsford Community Services Victims Assistance

(604) 859-7681 (Local 275)

What is Grief?



Grief is the normal process of reacting to a loss. The loss might be physical (the death of a family member, friend or pet) or the loss of one's usual lifestyle (through divorce, moving, changing schools, etc.) Different people react to grief in different ways, sometimes physically (sleeping problems, changes in appetite, etc.) and sometimes emotionally (anger, guilt, despair, etc.)

Feelings of grief are normal. Denying the strong feelings that accompany loss, and failing to move through the stages of grief, is much harder on oneself than allowing yourself to go through them. It's important to note there is no "typical" response to loss, there are only general guidelines of what many people go through. There is also no timeline for loss—some people feel at peace after a week, some take years to heal.

TIP: PRACTICE GOOD SELF-CARE

Tragedies are often sudden and unexpected. Grieving is made easier when we make a point to always take care of our mental and physical health. Eat a balanced diet, drink plenty of fluids, exercise, get plenty of sleep, and spend

Possible Feelings of Grief

1. DENIAL

Sometimes we might deny that the loss happened ("No, they can't really be getting divorced—they're just exaggerating.") This stage can last for just a moment or quite a long time.

2. ANGER

Children may lash out at the person that caused them the grief ("How dare he die, doesn't he know how much I need him?") or at themselves for allowing the bad thing to happen (even if they couldn't have prevented it). They might also be angry at the world in general.

3. BARGAINING

A child may attempt to make a bargain with God or the Universe ("If I'm a good boy my mom will get better.") to fix the situation.

4. DEPRESSION

Children may feel numb, although they are still hurting on the inside; too sad to do anything. Depression is a normal stage of grief, but is not so healthy when prolonged, as people might feel too unmotivated to do anything but dwell on their sorrow.

5. ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is said to have occurred when a child can accept the reality of a loss. It doesn't mean he or she is "over" it, but they are finally able to cope with their feelings and start moving forward.



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DIVORCE It can be very upsetting when parents decide to separate and move into different houses. It is important to realize that parents make the decision to be apart in order to be happier people and argue less. Divorces are never the kids' fault, and you shouldn't feel guilty for all those times you felt you were caught in a fight—all families experience conflict and divorce has numerous causes, not any single

one. Sometimes parents who are getting divorced fight a lot and their kids feel stuck in the middle. Talk to your parents for reassurance if you are upset. Make your wishes known (eg. who you want to live with) and understand your parents just want to put your best interests first. It can be helpful to talk your feelings over with someone you trust, like your **Big Brother/Big Sister**.

MOVING AWAY FROM A FRIEND

Whether a close buddy is moving away, or if you are the one leaving the neighborhood, it's always hard to say goodbye to best friends. Sometimes we might feel like a piece of us is missing or that no one will ever understand us as well as our friend did.



- ◆ **Broaden Social Horizons.** Whether you are the one moving, or its your best friend that is leaving town, join new social activities to make new friends. Dance class, swimming lessons, Cub Scouts—the possibilities are endless! You and your friend both have the right (and the need) to make new friends—its not being disloyal!
- ◆ **Stay in Touch.** If your parents say long-distance calls are too expensive, write letters or emails to keep in touch with your friend about what has changed since the move. Remember to spend time with new friends as well instead of only talking to your far-away friends!



LOSS OF A PET

As any animal lover knows, pets are important members of the family. Losing a pet can be just as real and traumatic as losing a human companion.

- ◆ **Reminisce** about the good times you had with your pet, and discuss funny situations he got himself into. Trying to avoid grief by not thinking about your pet doesn't help you understand your loss. Remember what

your pet meant to you and the fun you shared. Perhaps make a memory collage of photos.

- ◆ **Give your surviving pets** a lot of extra attention to help them get over the loss of their friend, and realize their love might be the best thing for you in this time of loss.
- ◆ **The decision of whether or not to have your pet put to sleep** is an extremely tough choice. If your pet still has a good quality of life and enjoys playing with family members and responds to attention, it might be okay to keep him around for a bit longer if the vet thinks its okay. But if a pet is in constant pain and uninterested in life, a pet owner must make the difficult and selfless choice to put an end to its suffering. It's the ultimate act of love you can make for your pet.

DEALING WITH LOSS

- ◆ **It is natural to feel angry at whatever or whoever caused your loss.** For example, you might be mad at your brother for letting your pet play outside that day, or at your mother for insisting your father move out of the house. **Realize that redirecting your anger will only make you feel worse and will hurt those you love who may also be struggling with coming to terms with the loss as well. A little forgiveness and understanding can go a long way. It's important to talk about our feelings so we don't feel the need to make other people sad like us.**
- ◆ **People may not always understand your loss** (eg. the bond between you and your pet, or why you don't want to leave your childhood home.) **Don't be offended or feel like there is something wrong with you if you are told by a well-meaning friend that a normal person would have gotten over your loss by now. We all grieve differently and there are many people out there who do understand what you are going through—find one of them to talk to about your feelings.**
- ◆ **It is common to experience guilt after suffering a loss.** You might feel responsible for the loss of your pet or the separation of your parents. **Accept that your loved ones do not blame you, and want you to be happy.**
- ◆ **Create a Special Memento to Commemorate your Loss.** If you are moving away, make two photo albums (one for you and one for your best friend) so the two of you can remember the fun times you have shared. You could also make a memory collage of photos of happy memories with your pet for your family to look back on fondly after a loss.
- ◆ **The attitude you use will prepare you for a smoother transition.** Look forward rather than backward. It can be upsetting to leave your old home for example, but it also means an opportunity to discover a new city and meet new friends. Parents often make decisions that will benefit their family in the long run—so you can look forward to the positive benefits for you and your family!

Definitions:

Grief: Intense sorrow caused by the loss of a loved one.

Mourning: The way people deal with their grief after a loss. For example, attending a funeral, or wearing an armband or black clothing. These are symbolic traditions that help to organize and focus our grief in a controlled fashion.



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When a Friend or Family Member Dies



Death is a new experience for most kids, and even many adults. It can be an abstract and difficult concept to understand and can be experienced differently depending on your age and experiences.

Ask the adults in your life not to be afraid to talk to you about the traumatic event. Tell them it is important for you to know the truth—the imagined details we

come up with are often scarier than reality. It is okay to request answers to the questions you want to know about the death, but make sure to also discuss positive memories of that individual. Sometimes we feel guilty after a loved one dies, so if you are feeling uncertain, ask someone you trust to reassure you and explain why it was not your fault.

It can be helpful to talk to someone you trust about their views of the afterlife, and the thoughts and fears they have about death. Some adults make the mistake of associating sleep with death when explaining it to kids (“Grandma went for a long sleep”) which can be confusing and frightening—going to sleep doesn’t mean you will die! It’s okay if your parent or **Big Brother/Sister** says “I don’t know” in response to some questions – it can be comforting when others admit that some things are too complex for anyone to fully comprehend. Appreciate that they are honest with you.

Even adults have trouble coping with loss. Your parent might be struggling as well, so suggest that the two of you can help each other whenever one of you feels sad. If your parent or **Big Brother/Sister** did not know the person you lost very well, ask if it is okay for you to tell them more about them, or find time to talk to other friends or school counselors about your loss. Telling these stories is a way to preserve your memories and celebrate the life of the person you lost.



What Can I Do to Process My Grief?

- **Honour the Person You Lost** by creating a scrapbook, photo album or a memorial (for example, a garden).
- **Write a letter** to the friend you never got to say goodbye to. You could keep the letter in a special box with cards/gifts from that friend, or attach the letter to a biodegradable helium balloon, and with a friend or family member you trust, release it in a location that was meaningful to you and your loved one.
- **Spend Time with Friends** who remember that person, to share your favorite memories and keep that person alive in your hearts.
- **Become an Advocate.** If your friend died in an accident, offer to speak at school assemblies on the dangers of drinking and driving, or speeding. Write down your story and send it in for consideration to community or school newspapers. If you lost a friend to a disease like cancer or diabetes participate in an event like Relay for Life or Walk for the Cure to raise money to help find a cure. Perhaps you can help stop the same thing from happening to someone else.
- **Send a Card** to the family of the friend you lost, with a favorite photo of the two of you, or share some special memories.
- **Don’t Turn to Alcohol, Drugs, or Reckless Behavior** in an attempt to numb the feelings. It will only make things more difficult for you and those around you and will often make you feel even worse or put your own life in danger.



NOTE TO CARING ADULTS:

IT IS ENTIRELY **NORMAL** FOR KIDS TO.....

- ◆ Re-experience the loss by drawing pictures, talking about the traumatic event, or through make-believe play.
- ◆ Develop concern for friends, strangers or fictional characters (eg. Asking whether or not their favorite cartoon character has a mother, and if not, what happened to her).
- ◆ Ask straightforward questions, for example, if their loved one felt any pain when they died, or how much it hurts to be in an accident. It does not mean they are morbid. They are just looking for answers and reassurance for the things they worry about.
- ◆ Appear unaffected by the loss, choosing to go outside and play instead of talking about their emotions. It doesn’t mean they don’t care, it means they are children. Sticking to their regular routine is comforting.
- ◆ Want to attend funerals. Children should not be left out of the mourning process if they want to attend. Prepare your children on what to expect (especially if there will be an open casket) and how to behave. They might wish to bring a letter or picture to be placed in the casket. If kids don’t feel like attending, they don’t need to be forced—there are other ways to grieve.



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HOW **BIG BROTHERS AND BIG SISTERS** CAN SUPPORT THEIR **LITTLE** THROUGH A TIME OF LOSS

- Don't tell your **Little** to "look at the bright side" or "Don't think about it". Your **Little** might feel pressured to hide or deny the difficult emotions rather than speaking to you about them. This will make the healing process longer. Do not avoid the topic if your **Little** brings it up.
- Don't be offended if your **Little** seems to direct anger or upset toward you, it means they are slowly moving through the necessary stages of grief.
- Help your **Little** express feelings in a tangible way. Encourage him or her to keep a journal, draw a picture, or write a poem or a story to get the emotions out.
- Ask your **Mentoring Coordinator** for advice if you think your **Little** would benefit from talking to a professional about his or her grief. This is especially important if they are becoming self-injurious or suicidal, or saying things like "I wish I were dead too" or "I want to kill myself to be with them.")
- Don't try to help your **Little** overcome their grief by attempting to replace their loss right away (for example, purchasing a new fish before he or she has gotten over the death of the previous one). Children will feel disloyal loving a new pet before their grieving period is over.



**“If a Child Can
Love,
A Child Can
Grieve.”**

- Dr. Alan Wolfelt

Thank you to the following
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- ◇ **Abbotsford Hospice Society Resource & Support Centre**
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- ◇ **Kim Stuckless, Ed. Psych**

Resources

Available from the Fraser Valley Regional Library

For **LITTLES (6-12)**

- *Kids Talk About Death (VHS)*. Jennifer Torrance. Montreal: National Film Board of Canada: 2005.
- *The Goodbye Boat*. Mary Joslin. W.B. Eerdmans, 1999.
- *Don't Despair on Thursdays! The Children's Grief Management Book*. Adolph Moser. Landmark Editions: 1996.
- *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney*. Judith Viost. NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1971.
- *The Fall of Freddie, the Leaf. A Story of Life for All Ages*. Leo Buscaglia. NJ: Chas. B. Slack, 1982.
- *Alexander Who is Not (Do you Hear Me? I Mean it!) Going to Move*. Judith Viorst. NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1995.

For **TEENS (13-17)**

- *Teenagers Face to Face with Bereavement*. Karen Gravelle and Charles Haskins. Englewood Cliffs, 1989.

For **BIG BROTHERS/BIG SISTERS & PARENTS**

- *35 ways to help a Grieving Child*. The Dougy Center. Portland: Dougy Center for Grieving Children, 2004.
- *Healing the Hurt, Restoring the Hope: How to Guide Children and Teens through times of Divorce, Death, and Crisis with the Rainbows Approach*. Suzy Yehl Marta. Rodale: 2003.
- *When Children Grieve: For Adults to Help Children Deal with Divorce, Pet Loss, Moving, and Other Losses*. John W. James and Russell Friedman. HarperCollins: 2001.

