



Is what my  
child/teen feeling,  
or thinking, or  
doing, normal?

## Children and grief: what's typical?

As you parent a grieving child/teen, you may sometimes wonder, "Is what my child/teen is feeling (or thinking or doing) normal?" We believe that grief is unique for each individual, and that the intensity and duration of grief is different for each person. There are, however, some common themes and experiences that can be helpful to be aware of.

**Some common reactions children/teens may have after the death of a significant person include:**

- Having head/stomach aches
- Telling the story of how the person died again and again
- Not being able to talk about the person or the death
- Feeling helpless and powerless
- Having trouble sleeping/being scared to go to sleep/wanting to sleep a lot
- Feeling sad and crying a lot
- Feeling guilty: "It was my fault," "I could have prevented this."
- Feeling angry, confused, frustrated, and/or quick to get into a fight
- Being afraid to be alone and not wanting to stay home alone
- Withdrawing from friends or not wanting to go out as much
- Dreaming about the death, having nightmares about the person, and death details
- Wanting to be with the person who died
- Finding it difficult to concentrate on work or school
- Worrying about, "Who is going to die next?"

### What does death mean to children?

Children/teens typically understand death very differently from the way adults do. Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible, a belief reinforced by cartoon and video game characters who die and come to life again. Children between five and nine or ten begin to

think more like adults about death, yet they still believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know. It is often not until children are nine or ten that they may be able to begin to comprehend that death is final, irreversible, and will happen to everyone. Regardless of their age, an important part of what can help a child/teen understand what has happened is receiving direct, accurate, and age-appropriate information from parents or other caregivers.

### Why won't they talk about it?

Children/teens' grief shows up in a variety of ways. Many children are unable to just sit with their feelings and may be very physically active in the way they grieve. This is totally normal. Young kids may not verbalize what's going on for them and may attempt to continue "business as usual" or act like nothing unusual has happened. This may be a way of trying to keep overwhelming feelings of shock, confusion, and grief at bay. It is particularly common for teens to not want to talk about what happened or the person who died. Often, they may find people outside the family to open up to — a teacher, coach, friend, or counselor — this is normal. A grieving child/teen may be less able to pay attention in school, and more likely to act out. It is crucial to understand these behavioral changes in the context of mourning — your child may be acting out because they are grieving.

### I never know how she's going to act.

Children and teens are likely to display feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. The surviving relatives should encourage open communication and make it clear that the child/teen has permission to show his or her feelings openly or freely.

### Why is he so angry?

The person who has died was essential to the stability of the child/teen's world, and anger can be a natural reaction. Anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors. Sometimes a child/teen will show anger towards the surviving family members.



**The Children's Room**

*caring grief support for children, teens, and families*