

# Loss, Separation and Grief: Helping Children Cope with Difficult Change

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**Change** is inevitable, the only constant. Loss is difficult. We cling to the past. Only by acknowledging and experiencing grief can we move on. Life is never the same after a loss. Grief is a process, not a single event--there is no timeline for its resolution.

## *Healthy Attachment Makes Separation Easier.*

---Healthy attachment results from care (including physical holding), attunement, consistency, respect, understanding, predictability, repetition  
---Separations are made easier when we are prepared for them and through graduated challenges

## **Complicated Grief (v simple loss)**

--is unexpressed, frozen, blocked (needs melting)  
-- contains stigma, embarrassment --as sometimes with AIDS or shootings-- and can lead to self-hatred (guilt)  
----involves unwillingness to talk of loss, downer  
----occurs amid multiple losses--causes complete change of circumstance (as with children of a single parent who dies) or other stressors simultaneously occurring  
----can occur when adults, especially parents, have a hard time experiencing children's grief  
----involves a sense of unreality, being unsafe, unfamiliar feelings

## **Stages of Grief**

- 1) Denial
- 2) Rage Anger
- 3) Bargaining
- 4) Depression, Sadness
- 5) Acceptance

**Grief as particular to children:** Children are dependent on others for survival (loss more threatening); Adults can seek support (Children get what they are given); Children are repetitive (requiring patience and perseverance); children are physical (act out feelings, need concrete activities); When loss occurs in childhood, grief is cyclical and may have to be worked out again at each stage of life.

## *Strategies for Parents and other Caregivers*

**Model and Mean It.** How adults behave, talk, express feelings and relate with others is the primary way children learn. If your words are not consistent with your behavior, they will know it, and they are more likely to follow the behavior.

### Let Children Talk

Let Children Participate (in rituals like funerals if they want to go, in making decisions about what they can).

Let Children Be Unique (everyone grieves in his or her own way)

Provide Care, Continuity, Connection

Be Honest (it builds trust)

Be Open (it models grieving)

Encourage Questions (and be prepared to repeat answers over and over)

Invite children to talk. Talk, talk and then when you're done, talk some more.

Tell children that whatever s/he feels is OK. There are no wrong feelings.

No Secrets (Don't withhold information--children will fantasize to fill in gaps, and also intuit problems)

No Sugarcoating

You don't need to have all the answers.

Take children's pain seriously

Help Verbalize feelings (i.e. "you look sad, are you?")

Enact (make a scrapbook, memory box, write a story)

## *Healing Activities*

- 1) Read stories about others' losses and listen to children's responses and projections
- 2) Provide opportunities to Create Art: Communication is more than just verbal. Sometimes a sculpture or a painting can say what a child can't say directly. Sing, dance write poetry or prose, drum, write letters to the deceased.
- 3) Make a loss timeline, a concrete representation of events on paper
- 4) Create a genogram (family tree picture) showing those who are alive and dead, together and separated. This reminds us all of the diversity of experience and that support survives all loss.

## Developmental Issues

4 Components of Understanding Death: Irreversibility, Finality, Inevitability and Causality

9 mos-2 yrs Hardest time to lose mom. Other losses less problematical unless of caretaker(s).

Toddler--feels loss but often without words, can acknowledge only one feeling at a time; sense of time is incomplete, no sense of permanence.

PreK--greater facility with language, capacity to understand. Behavioral changes common after or anticipating loss: Regression to earlier behaviors and enjoyments, withdrawn or overly aggressive; sleep or appetite changes (more or less) may seem unfazed.

5-10 yrs- with greater understanding comes more fearfulness; often act before thinking; need questions answered over and over; can understand time/death. Regression possible i.e. bedwetting

10-13yrs. -- may try to act more adult than they really are

13-18yrs-- may try to take on roles and responsibilities of deceased

## Glossary

**Attachment:** a special form of emotional relationship involving mutuality, comfort, safety and pleasure for both individuals in the relationship

**Attunement:** the ability to read and respond to the communicated needs, verbal and non-verbal cues, of another

**Bond:** a relationship, not necessarily positive i.e. may be based on fear

## Issues particular to Divorce and Separation

--Children need to know that there was at one time at least a hope of joy and contentment in the union that created them (because they carry both parents in themselves)

--Support ex's relationship with the child (even if only in fantasy)

--Exes will have to communicate over the course of the child's lifetime, achieve amiability

--Parents should get their needs met elsewhere (a child is not a partner)

--Consistency re discipline and routines is optimal

--A Continuity between/among home is helpful

---Dependable schedule is a necessity

## Helping Children Understand and Cope with 9/11 and other large, community, societal tragedies and traumas

1. Define problem in simple, fair language(i.e. no ethnic or racial biases or slurs)
2. Affirm survival and odds
3. Help reestablish sense of order with routines
4. Role Model --feeling and actions (i.e. volunteering to help)
5. Monitor media coverage (enough to get the picture while you are there to explain it)
6. Accept children's reactions (even if blasé)
7. Reassure that child is not responsible
8. Reassure that problem is being handled



IT'S OK TO CRY!

CRYING

- lets the sadness out
- is good for your eyes
- releases endorphins
- is self comforting