

Mental Health

On Coping with Death...

Death. It hits hard and with a loved one, no matter what the preparation, the loss is heartfelt. Now imagine you are a child.

Coping with the death of a parent in childhood will be different depending on the age of the child and the nature of the relationship.

While all children will experience loss and separation, infants and toddlers are in that unique stage of life where a permanent and abrupt separation with a parent can interfere with forming other interpersonal attachments. Their distress will be most visible through disrupted sleep, eating, and toileting patterns. Further, as these young children do not yet possess language, they will rely on direct care, hugging and holding to provide nurturing and a sense of security. However, right at the time of the death, they will be very emotional. They will not handle their own feelings very well and it will take patience and consistency on the adults part to maintain a sense of recovery and security.

Preschool children will have some cognitive capacity to understand someone isn't coming back in much the same way they can relate to the loss of a ball or toy. Similar to infants and toddlers, they may show their distress through disrupted sleep, eating, and toileting patterns. However, because they have some language capability, they may be soothed not only by care and love, but also by talking with them about their loss and grief. At this age, they may relate to their grief through play, particularly expressive art and puppet play, dolls, stuffed animals, etc.

School-age children are apt to express sadness as anger. Hence it is important for loved ones not to take the child's anger personally, but to accept the anger as an expression of grief. Rather than telling a child not to be angry, adult loved ones can help the child to express or show their upset through other channels. These other channels can include art, play, and talking. Now that the child has language and in view of the survivors' upset for the child's distress, it is important not to cut a child off from

talking, but to listen with a gentle ear. The difficult task for the survivors is to allow the children to vent and express themselves, yet protect them from straying to dangerous or risky behavior in view of their anger.

Teenagers will likely find comfort in their peers as much and sometimes more than immediate family. They may stray from family, upset by the loss and aware of the distress of other survivors. Hence they may seek to protect loved ones from witnessing or being subject to their own distress. It is important therefore for survivors to track their teens, to be aware of their whereabouts and grief reaction. Permission must be granted to grieve openly in the context of the surviving family members.

As much as coping with the death of a parent will depend on the age of the child, the quality and nature of the parent-child relationship will also factor into the grief response. Also to be factored in is the gender of the child and lost parent, also to mention if the parents were separated or together at the time of one's death.

If there are any rules to remember, it is to respect the fact that every child's grief reaction will be different for all the factors listed. As such, adult survivors must stay close and attune themselves to the child's emotional response, allowing the child to vent constructively and to be there to restore structure and routine and other key factors in facilitating adaptation to the reality of the death and it's meaning for continued life for the child.

Lastly, if you as an adult survivor are having difficulty coping, get help. I have worked with anticipation of grief and grief for 48 years both in home settings and in hospitals. You can only be as available to the child as you are able to manage your own grief.

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