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About this eBook

This eBook explains the effects of grief on children and adolescents when they experience the death of a loved one or another significant loss.

The information will help individuals, families and those who are involved in supporting children and adolescents in grief to:

- understand that grief is a natural human response to loss
- understand that children and adolescents think and feel differently from adults
- realise the importance of recognising, acknowledging and validating the feelings being experienced by children and adolescents in grief
- make it easier for those involved to help children and adolescents in grief work through the debilitating effects of grief and be able to live in a healthy way with acceptance of the loss.

The information is gathered through research on this subject by the author from the author's personal experience of supporting children and adolescents in grief and those who are involved with them, and from interactions with various organisations in the field of death, loss, grief and bereavement.

Also included are comments and opinions based on the author's direct involvement in the field of grief and bereavement support.

How grief affects children and adolescents

What is grief?

Grief is a process that we go through when we lose a loved one in death or suffer another significant loss in our lives.

The process of grief

The process of grief forces us to face different feelings, which come in phases and which are the natural human response to death and significant loss. This process allows us to eventually reach acceptance of the loss and come to the realisation that we have to keep on living without the person or significant thing we have lost.

Phases of grief

Phases of grief are experienced by every loss we have. The more significant the loss is and the more resistance we have to accepting it, the harder it is to progress through these phases. Some of the more obvious feelings that come in phases, not necessarily in any particular order, are:

- denial
- anger
- bargaining
- guilt
- depression
- and eventually acceptance.

This eBook covers how grief affects children and adolescents. If you would like further understanding of grief and the phases of grief, please refer to the Memorable Farewells® eBook entitled, 'Grief and Mourning and the Phases of Grief,' which explains the process and phases of grief and mourning in more detail.

Reactions of children and adolescents to death and other significant loss

The most common reactions to death and other significant loss that children and adolescents have are fear, guilt, anger, and confusion. Some of the common fears experienced are:

- fear of losing other loved ones
- fear of being separated from a parent or sibling

- fear of being unprotected
- fear of dying in their sleep
- fear of their feelings being misunderstood.

Why children and adolescents do not express their fears

The reluctance that children and adolescents have to share these fears with others can be particularly strong. One of the main reasons that these fears are not shared is the fear of causing more upheaval for the family. Adolescents fear that other family members may be upset if they share their feelings or that their fears may not be understood or validated.

Older children do not express their feelings because they do not want to risk the possible negative outcomes or repercussions to their fears, whereas young children may not know how to express their fears.

Concerns of children

Following the death of a member of the family or some other significant loss, children and adolescents may become very concerned about their own physical and social welfare.

Their sense of security may be threatened and they need to know that their well-being will not be affected.

Examples of questions they ask that arise from these concerns are:

- 'Will we have to move?'
- 'Will I still sleep in my bed?'
- 'Can I still go to school?'

When faced with the death of a loved one or another significant loss, if children exhibit anxiety or insecurity regarding home, family, pets or routine in their life, they need to be continually reassured that arrangements in their immediate world with regard to their security and welfare will not change.

The need for reassurance

Reassurance of the stability of the family when a death or another significant loss occurs is an ongoing process. Children and adolescents will reopen the discussions, asking the same questions again and again, or posing entirely new questions which have arisen out of new experiences and a changed level of understanding.

Children need to be reassured specifically that:

- they are secure in the family despite the death or other loss
- their daily routine will remain, for the most part, unchanged
- they will be able to keep the same friends, go to the same school, etc.

Levels of understanding death or other significant loss in children and adolescents

The way children and adolescents respond to death and other significant loss varies according to their age. The age range given here with regard to the understanding of death and significant loss is approximate.