

Helping Young Children with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Caregivers

Each child grieves in his or her unique way. After a death that occurs under traumatic circumstances, some young children develop traumatic grief responses, making it hard to cope with their loss. Here are ways to recognize and help young child with traumatic grief.

| I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT: | YOU CAN HELP ME WHEN YOU: |
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| 1. Even though I am a very young, I miss the person and get very sad. | 1. Teach me to talk about my feelings with words. Tell me it is OK to be sad and that you get sad too. Be careful not to get too upset around me, because it might make me worry. |
| 2. My feelings change a lot. Sometimes I am sad and other times I like to have fun. | 2. Try to understand me and get it right and when you tell me you understand how I feel and that it is OK. |
| 3. I do not understand that when someone dies they are gone and can never come back. | 3. Remind me quietly that the person cannot come back—even if I ask over and over again. Don't say things to grownups that will scare me or confuse me because I do hear you, even if you don't think I do. |
| 4. Sometimes I worry that I will die or that you will not come back if you leave. I might cry and cling to you at bedtime or going to school. | 4. Tell me that you will keep us safe. Tell me when you leave that you will always come back and give me a picture of us or a note in my lunchbox to remind me that you will be back. Remind me that I can always feel better when I cuddle my blanket or teddy bear. Help me relax at bedtime by reading stories or listening to music. |
| 5. My upset feelings might come out as physical reactions like tummy aches and headaches or as behavior problems like not listening or fighting. Sometimes I may act like a baby by sucking my thumb or wetting my bed or my clothes. | 5. Help me do things to feel calmer, get back to my routines and activities, and have fun again. |
| 6. Sometimes over and over I keep playing how the person died (like making my toy cars crash or having bad guys shooting) to try to understand it. | 6. Help me understand the death with words I can understand. Tell me the truth simply without scary details. Do not let me see pictures of what happened if it is on the news. |
| 7. I may not want to talk about the person who died because it's too hard or because I don't want to make you cry. | 7. Don't get mad if I don't want to talk about the person who died yet. |
| 8. I may not like to do things or go places that remind me of the person who died. | 8. Tell me that you understand that it is too hard right now for me to do things or go places that remind me. Tell me that it won't always be this hard. |
| 9. I may think the person who died did not come back because he is mad at me or that it was my fault. I might worry that if I do something wrong (like not follow the rules) someone else will die. | 9. Reassure me that the death was not my fault, and I did not make it happen. Explain that the person who died loved me and would come back if she could, but when people die they cannot come back. |
| 10. I may worry I can't remember things about the person who died and what we did together. | 10. Keep pictures of the person who died around for me to see. Tell me stories about the person and make me a memory book so I can keep the person in my mind and my heart. |

If you are worried about how your child is doing or if any of these problems get in the way of your child having fun, going to school, being with friends, or other functioning, go with your child to a mental health professional with expertise in treating traumatized children.

Helping Teens with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Caregivers

Each teen grieves in unique ways. After a sudden or violent death some teens may develop traumatic grief responses and have difficulty coping. Here are ways to recognize and help your teen with traumatic grief. Being nonjudgmental, open to compromise and considering your teen’s point of view are important.

| I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT: | YOU CAN HELP ME WHEN YOU: |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I may feel sad, scared, empty, or numb but be embarrassed to show my true feelings. Yet, I may say too much on social media. 2. I might have behavior problems that are new or worse than before the trauma (angry outbursts, irritability, rule breaking, revenge seeking). I may be doing serious, unsafe, or harmful behaviors (self-injury, risky sexual behavior, drug or alcohol use). 3. I have trouble concentrating and paying attention or have a change in sleep patterns, such as staying up later or sleeping in all day. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Say that it is painful when someone you care about dies. Talk about your own feelings and invite me to talk about mine once I'm ready. Discuss sharing things on social media. Offer to find me a counselor if it seems easier for me to talk to someone outside the family. 2. Have patience and try to remain calm while setting appropriate limits on behaviors. Encourage me to get back to routines and activities with friends. For serious, risky, or harmful behaviors, get professional help. 3. Realize that I may be having scary thoughts about the trauma and not tell you. Talk with me about ways to cope with these, like getting back to enjoyable activities or listening to calming music. Taking a technology break at night will help me to sleep better. |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Have physical reactions like jumpiness, stomach aches, headaches, a pounding heart, or body aches. These may be worse after being around people, places, sounds, situations or other things that remind him of the trauma or the person who died | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Recognize that I may minimize these physical reactions—or do the opposite—exaggerate a minor ailment or injury. Encourage me to use physical activities to release tension or try relaxing things, like deep breathing or gentle stretching. |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. I may think that life is meaningless, feel guilty for being okay, or withdraw from family and friends—yet retreat to social media or gaming. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Discuss solutions for feeling sad and mention that, while social media can be helpful, I may feel better seeing friends in person. Check with other adults I may confide in to discuss ways to support me. If I seem very sad or guilty, seek professional help. |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Sometimes I wonder if something bad will happen to me or that other important people in my life. I may express this by appearing anxious or worried or seeming not to care about the future (not studying, skipping school), or risk-taking behavior. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Help me develop a realistic picture of the dangers in life. Talk about ways for me to take control of my safety and future (e.g. driving carefully, eating well and exercising, asking others for help). |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. I may talk about feeling responsible for the death. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Give honest, accurate, and age-appropriate information. Teens get information from all kinds of media, so let me know you will always tell me the truth. If I feel responsible, reassure me to not worry; that I did the best I could at the time. |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Sometimes I might not want to talk about the person who died. I may try to change or reject the topic (“leave me alone”), or shrug it off. I may hide my discomfort and act as if nothing bothers me or as if I'm is doing fine. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Realize that I may think that talking about the trauma or the person who died will upset you Even if you feel rejected, do stay involved with me and know where I am and what I'm is doing. I need your presence more than ever. |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. I might refuse to go places or do things that remind me of the person who died, or of how my life has changed since the person died. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Understand that I may be overwhelmed by upsetting feelings, but want to look strong or act as if nothing is wrong. This may be a sign of traumatic grief, and a professional can help. |
| <p>I may not want to talk about or remember good things about the person who died because it brings up reminders of the traumatic death.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Keep pictures of the person who died around for me to see. Tell me stories about the person and make me a memory book so I can keep the person in my mind and my heart. |

If any of these problems get in the way of your teen’s functioning at school or home, or continue more than 1-2 months, get help from a mental health professional who has experience treating children and teens with trauma or traumatic grief.

GRIEF VS. TRAUMA

GRIEF

Generalized reaction is SADNESS

Grief reactions stand alone

Grief reactions are generally known to the public and the professional

In grief, most can generally talk about what happened

In grief, pain is the acknowledgement of the loss

In grief, anger is generally non-destructive and non-assaultive

In grief, guilt says "I wish I would/would not have . . ."

Grief generally does not attack nor "disfigure" our self image

In grief, dreams tend to be of the deceased

Grief generally does not involve trauma reactions like flashbacks, startle reactions hyper vigilance, numbing, etc.

TRAUMA

Generalized reaction is TERROR

Trauma reactions generally include grief reactions

Trauma reactions especially in children are largely unknown to the public and often professionals

In trauma, most do not want to talk about about what happened

In trauma, pain triggers tremendous terror and an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and loss of safety

In trauma, anger often becomes assaultive even after non-violent trauma

Trauma guilt says, "It was my fault. I could have prevented it" and "It should have been me instead"

Trauma generally attacks, distorts and "disfigures" our self image

In trauma, dreams are about self as potential victim

Trauma involves grief reactions in addition to trauma-specific reactions

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