

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, in the early stages, they may first be inconsolable until adjustments are accommodated.

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.

School-age children are apt to express sadness as anger. Hence it is important for loved ones not to take their anger personally, but to accept the anger as an expression of grief. Rather than telling a child not to be angry, loved ones can help the child to express their upset through other channels. These 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 behaviour 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, not to mention if the parents were separated or together at the time of one's passing.

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, survivors must stay close and attune themselves to the child's emotional response, allow the child to vent constructively and be there to restore structure and routine, key factors in facilitating adaptation.

Lastly, if you as survivor are having difficulty coping, get help. You can only be as available to the child as you manage your own grief.

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