

Common Grief Reactions

Below are diverse reactions to loss that are common in some form for children and teens – and even adults – of all ages. (See table below for age-specific considerations and information.) Within the same family, some individuals might experience only a few of the reactions listed, while others might struggle with many reactions. For anyone, these types of reactions are understandable and natural responses to a significant loss.

Feelings

- Sadness, despair, sorrow, initial disbelief, shock, numbness, yearning, longing, missing the person.
- Anger, irritability, frustration.
- Anxiety, fears, worries about safety or future.
- Confusion, insecurity, guilt, remorse, shame, powerlessness.

Thoughts

- Constant thoughts and memories of the death or the person who died.
- Believing the person who died is still present (hearing, seeing, feeling or smelling the person; vivid dreams).
- Worries about their own health or another loved one's health.
- Confusion, disbelief about finality of death, thinking death was one's fault.
- Difficulty making decisions.
- Insecurities, lowered self-esteem or self-confidence.
- Impaired memory and concentration.

Body Reactions

- Frequent illness or physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, increased heart rate, tense or sore muscles, unexplained body aches and pains).
- Loss of energy, fatigue or feeling too keyed up or on edge, difficulty relaxing or feeling calm and regulated.

Behaviors

- Less participation or interest in normal activities and/or isolation or withdrawal from others.
- Inability to sleep or be alone, clinging to caregivers.
- Acting younger than age or not engaging in normal self-care.
- Angry, irritable or aggressive behaviors or conflicts with others.
- Impulsivity and reactivity, unpredictable behaviors or hyperactivity or difficulty staying still.
- Changes in sleeping patterns and appetite (eating or sleeping too much or too little).
- Performing poorly in school or work due to lack of initiative or difficulty concentrating, anxious overachieving or perfectionism.

Concerning Grief Reactions

For most children and adults, there will be **a gradual decrease in the intensity of grief reactions** over the first six months to a year after the death. If any of the symptoms above are **not improving** at that point, or if they **are interfering with normal functioning or development**, it might mean that more intensive support is needed to prevent long-term problems.

Additionally, if any of the following are present, professional support should be sought:

- Severe depression (e.g., hopelessness, lack of interest in normal activities).
- Self-harm or suicidal thoughts or actions.
- Reckless or illegal behaviors; dangerous aggression, fighting or bullying.
- Extreme feelings of guilt or desire to seek revenge against person responsible for death.
- Giving up on or inability to function at school or work, truancy.
- Severe withdrawal or giving up on relationships.
- Severe fears or anxiety that get in the way of normal functioning.
- Substance or alcohol abuse.
- Prolonged eating or sleeping problems affecting health or

development.

- Prolonged posttraumatic stress symptoms related to the death:
 - Increased arousal (e.g., feeling keyed up, jumpy, irritable or on edge).
 - Intrusive thoughts, images or nightmares about the death.
 - Avoidance of reminders of the death (e.g., numbing, withdrawal).
 - Difficulty engaging in a healthy grieving process (e.g., sharing memories, maintaining a positive emotional connection, meaning making) because reminders of the death or the person who died trigger the above trauma reactions (this is sometimes referred to as "traumatic grief")

To learn more about the Judi's House/JAG Institute Training and Education Initiative, which provides additional and customized training and education about Common Grief reactions and other topics related to grief and loss, please visit www.Judishouse.org/training-education

To request a Judi's House/ JAG institute training or education presentation, please visit www.judishouse.org/presentation-request

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