

Common Grief Reactions

Below are diverse reactions to loss that are common in some form for children and teens. Within the same family, some individuals may experience only a few of the reactions listed, while others might struggle with many reactions. For anyone, these types of reactions are natural responses to a significant loss.

Feelings

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

Thoughts

- Constant thoughts and memories about the death or 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 the finality of death, thinking the death was one's fault
- Difficulty making decisions
- Insecurities, lowered self-esteem and 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, feeling on edge, difficulty relaxing or feeling calm

Behaviors

- Less participation or interest in normal activities and/or isolation or withdraw from others
- Inability to sleep or be alone, clinging to caregivers
- Acting younger than their age or not engaging in normal self-care
- Angry, irritable, or aggressive behaviors or conflicts with others
- Impulsivity or reactivity, unpredictable behaviors, hyperactivity or difficulty staying still
- Changes in sleeping patterns and appetite (sleeping or eating 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 individuals 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 by 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 (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 the 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 post-traumatic stress symptoms related to the death:
 - Increased arousal (feeling keyed up, jumpy, irritable, or on edge)
 - Intrusive thoughts, images, or nightmares about the death
 - Avoidance of reminders of the death (numbing, withdrawal)
 - Difficulty engaging in a healthy grieving process (sharing memories, maintaining a positive emotional connection, meaning making) because reminders of the death or the person who died triggered 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, visit

judishouse.org/training-education

To request a Judi’s House/JAG Institute training or education presentation, please visit

judishouse.org/presentation-request