



ST. JOHN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

TOORAK

EST. 1859

Understanding Grief

Grief is a natural response to loss. It's the emotional suffering you feel when something or someone you love is taken away.

The pain and shock of loss can be overwhelming. You may experience all kinds of difficult and unexpected emotions: anger, guilt, disbelief, profound sadness, depression or loneliness as well as possibly a sense of relief, hope and acceptance are normal responses. The pain of grief can also disrupt your physical health. You may find it difficult to sleep, eat, or even think straight. These are normal reactions to loss – and the more significant the loss, the more intense your grief is likely to be.

You may have difficulty recalling the person who has died, or your recollections may be vivid and troublesome to you. Following the experience, you have been through, it is possible you may feel exhausted and have no motivation, even to do the everyday things you've normally taken for granted.

You may feel as though life would be more bearable if you changed your life in some way: move house, or dispose of possessions or refuse to see people. There is a very natural urge to avoid painful things. However, quick changes usually make things worse and decisions like these require careful thought.

Special dates and anniversaries approach can intensify grief, even years later. If possible, be in a supportive environment at these times. With time, you may find you are forgetting about the death and have resumed normal life. This is nothing to feel guilty about; it's a natural way for your body to cope with physical and emotional stress. Giving yourself permission to live your life doesn't mean you think any less of the person who has died.

Whatever your feelings, it's important to remember that it is normal and healthy to express them and it is often helpful to talk them over with someone who understands and who has time to listen. This person may be a friend or relative. Sometimes, however, people may not know what to say or how to say it; they may feel

uncomfortable around you. If you can, take the initiative and talk about the person who has died.

Children and grief

Like adults, children will feel grief and loss deeply, even young children. It is important that they express how they are feeling. It is important that they are not left out of what is happening in the family. It is helpful for them to see that we are grieving too. Crying with them or letting them see you are sad allows them to feel that their reactions are normal.

Answering questions simply and honestly helps children with their grief. Some questions are difficult or impossible to answer; don't make up a story to 'fill' this space. Some explanations can be confusing and frightening. For example, 'Grandma fell asleep' may make a child afraid to go to bed because they think they may not wake up. And statements like 'Uncle Ben has gone away and won't be coming back' may also cause distress. Brief separations may then begin to worry them.

Children's understanding of death develops as they do. What and how you tell a child depends on their age and level of understanding. Children up to 6 years don't have a concept of the finality of death. It is useful to talk about the body no longer being able to do normal activities like walking, eating, talking. Animals provide a good reference point for living and dying, especially if the child has had a pet die or found a dead bird in the garden. If the person died after a painful illness, it can be helpful to explain there is no more pain. Small children may need to keep asking the same questions. Your answers need to be consistent because repetition helps them understand. They also need lots of hugs and reassurance that everything will be OK and that others close to them won't be going away.

Children aged between 6 - 10 years have similar reactions to adults such as shock, anger and tears. However, they may not understand their reactions and engage in behaviours of their childhood like temper tantrums, bed-wetting and thumb sucking. Reassure them that an emotional reaction is normal and it's OK to feel angry and sad. They also may be curious about what happens to the body when it dies and after the funeral. It is best to answer their questions simply and honestly. It is a good idea to ask them if what you've said answers their question. Let them know that they can always ask more later.

Older children and teenagers will value being treated as adults. They will usually experience similar emotions to everyone around them. They may not say much about how they feel, but it's important they be included in any plans or family discussions. It may help if family members can talk openly about the person who has

died by recalling memories. Sharing stories helps both adults and children with their grief.

Helpful contact details

- Griefline Telephone Counselling Service, free of charge from 12 noon to 3.00am, 7 days a week on 1300 845 745.
- More information is available at <https://griefline.org.au/>
- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- Lifeline website: <https://www.lifeline.org.au/>

Resources for children

There are many books that help children understand and deal with grief and grieving. Here are a few suggestions.

On the death of a grandparent

What's Heaven? (2007), by Maria Shriver. Looks at the death of a grandparent. Suitable for 3-8 year olds.

Finding Grandpa Everywhere (1998), by John Hodge. A young child discovers memories of a grandparent. Suitable for ages 3-10.

Other books for helping children deal with grief

Lifetimes (1983). A beautiful way to explain death to children (gentle explanations of the life cycle). Suitable for 3-7 year olds.

My Memory Book for Grieving Children. This offers the opportunity to draw or write about memories and feelings after death. Suitable for 3-10 year olds.

More suggestions can be found at

<https://whatsyourgrief.com/childrens-books-about-death/>

Resources for Adolescents

How It Feels When A Parent Dies (1991), by Jill Krementz. Published by Tallanz Children's Paperbacks in London.

Something I've Never Felt Before (1990), by Doris Zagdanski. Published by Hill of Content in Melbourne.

Straight Talk About Death. For Teenagers (1993), by Earl Grollman. Published by Beacon Press.

Further Reading Resources for Adults

<https://www.svhs.org.au/our-services/list-of-services/bereavement/suggested-reading-grief>