

Five Signs a Grieving Child or Adolescent May Need Extra Help

There is no “right or wrong” way to grieve, and every child expresses their grief differently. However, there are times when youth feel especially “stuck” in their grief and need additional support.

While most grief reactions are a natural reflection of the love we had for the person who died, concerned caregivers often want to know how to identify if and when their grieving child may need a higher level of support (for example, therapy).

THE FIVE SIGNS TO LOOK FOR:

- **Significant Developmental Regressions**
- **Extreme Separation Distress**
- **Excessive Preoccupation with the Circumstances of the Death**
- **Avoidance and Numbing**
- **Risk-Taking Behavior**

Significant Developmental Regressions, seen more frequently in younger children, can involve changes in sleeping/language/eating habits, which can have a major impact on daily functioning. This can also include the inability to separate from adult caregivers.

What caregivers might observe: Trouble sleeping, not eating, climbing into caregiver’s bed every night, excessive clinginess, tearfulness upon separation

Extreme Separation Distress can include missing the deceased person so much that they can’t get out of bed in the morning, attend school, or complete daily activities.

What caregivers might observe: Going to sleep crying and waking up crying, excessive tiredness, lack of motivation to do things they used to enjoy doing

Extreme Preoccupation with the Circumstances of the Death can include excessive worries and concerns about the way the person died or even shame or guilt that the child was somehow responsible.

What caregivers might observe: Ongoing questions regarding how the person died, wanting to keep returning to the place where they died, verbal expressions of guilt or remorse

Avoidance and Numbing Behavior can include staying away from people, places, or things that remind the child of the person or the way the person died.

What caregivers might observe: Emotionally flat (appearing like they don’t have any feelings at all), distress when the person’s name is mentioned, physically avoiding things that remind them of the person or the death itself

Risk-taking Behavior, which is more likely to appear in adolescents, can include engaging in activities that are dangerous or reckless, such as substance abuse, driving while intoxicated, or violent behavior.

What caregivers might observe: Social withdrawal from family, engaging with risk-taking peers, irritability and/or aggression, or self-harming behaviors

Again, every child grieves differently, and there is no set timeline for grief. But if any of these behaviors (1) are present after six months post-death; (2) impact daily functioning; and/or (3) include expressions of self-harm or suicidal thoughts, we would encourage caregivers to have the child evaluated by a mental health professional who is well-versed in the assessment and treatment of childhood grief.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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