

WHAT IS NORMAL?

DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSES TO GRIEF

Although grief is a unique and personal experience, some aspects of grief are affected by age and development. Children and teens will grieve differently based on age and development, and need different expectations and supports to help them manage their grief in healthy ways.

PRESCHOOL

Understanding of death:

- Kids this age have a hard time understanding that death is permanent, and are likely to repeat information or need to be reminded many times that their person will not come back

Grief might look like:

- Intense, short emotional reactions such as crying, anxiety and anger
- Physical responses such as stomachaches, headaches, and difficulty sleeping
- Clinginess and being difficult to soothe
- Behavioral regression: losing skills they recently gained, or acting younger than they are
- Repeating the story often, verbally or in play, and asking repetitive questions

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Understanding of death:

- Kids this age are beginning to understand death is permanent but may believe that they caused or contributed to the death somehow. They may also worry that they or someone else close to them will die.

Grief might look like:

- Intense emotional reactions, sometimes very short and sometimes for a prolonged period
- Physical responses such as stomachaches, headaches and difficulty sleeping
- Increased anxiety and fears about their own and others' safety
- Behavioral regression: losing skills they recently gained, or acting younger than they are, sometimes intermittently
- Frequent, sometimes repetitive questions about what occurred, why, where the person is now, etc.
- Expression of emotion through play and activities, with occasional verbal expression



TEENS

Understanding of death:

- Teens' understanding may be similar to adults, recognizing permanence and the changes that come with loss. As teens are developing abstract thought, they are likely to have more questions and thoughts about larger concepts such as the meaning of life and justice.

Grief might look like:

- Mood swings
- Intense or lack of emotional expression
- Physical reactions to grief, including energy changes as well as pain or tension
- Risk-taking behaviors or avoidance of risk
- Increased thoughts about and discussion of death
- Picking up adult responsibilities

