



Dear griefHaven Families:

This is a comprehensive overview of childhood grief after the death of a loved one. It includes normal and traumatic grief reactions, what to look for, and what you can do to help your child.

For Parents
Childhood Traumatic Grief
Educational Materials
by www.NCTSN.org

Information for Parents on Childhood Traumatic Grief

Introduction

This guide to childhood traumatic stress for parents builds on the “In-Depth General Information Guide to Childhood Traumatic Grief” and “Brief Information on Childhood Traumatic Grief,” which can be found at www.NCTSN.org. Those publications should be read in conjunction with the information here as they provide (also provided on the griefHaven.org site) an essential background for understanding the difference between uncomplicated bereavement following a death, childhood traumatic grief, and other reactions to trauma.

Not every child who experiences a death will develop childhood traumatic grief. Many children will experience an appropriate grieving response and in time, with adequate support, adjust to the loss of the loved one. In some cases, however, children may have enduring difficulties that interfere with their ability to function and remember the person who died in positive ways.

The information presented here provides an overview of childhood traumatic grief, its general signs and symptoms, and some suggestions on what parents can do to help their child. Using this guide can be a first step for parents to help them understand their child's experience of intense grief following a death of a loved one that the child experienced as being especially difficult or traumatic. If you are a concerned parent or guardian and after reading this guide you think that your child is demonstrating the symptoms of childhood traumatic grief, we recommend that you seek further help.

What Is Childhood Traumatic Grief?

When someone special dies, it can be a very sad and painful experience for the child. When the death occurs as a result of a traumatic event, or when the child experiences the death as traumatic, the child may show signs of both trauma and grief. Childhood traumatic grief is explained more fully in the “In-Depth General Information Guide to Childhood Traumatic Grief,” but the following basic facts hold true:

- * Childhood traumatic grief is an intense grief response that can occur following the death of a loved one.
- * Childhood traumatic grief is different from and can interfere with the normal bereavement process following the death of a loved one.
- * Not all children who have been exposed to deaths they perceive to be shocking will develop childhood traumatic grief.
- * Childhood traumatic grief may appear differently in different children.
- * Parents, caregivers, and important adults can help children cope with childhood traumatic grief.
- * Help is available to parents and children who are experiencing childhood traumatic grief.

Childhood traumatic grief is a condition that some children develop after the death of a close friend or family member. Children with childhood traumatic grief experience the cause of that death as horrifying or terrifying, whether the death was sudden and unexpected (due to homicide, suicide, motor vehicle accident, natural disaster, war, terrorism, or other causes) or due to natural causes (such as cancer or a heart attack). Even if to you, as the adult, the manner of death does not seem to be sudden, shocking, or frightening, the child may perceive the death in this way and can be at risk of developing childhood traumatic grief. When a child is struggling with childhood traumatic grief, the child’s trauma reactions interfere with his or her ability to go through a normal bereavement process. Because of the interaction of traumatic and grief reactions, any thoughts, even happy ones, of the deceased person can lead to frightening memories of how the person died. Because these thoughts can be so upsetting, the child often may try to avoid all reminders of the loss so as not to stir up upsetting thoughts or feelings. A younger child may be afraid to sleep alone at night because of nightmares about a shooting that she witnessed, while an older child may avoid playing on the school baseball team his father used to coach because it brings up painful thoughts about how his father died in a terrible car accident. In this way, the child can get “stuck” on the traumatic aspects of the death and cannot proceed through the normal bereavement process.

How Is Childhood Traumatic Grief Different from Normal Grief?

In both normal grief (also called *uncomplicated bereavement*) and childhood traumatic grief, children often feel very sad and may have sleep problems, a loss of appetite, and a decreased interest in family and friends. They may also develop increased complaints of physical discomfort (such as headaches or stomachaches), or they may regress and return to behaviors they had previously outgrown (such as bed wetting, thumb sucking, or clinging to parents). They may also be irritable, do risky things, be withdrawn, have trouble concentrating, and think often about death. Children experiencing normal grief usually want to talk about the person who died, do things to remember the person, and perhaps find comfort in thinking about the person. Over time they also are able to complete the following “tasks” of normal bereavement:

- * Accept the reality and permanence of the death
- * Experience and cope with the range of feelings about the person who died, such as sadness, anger, guilt, and appreciation
- * Adjust to changes in their lives and identity that result from the death
- * Develop new relationships or deepen existing relationships with friends and family
- * Invest in new relationships and life-affirming activities
- * Maintain a continuing, appropriate attachment to the person who died through such activities as reminiscing, remembering, and memorialization
- * Make some meaning of the death that can include coming to an understanding of why the person died
- * Continue through the normal developmental stages of childhood and adolescence

For children experiencing childhood traumatic grief, thinking or talking about the person who died often leads to thoughts of the traumatic manner of death. For this reason, these children often try to avoid thinking or talking about the person who died and avoid facing the frightening feelings associated with these reminders. This prevents them from completing the tasks of normal bereavement mentioned above.

What Are Some Common Signs That A Child Is Struggling With Traumatic Grief?

Not all children who experience a traumatic death will develop childhood traumatic grief. Some children will be able to grieve the loss without complications. A small number of grieving children may develop some reactions or symptoms that can become difficult and perhaps interfere with their daily functioning. Signs that a child is having difficulty coping with the death may be noticeable in the first month or two or may not be apparent until one or more years later. Some of these signs include the following:

- * *Intrusive memories about the death:* These can be expressed by nightmares, guilt or self-blame about how the person died, or recurrent or disturbing thoughts about the terrible way someone died
- * *Avoidance and numbing:* These can be expressed by withdrawal, acting as if not upset, or avoiding reminders of the person, the way he or she died, or the things that led to the death
- * *Physical or emotional symptoms of increased arousal:* Children may show this by their irritability, anger, trouble sleeping, decreased concentration, drop in grades, stomachaches, headaches, increased vigilance, and/or fears about safety for oneself or others

What Additional Challenges Can Increase the Risk of Childhood Traumatic Grief? (Secondary Adversities)

Children who must face additional difficult experiences as a result of the death or are already facing stressful life circumstances are at risk for developing traumatic grief. For example, after a father's death, a child who has to move must contend with both the death of her parent as well as changes in her social network, and a child who is witness to the murder of a family member must deal with legal procedures and unpleasant questions from peers.

What Can Parents Do to Help Children and Teenagers?

Parents can play a very important role in helping children and adolescents affected by childhood traumatic grief. Children may be struggling with finding ways to understand and cope

with their reactions to a traumatic loss. Here are some suggestions about ways that parents can help support children:

- * Be aware of the common reactions of children to death described above.
- * Remember that not all children will develop childhood traumatic grief, and those that do may demonstrate a range of symptoms depending on their developmental level, personality, and prior history of traumatic experiences.
- * Provide children of all ages with opportunities to talk about their worries and concerns. Children at different ages may need different types of support. Younger children may need more attention, patience, understanding, and a few extra hugs. Older children may need reassurance that it is normal to experience a range of reactions and that there are adults in their lives to help them through difficult times. Some children, especially older children, may not want to talk about their experiences and feelings or may shut adults out.
- * Understand that anger or regressive behavior may be a part of a child or adolescent's reaction to a traumatic loss.
- * Recognize that children of all ages carefully observe how the adults in their lives are reacting and will often take their cues from the adults around them. Children will find comfort by observing how adults manage difficult reactions and model effective ways of coping.
- * Be prepared to revisit the loss with children as they become older and acquire new information, develop new questions, and have new experiences.
- * Seek support from friends and family to help manage your own grief.
- * Reach out for professional help if you're concerned that a child's reactions are affecting his or her daily life.

In-Depth General Information Guide to Childhood Traumatic Grief Introduction

This information presents an overview of childhood traumatic grief, a condition that can affect children's development, relationships, achievement, and later effectiveness in life if not treated or otherwise resolved.

We begin by describing normal grief and the grieving process and then define psychological trauma and describe how traumatic experiences can affect children. We explain the differences between normal or uncomplicated grief and childhood traumatic grief. Finally, we present an understanding of what happens when a child experiences the death of another and reacts in ways that interfere with the intense normal course of grieving and present ongoing difficulties. This information is useful for medical and psychological professionals, parents, caregivers, educators, and others working with children who are experiencing intense grief responses. The child's perception, rather than the cause of death, plays the key role in determining the development of symptoms following the death of a significant person. Not every child develops traumatic grief after a death that happened in a particularly dramatic or threatening manner. On the other hand, some children may experience what most of us would consider an expected and normal death of another person as a traumatic event. Because research and information about this special condition is still evolving, we do not yet know which children are most at risk for developing childhood traumatic grief. Signs that a child or adolescent is having difficulty coping with the death may be noticeable in the first few months, or may not be apparent until one or more years later. What we do know is that there are effective treatments for children experiencing childhood traumatic grief and that it is most important to recognize its signs and symptoms.

What Do We Mean by Grief?

Grief describes the intense emotional distress we have following a death. *Bereavement* refers to the state or fact of being bereaved, or having lost a loved one by death. *Mourning* refers to the encompassing family, social, and cultural rituals associated with bereavement. Thus, when you are bereaved, you feel grief, and mourn in special ways.

What Is the Typical Grieving Process?

There is no right or wrong way to grieve or “appropriate” length of time to experience grief following the death of a loved one. The process can vary from child to child and may change as the child grows older. Issues and questions may arise as children have new experiences and face new challenges that may remind them of an earlier loss. A toddler may have new questions about how his brother died when he reaches school age, a teenage son may miss his father when he learns how to drive, or a daughter may feel a new sense of longing on her wedding day for a mother who died when she was a preteen. With each new developmental challenge, children are likely to experience their loss in new ways. Throughout their life, children continue to adjust to the loss and develop new ways of coping. Over time, it is helpful if children can relate to their loss in the following ways:

- * Accept the reality and permanence of the death.
- * Experience and cope with the painful emotional reactions to the death, such as sadness, anger, resentment, confusion, and guilt.
- * Adjust to changes in their lives and identity that result from the death.
- * Develop new relationships or deepen existing relationships to help them cope with the difficulties and loneliness that may have resulted from the death.
- * Maintain a continuing, healthy attachment to the person by reminiscing, remembering, modeling behaviors, and maintaining a memorial.
- * Make meaning of the death, a process that can include beginning to understand why the person died and what significance the loss has for the living.
- * Continue through the normal developmental stages of childhood and adolescence.

What Is Common Following a Death?

Any death can be difficult for a child, and certain reactions are common. Children’s difficulties with grief vary according to a child’s age, developmental level, previous life experiences, emotional health before the death, and family and social environment. An uncomplicated bereavement response may include the following:

- * *Emotional reactions:* feeling sad, angry, anxious, numb, lonely, guilty, powerless, ashamed, insecure, and remorseful
- * *Changes in behaviors:* lack of interest and participation in usual activities, diminished self-care, unpredictable or odd behaviors, angry or aggressive behaviors, irritability and conflict with others, impulsivity, regression to more childlike or infantile behaviors, changes in sleeping patterns (such as increased sleep), difficulty sleeping or not being able to sleep alone, changes in appetite resulting in weight gain or loss, and changes in overall physical health
- * *Interpersonal interactions:* withdrawal, social isolation, peer difficulties, clinging, irritability, difficulty sharing memories, difficulty participating in group or athletic activities, and general lack of interest in others
- * *Changes in thinking:* constant thoughts and memories about the loved one, persistent thoughts about the death, disbelief about the death and the finality of death, constant or intrusive thoughts about death, preoccupation with one’s own or another loved one’s physical health, difficulty making decisions, confusion, impaired memory and

concentration, lowered self-esteem and self-confidence, disillusionment, thinking that the death was one's fault, and survivor guilt

- * *Physical reactions:* susceptibility to illness, loss of energy, fatigue, difficulty or changes in eating, physical complaints, and changes in physiological arousal (for example, increased heart rate, respiration, and startle response)
- * *Changes in academic functioning:* poor school performance, difficulty studying or concentrating, and potential school failure

What Is Trauma, and How Do Children and Adolescents Respond to It?

Traumatic events can involve an actual death, other loss, serious injury, or threat to the child's well-being. These events could include natural or man-made disasters, interpersonal violence, car accidents, war, or terrorist acts, among many other possibilities. A child may be traumatized by directly experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event or by hearing about another person's experience with such an event.

Children respond to trauma in different ways, and their responses can change over time. In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event, children may experience feelings of terror, intense fear, horror, helplessness, lack of control, and physical stress reactions such as a rapidly beating heart or shakiness. Intense feelings such as fear and helplessness are likely to be experienced in the first weeks following a traumatic event or after repeated exposure, such as in child abuse. These acute responses can be disruptive to the child's functioning but may go away naturally over time.

For some children and adolescents, responses to traumatic events can have a profound effect on the way they see themselves and their world. These children may experience important and long-lasting changes in their ability to trust others, their sense of personal safety, their effectiveness in navigating life challenges, and their belief that there is justice or fairness in life. Traumatized children may develop changes in behavior that are often referred to as *externalizing* problems or *acting out*. They may become involved in fights or other conflicts with peers, have difficulty interacting with authority figures, become socially isolated or withdrawn, develop poor school attendance, and begin using illicit substances. They may also experience changes in their emotional and psychological functioning, referred to as *internalizing* problems, such as depression or anxiety. These internal changes may be more difficult for others to detect than external changes but can still cause significant impairment in functioning.

What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

In some cases, the difficulties resulting from exposure to trauma persist over time and can result in what is called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is diagnosed when the child has specific symptoms that continue for a month or more following exposure to a traumatic event. Not all children exposed to a trauma will develop PTSD, and for some children PTSD symptoms will lessen naturally over time. However, children who experience the disorder often have a variety of symptoms that can significantly impact their day-to-day functioning. These symptoms fall into the following general categories:

- * *Re-experiencing:* recurrent upsetting thoughts about the event, repeated distressing nightmares, or repetitive play in young children
- * *Hyperarousal:* nervous, jumpy, or agitated behavior, irritability or anger, and hypervigilance or increased startle reaction
- * *Avoidance:* avoiding thoughts, feelings, or places that remind the child of the trauma, withdrawing, becoming disinterested in activities, or developing emotional distance. If left untreated, PTSD can lead to more serious difficulties over time. PTSD has been linked

to adult depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, and other psychiatric difficulties. If a child shows symptoms of PTSD, it is important that he or she be evaluated, and consultation with a qualified mental health professional is encouraged.

What Is Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Childhood traumatic grief may occur following the death of a loved one when the child perceives the experience as traumatic. The death may have been sudden and unexpected, or it may have been an anticipated death due to illness or other natural causes. Childhood traumatic grief is distinct from the normal bereavement process and PTSD, but it shares features of both. The distinguishing feature of childhood traumatic grief is that trauma symptoms interfere with the child's ability to navigate the typical bereavement process. A mental health professional with experience in childhood traumatic grief may be needed to distinguish between the sometimes overlapping symptoms of uncomplicated bereavement and traumatic grief.

Children may show different signs of childhood traumatic grief at different ages. However, difficulties specific to childhood traumatic grief that commonly occur across developmental stages include the following:

- * *Intrusive memories about the death:* These can appear through nightmares, guilt, or self-blame about how the person died or recurrent or intrusive thoughts about the horrifying manner of death.
- * *Avoidance and numbing:* These can be expressed by withdrawal, the child acting as if not upset, or the child avoiding reminders of the person, the way she or he died, or the event that led to the death.
- * *Physical or emotional symptoms of increased arousal:* These can include irritability, anger, trouble sleeping, decreased concentration, drop in grades, stomachaches, headaches, increased vigilance, and fears about safety for oneself or others. In childhood traumatic grief, the interaction of traumatic and grief symptoms is such that any thoughts or reminders, even happy ones, about the person who died can lead to frightening thoughts, images, or memories of how the person died. Three types of reminders may trigger them:
 1. *Trauma reminders:* places, situations, people, sights, smells, or sounds reminiscent of the death. These may include the street corner where a fatal accident occurred, the bedroom where a sibling died, or the sound of an airplane reminding a child of a mother who died in a crash.
 2. *Loss reminders:* people, places, objects, situations, thoughts, or memories that are reminders of the person who died—for example, photo albums or a new coach who has replaced a parent who previously headed a child's sports team.
 3. *Change reminders:* situations, people, places, or things reminding the child of changes in his or her life resulting from the death—for example, moving to a new house or having to walk home with a babysitter rather than with an older sibling who died.

These reminders may lead to the child re-experiencing the traumatic events that led to the death. The terror associated with these memories results in hyperarousal symptoms. The child then attempts to handle the distressing re-experiencing and hyperarousal symptoms through the use of avoidance or emotional numbing.

Because traumatic aspects of the death are so upsetting, the child tries to avoid all reminders of the trauma, loss, or resulting changes so as not to stir up unpleasant thoughts or feelings.

For example, a younger child may be afraid to sleep alone at night because of nightmares about a tragic shooting, whereas an older child may avoid flying in a plane because it brings up painful memories about a father who died in a plane crash. Hence, the traumatic reactions make it difficult for children to:

- * remember or enjoy positive memories of the deceased person,
- * cope with the many life changes that occur as a result of the death, and
- * continue with normal development.

What Additional Challenges Increase the Risk of Childhood Traumatic Grief? (Secondary Adversities)

Secondary adversities refer to related challenges, difficulties, and stressors that follow from the death or traumatic experience. Although the study of childhood traumatic grief is in its infancy, some evidence suggests that bereaved children who experience additional life adversities that result from the death, or who are already facing difficult life circumstances, are especially at risk for experiencing traumatic grief reactions. For example, following their father's fatal heart attack, children who must move due to changed financial resources are forced to contend not only with the ongoing absence of their father, but also with disruptions and changes in their home environment and social network. A child whose sibling was murdered may face a spectrum of severe secondary adversities, such as participation in legal proceedings, intrusive questions by peers, or placement in the home of relatives.

Example of a Child with Traumatic Grief

Five months after a ten-year-old boy's father was killed in a car accident, he began waking up in the middle of the night in fright and spending the remainder of the night in his mother's bed. He was difficult to arouse in the morning and had trouble leaving the house for school. His grades began to slip, and he was uncooperative with the tutor his mother had obtained. He also refused to drive with anyone except his mother, creating a burden for her and making it difficult for him to go on outings with friends. He refused to allow his mother to display pictures of his father in the house.

In this example, the boy would at first glance be fearful of separation from his mother. However, on further assessment it became clear that he was having nightmares in which he saw speeding cars and heard cars screeching. He also experienced panic in any car other than his mother's. Before his father's death, he and his father had begun working together on his science homework, creating various experiments and projects. This was the last thing they did together before his father left the house the night of the accident. Thus, the boy became upset whenever he had to do his schoolwork with someone other than his father, as it led to reminders of the last time he saw his father before the crash. His functioning at home, at school, and with friends was suffering from the intrusion of such traumatic symptoms, and he was unable to have happy memories of his father without thinking about the night of his death.

This boy is displaying several classic features of childhood traumatic grief. Rather than finding comfort from memories of his father, he is avoiding such memories because for him they trigger memories of the traumatic way his father died. He also avoids activities that are important to his ongoing development—such as doing homework and riding in friends' cars—because these also trigger traumatic memories. He is unable to work through the loss of his father and the pain associated with missing him, because he cannot tolerate any reminders of him, even seeing his picture. Thus, this boy is "stuck" due to the impingement of trauma

symptoms on his ability to tolerate memories of his father and accomplish the tasks of normal grieving.

How Is Childhood Traumatic Grief Treated?

Fortunately, children experiencing childhood traumatic grief recover with appropriate help. Consultation with a qualified mental health professional is encouraged. Ideally, this professional should have experience working with children and adolescents and specifically with issues of grief and trauma. Treatment itself should address both the trauma and grief symptoms. In learning how to manage the trauma-related reactions, a child becomes better able to reminisce productively about the person.

Several treatment manuals have been developed by the NCTSN Childhood Traumatic Grief Task Force for treating this condition at different developmental stages. In general, all of these treatments incorporate components of evidence-based treatments for trauma symptoms. These include affective regulation, stress management, and cognitive reprocessing skills, as well as encouraging the child to tolerate increasingly more detailed memories of the traumatic event that led to the death through the creation of a trauma narrative. These interventions also include grief-focused treatment components, such as acknowledging what has been lost in the relationship, exploring "unfinished business" with the deceased, memorializing the person who has died, and committing to other relationships in the present.

Treatments for children and younger adolescents include parents in treatment, while adolescent treatment is often provided in a group format. It is important for the caregiver to process and work on personal trauma and grief issues in order to best help a child. More information about these treatment models is available at www.NCTSNnet.org.

Further information about these topics, additional fact sheets, resources, and assistance in locating appropriate treatment is available from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) at (310) 235-2633 and (919) 682-1552 and at the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Web site, www.NCTSN.net.

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National Child Traumatic Stress Network