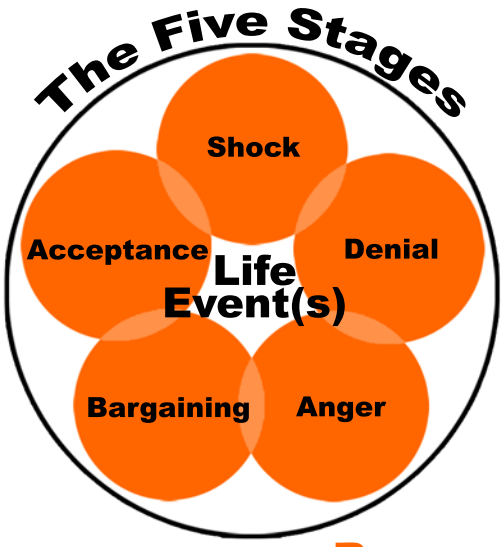
Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
Tough Topics Series
Learning and Teaching Support
Issue 3

Impact of Grief and Loss

Educators and other helping professionals often find themselves in the critical position of supporting kids struggling with significant life changes, personal losses or the death of a parent/loved one. The grief resulting from these experiences can be defined as "the internal anguish bereaved persons feel in reaction to a loss they have experienced." It's important to remember that kids grieve, too, and they may or may not "show it" outwardly to the rest of the world. What is most important is that we understand their varied responses and provide quality support to guide them through the process toward a healthy resolution.

Understanding the Grief and Loss Process



General youth reactions . . .

- Tend to go in and out of grief process
- Developmental stage will influence their reactions
- All cannot talk openly about their loss and feelings
- May not seem to be affected at all – external vs. internal responses or "survival mode"
- Play is one way kids make sense of changes in their world
- Not unusual for them to experience physical reactions
- Need to grieve significant loss/change/death at all developmental stages for healthy resolution

Responses of Grieving Child/Youth

Academic

–Inability to focus or concentrate
–Failing or declining grades
–Incomplete or poor quality of work
–Increased absence or reluctance to go to school
–Forgetful, memory loss
–Overachievement – trying to be perfect
–Underachievement – giving up
–Inattentiveness
–Excessive daydreaming

Behavioral

–Disruptive behaviors, noisy outbursts
–Aggressive behaviors, frequent fighting
–Non-compliance to requests
–Increase in risk-taking or unsafe behaviors
–Isolation or withdrawal
–Regressive behaviors to time when things felt more safe and in control
–High need for attention
–A need to check in with parent/significant other

Emotional

–Insecurity, issues of abandonment, safety concerns
–Concern over being treated differently from others
–Fear, guilt, anger, regret, sadness, confusion
–"I don't care" attitude
–Depression, hopelessness, intense sadness
–Overly sensitive, frequently tearful, irritable
–Appears unaffected by change/loss/death
–Preoccupation with wanting details
–Recurring thoughts of suicide, death

Social

–Withdrawal from friends and family
–Withdrawal from activities and sports
–Use of alcohol and drugs
–Changes in relationships with peers and teachers
–Changes in family roles
–Wanting to be physically close to a safe adult
–Sexual acting out
–Stealing, shoplifting
–Difficulty being in a group or crowd

continued . . .

Responses of Grieving Child/Youth (continued)

Physical

–Stomachaches, headaches, heartaches
–Frequent accidents or injuries
–Nightmares, dreams or sleep difficulties
–Loss of appetite or increased eating
–Low energy, weakness
–Nausea, upset stomach, hives, rash, etc.
–Increased illness, low resistance
–Rapid heartbeat

Spiritual

–Anger at God/Higher Power
–Questions of "Why me?" or "Why now?"
–Questions about meaning of life
–Confusion
–Feelings of being alone in the universe
–Doubting or questioning current beliefs
–Sense of meaninglessness about the future
–Changes in values, questioning what is important

How to Help . . .

Infants and Toddlers

Lots of holding, additional nurturing, and physical contact; Consistent routine, including regular meal and bed times; Rules and limits which are concrete and specific; Short, truthful statements about what happened; Making time for play, both physical and imaginative

Preschool Child

Use simple and honest answers; Be prepared to answer same questions over and over again; Include child in rituals around loss/death; Support child in his/her play; Allow anger and physical expression; Maintain consistent routines; Allow to act younger for awhile; Hold, nurture, and give lots of physical attention; Encourage/allow fun and happy times; Have books available; Model by sharing personal anecdotes as appropriate

Elementary School Child

Answer questions as clearly and accurately as possible; Provide creative outlets (art, music, journal, etc.); Help identify and use support systems; Work with student around academic workload; Encourage taking breaks and some time alone; Allow for expression of feelings and emotions; Maintain routines and structure but allow for flexibility; Give choices whenever possible; Share that you care and are thinking about them; Create "safe space" for child to go to as needed

Middle School Youth

Expect mood swings; Provide supportive environment where students can share, when needed; Anticipate physical concerns, illness, body aches and pains; Allow to choose with whom and how he/she gets support; Encourage participation in school-based educational support group; Allow flexibility in completing school work

High School Youth

Allow for regression and dependency; Encourage expression of feelings such as sorrow, anger, guilt, and regret; Understand and allow for variation in maturity level; Answer questions honestly and provide factual information; Model appropriate responses; Avoid power struggles and allow choices; Help understand and resolve feelings of helplessness; Assist in plans for completion of school assignments; Encourage participation in school-based educational support group

For more information: http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/

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Information for this article adapted from *Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers* by the Dougy Center: National Center for Grieving Children and Families