

Grief

Grief is our natural response to loss. Children and young people experience grief when they lose someone or something they feel close to.

Grief can be more intense when the loss is more significant

The death of a family member, friend or pet can be particularly hard for children and young people.

Grief can also be experienced following events such as:

- separation of parents and family breakup
- change of learning community or shifting house
- loss of a friendship
- relocating to a new city or country
- adapting or coming to terms with a disability or medical illness
- having a family member in hospital for a long time
- forced displacement (for example, due to natural disasters, war, loss of family's livelihood)
- loss of culture or connection to community.

Grief can also affect children and young people in different ways depending on things like their age, developmental stage, life experiences, the disruption to their and their family's lives and the availability of support networks.

Experiences and expressions of grief

Everyone experiences grief differently and people's culture, personality, values, beliefs and life experiences can also shape how we grieve.

Grief can also be exacerbated if the child/young person is already experiencing things like depression, anxiety or bullying. These stresses will have an accumulative effect

Some children and young people may find it helpful to express their grief in words, while others may show it through behaviour, creativity or connection to their culture.

For example, First Nations Peoples and many other cultures may grieve collectively, placing a strong emphasis on community support, shared rituals and connection.

Some people may follow specific cultural practices or spiritual beliefs during times of grief, which can be an important part of their healing process.

Grief can be experienced on an individual, family, community, cultural, and intergenerational level. For example, in connected communities, a loss may impact on the wellbeing of many people. And sudden or unexpected loss can increase the intensity of grief.

'Unresolved' grief can also be passed down through generations, affecting individuals, family and cultural traditions, and ways of living. An example of this is the ongoing trauma experienced by the Stolen Generations, their family and communities.

Read more about [providing support to children and young people affected by grief](#).

How might grief affect children and young people?

Grief can affect many parts of a child or young person's life, including their emotions, thoughts, behaviour and physical health.

They can feel their loss both at home and in the learning community. Grief can make it hard to concentrate, disrupt sleep patterns and cause physical health complaints such as headaches and nausea. While many children and young people experiencing grief may struggle to perform at their previous levels academically for a period of time, with support and structure most will be able to re-engage with their studies over time.

What signs should I look out for?

Everyone experiences grief differently. Grief reactions commonly include sadness, crying, anxiety, having 'bad' dreams, changes in eating habits and increased need to be close to their families. Children and young people can show their distress in a range of ways. For example, they may be angry, irritable or unsettled, withdraw from social interactions, or lose motivation for learning or the things they love to do (such as sports practice or playing with friends).

It may be difficult for a child or young person to express their grief, or the grief may take some time to emerge after a loss. Children and young people can grieve differently depending on their age and stage of development.

Expressions of grief can also be influenced by the family's culture, established patterns of mourning and "acceptable" expression of emotions. Here are some typical signs you can look out for in children and adolescents:

Children

- Shock and confusion – expressing shock or confusion at their loss and not believing it's real.
- Physical symptoms – experiencing stomach pains, headaches and other aches and pains.

- Behaviour changes – showing their distress by behaving in ways you'd expect from a younger child (for example, wetting the bed at night, sucking their thumb or using baby talk).
- Anger – becoming angry and having difficulty expressing this in a helpful way.
- Guilt – feeling that the loss was their fault.
- Anxiety – experiencing anxiety about the safety of other loved ones, feeling separation anxiety.
- Sleep disturbances – having difficulties falling asleep, staying asleep or having nightmares.
- Eating – experiencing changes with eating patterns – for example, eating more or less.
- Concentration – having difficulty focusing on schoolwork.
- Withdrawal – not wanting to play with their friends.

Adolescents

Adolescents often have a greater capacity to understand the impact of their loss. They may express their grief in the same way as children, but other signs to look out for include:

- risk-taking behaviour
- resentment – they may be angry about their loss
- acting as though they're not affected by the loss
- frequent mood changes.

Adolescents may differ in how they want to grieve. Some might want family and friend support, while others may want to deal with their emotions privately.

If the loss is of a close family or community member, this can sometimes place additional responsibility on a young person, as they may feel, or be told, that they need to "step up" with caring or financial roles. This can be very stressful, as an adolescent may be struggling with grief plus trying to juggle the extra

responsibility. They may also experience guilt if they feel resentful of their new role.

Grief is complex and every child and young person will experience it differently. Learn more about [supporting children and young people affected by grief](#).

Be You Resources

Learn more about [Mental health services and support helplines](#).

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about observing children and young people's behavioural and mood changes in the [Notice](#) module.

External links

[Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network](#)

Bibliography

Visit [Grief](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

