

HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE AFTER LOSS

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Every child is unique and every loss is unique. Divorce between parents or the loss of a spouse due to death will likewise bring individual responses to all who are involved. Although there is uniqueness to each loss a child experiences, there is a common experience of grief for a child following a loss. This article will briefly review the course of grief reactions normally seen in children after the death of a parent. I will then highlight what the surviving parent can do to help their child cope with the loss of a parent. Although the suggestions in this article are based on research from studies on parental death, the suggestions can and will be helpful for parents who have gone through a divorce.

All children will exhibit some form of grief reaction after the death of a parent. Kaffman and Elizure outline the grief process experienced by most children. Some of the most common expressions of grief include crying, sadness, anger, guilt, despair, gloomy mood, sobbing, tearfulness, longing, and continued preoccupation on the subject of death or separation. In the first few months after the death or separation of a parent, children react with crying, sadness, and varied expressions of longing. Responses of anger, protest, and pain are also common. At the same time, and to an increasing extent throughout the first year after the loss, the child begins to examine the meaning and implications of the loss of their parent. The painful understanding of the finality of the loss may significantly increase the child's level of anxiety. This increased anxiety can be expressed by the appearance of various fears, such as fear of being left alone, apprehension that the surviving parent may suddenly disappear, as well as fears of injury and the darkness. Finally, children may exhibit symptoms such as aggression, depression and/or concentration difficulties.

The good news is that most children evidence a tremendous ability to adjust to loss and will go on living with the loss of a parent in a healthy manner. Researchers point to 4 factors that will help your child cope with the loss of a parent:

1. Talk to your child. No matter what your child's age, they will have questions and feelings regarding their loss. If your family has experienced a death, examine what your child has been told about the death. Take time to evaluate your own belief system as a parent. If you have a clear understanding about your beliefs and feelings toward the loss, you will be better able to answer your child's questions about their beliefs and feelings.

2. Understand how your child's age, gender and temperament may influence your child's understanding of their loss. For example, a child 6 years old and younger will be in a "magical thinking" stage. This means your child does not yet understand the irreversibility of death or the irreversibility of the decision to divorce. Older children will understand that they can't wish a parent back into their life after death, but a child who

is 4 years old will think they can do something to make their parent reappear in their life, even after a death. Also consider your child's ability to adjust to change in general. Children have different styles of reacting to events in their world. Your child's temperament will influence their reactions to loss.

3. The quality of the preexisting relationship with the parent before the loss is linked to post-loss adjustment. Just as is true with adults, a relationship that is marked by difficulties when the parent is alive, will likely result in continued difficulties for the child when the parent dies or leaves due to divorce. Talking to your child and understanding the difficulties your child is experiencing is again invaluable to address the feelings experienced by your child.

4. Finally, and maybe most importantly, your ability to process and cope with the loss of your spouse will impact your child. It is important for you to have your needs met, to find answers to the questions of why did this loss happen, to find support for yourself, and to remain active in the process of living. Your ability to surround yourself with a support system will help you provide a stable environment in which your child will find stability and support. Reaching out to family members, friends, support groups, church and a personal faith system are all ways to restore your support system as well as a support system for your child.