

Living with Grief - Myths and Realities

Whenever we have a loss, we experience grief. Because grief can be such a strong emotion, it can leave us feeling overwhelmed and confused. The Hospice Foundation of America offers this list of myths and realities about living with grief.

Myth 1: We only grieve deaths.

Reality: We grieve all losses.

Myth 2: Only family members grieve.

Reality: All who are attached grieve.

Myth 3: Grief is an emotional reaction.

Reality: Grief is manifested in many ways.

Myth 4: Individuals should leave their grieving at home.

Reality: We cannot control where we grieve.

Myth 5: We slowly and predictably recover from grief.

Reality: Grief is an uneven process, a roller coaster with no timeline.

Myth 6: Grieving necessitates detachment.

Reality: We never fully detach.

Myth 7: Grief finally ends.

Reality: Over time most people learn to live with their loss.

Myth 8: Grievers are best left alone.

Reality: Grievers need opportunities to share their memories and grief and to receive support.

How to Help Someone Who is Grieving

- A grieving person needs friends who are willing to listen. All they need is your presence.
- Offer your help with practical matters.
- Let the bereaved tell you what they want, when they want. Don't push. A helpful question might be "Would you like to talk?"
- Don't say "I know how you feel". You don't.
- Don't use platitudes such as: "He/she is in a better place."

- Recognize that the bereaved may be angry. Encourage them to acknowledge their anger and to find healthy ways of handling it.
- Be patient. Encourage them to be patient with themselves as there is no timetable for grief.
- Accept whatever feelings that are expressed and encourage them to express these feelings.

Children and Grief

Before we can structure what we are going to say to children about death, we have to take into consideration the child's level of development as well as what the child already knows.

Up To Six Years:

- Concepts like time and death are not fully developed.
- Death is separation. Anxiety accompanies separation.
- The dead person will return. Death is reversible.
- Magical thinking plays a role in children's thinking.

Six To Nine Years:

- Death personified...Seen as a monster, something that "gets you."
- Death is seen as a result of causes..."Who killed him?"
- Fear of death being contagious.
- Fear death of a parent.
- Death is understood as final.

Nine to Twelve Years:

- Develop an acute sense of mortality. Death seen as a punishment.
- Interested in the biological/scientific details.
- Aware of their own mortality and the universality of death.
- Concerned about practical details. "Will their life change as a result of this death?"

Adolescence:

- Cognitive skills developed and death is seen as universal, inevitable and irreversible.
- Death seen as the natural enemy. "What is the purpose of living only to die?"
- Struggle with guilt, anger and responsibility.
- Reminded of their own mortality.
- Often they reject the help of adults.

- Grieving seen as embarrassing.

How To Help The Grieving Child

- Tell the truth and use the correct vocabulary. Do not use words like "went to sleep."
- Encourage their questions.
- Children grieve for a long time and in intervals.
- Be honest about your own feelings. Don't try to hide them.
- Encourage a dialogue. Talking is a way for children to sort through issues they don't fully understand.