

On Death and Loss

The following information is not a comprehensive discussion, but is intended to introduce concepts that support families in a time of loss. It is drawn from programming by the Grief Recovery Institute. More information can be found in The Grief Recovery Handbook and When Children Grieve, both by John James and Russell Friedmann.

If you are reading this, you are either researching whether to take the dive into caring for an animal, or you are looking to support your child in dealing with a loss. Loss is one of the inevitabilities in life, and parents have many opportunities to teach healthy practices and skills in coping with it. Sadly, we can only pass on what we have learned ourselves and, in our culture, this most often includes habits and coping methods that do not serve us.

It is difficult to watch others experience pain and be sad, and all too frequently we spend a lot of time and energy trying to cover sadness with happy activities and distractions without ever addressing it. It takes courage to confront grief and sadness, to become still and at home with it and to not try to change it. If you observe, you will find that often children are much better at this than most adults. They can often allow tears to flow through them unhampered and be wracked with full body sobs. If you can meet this as a parent and offer genuine comfort without trying to make it stop, you will be giving your children a great gift. Not only will you allow their cells to fully grieve and release the stress that has incurred, but you will teach compassion, empathy and stillness.

Grief is a normal and natural reaction to loss. All change carries a potential for grief, even change that is ultimately positive. If a human is experiencing grief, it is not for us to judge the size of their reaction versus the size of the loss that we see. Grief adds up when we resist it, sometimes the flood of tears that accompanies a skinned knee, or small conflict masks more or deeper stress that needs releasing. Often our children learn what loses we

consider valid and they bring on the tears that they have accumulated when these occur. In this time of pandemic, when their lives have been turned upside down by change, their little bodies are storing lots of stress and grief.

When encountering grief from another, try to avoid inserting anything new into the space (like your own judgment, fears, or annoyance). Try instead to allow, accept, find stillness, breathe. We often try to feed (quite literally: Don't cry, have a cookie.), avoid or distract grief, these are temporary fixes. These don't ultimately help. When we don't allow tears to be in the space with us, we unintentionally invalidate the person who is sad. We inadvertently send the message: "You are OK or better when you are happy and kind. You are not OK when you are sad, scared or angry. Please get happy or let's distract you until you can be happy." As our losses accumulate, there is a very good chance that some will become too big to apply this to and if we have not helped our children to be comfortable or OK with themselves when they are grieving, then we have done nothing to support them in finding a way to move beyond pain and loss.

Dwelling on pain is often the result of not being heard. It can help to acknowledge the emotions before you address the facts of the story. Listen with your heart, not your head. Allow your child to express all emotions without judgment, criticism or analysis. Don't try to tell them how they feel, or should feel. If you are directly affected by the loss that has affected your child, be authentic about your own grief. It can help to avoid telling how to, or how not to feel (e.g. "Don't feel scared or sad").

When dealing with the death of a pet or an animal in your care, it can be helpful to talk about the relationship. In Grief Recovery we look into three types of communications that tend to help with completion: apologies, forgiveness and significant emotional statements (strong memories).

Reach out if we can support you. Or join us for our 4 part Helping Children Deal With Loss Workshop which sadly we don't have a virtual version of yet.