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Grief and Loss as Experienced by Children

Within South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has claimed the lives of at least 50 366 people to date. As statistics gradually stabilise with the hope of vaccines creating herd immunity, we continue to witness and in some cases experience ourselves, the devastating loss of people around us. With COVID regulations still in place, we have often had to mourn the loss of loved ones, often not having had the opportunity to say goodbye or find closure which we would typically get from attending funerals. Adults and children are therefore having to grieve their loss in unconventional ways which is inevitably having a vast impact on their psychological and emotional wellbeing.



Mourning Death

How children mourn death is directly associated with their developmental age and life stages. Thus, how young children experience death is quite different from that of adolescents. For young children, death is perceived as a temporary state of absence. Their thought process is grounded in concrete thinking and therefore when they don't see their loved one, the belief is that they are just absent and hold onto the hope of their return. This narrative is reinforced by cartoon characters who die but then suddenly come back to life. As they observe how others mourn loss, their belief system is challenged. The result is that they become overwhelmed with visual information but are unable to comprehend. Typically, children tend to lose their independence as they realise they are unable to change or fix what has happened and what we may observe are emotional outbursts which are fueled by anger, sadness, guilt and fear. With limited resources such as language and emotional awareness, their only way of communication is through behaviour.

Some of the reactions to death that we may observe in young children include:



- looking for the person who has died,
- finding it difficult to separate from parents,
- experiencing nightmares,
- bedwetting and/or soiling,
- psychosomatic responses such as a sore stomach or headaches,
- increased fears,
- changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns,
- expressing concern regarding the safety and health of themselves and loved ones,
- behavioural difficulties and a decline in performance at school.

An adolescent has a more comprehensive understanding of death and comes to realise that this is permanent. They experience an intensity of emotion that becomes overwhelming and anxiety-provoking. In an attempt to preserve what they view as an increased burden on their parents during their grieving process, adolescents often mask what they feel through avoidance behaviours. In addition to the reactions of a young child to death, an adolescent may also demonstrate the following behaviours:

- aggression;
- erratic moods;
- display withdrawn tendencies;
- spend more time with their friends;
- divert from emotional conversations;
- question mortality and the purpose of life;
- increased risk-taking behaviour.



When confronted with death, parents take on a dual role as they mourn their own loss as well as attempt to guide their child through the grieving process, often trying to protect them from overwhelming emotions. It is important to be aware of your own process because whilst we think children are not present when we have conversations about death or have our own moments of emotional outlet, they observe and hear more than what we know. This does not mean hide information or bottle your own emotions, rather it means inviting your child on your journey, sharing age-appropriate details. Also, you can help your child with the following guidelines as they navigate through their process by:

- Have age-appropriate conversations about death and what it means;
- Allow questions and provide honest answers that reflect their developmental age;
- Frequently reassure children of their safety, their health as well as your health;
- Keep routines and activities relatively consistent;
- Use emotive language and help them label their feelings;
- For younger children, encourage play. Children often find it difficult to converse using words and thus play can help them process what has happened. Activities to

- help encourage play can be sand play, puppets, dolls, writing, drawing, painting or various physical activities;
- For older children, writing in a journal, creating a memory box, drawing or other creative outlets can help them express their emotions and process their loss;
 - It can be helpful for parents or adults to share their feelings regarding the death of a loved one;
 - Help them remember the person who has died by writing a letter or picking an item that reminds them of the person and allowing them to talk about their memories of or with the deceased individual;
 - Model your healthy coping strategies and show your child how reaching out for help is an act of strength.

As we engage in the grieving process it is important to remember that everyone copes with loss differently. Therefore, understanding your own experiences and limitations will assist in enabling you to provide support to those around you.

Our community wants to see your child be the best that they can be so we encourage you to be courageous and ask for help

