

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN WITH ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

“Anticipatory grief” is a form of grief that occurs when there is an opportunity to anticipate the death of someone (or oneself). It is similar to the normal process of mourning, but it occurs before the actual death (in anticipation of the death).

Children and teens can be helped with coping tasks in a variety of ways. Whereas the particular issues and specific content discussed must be varied and adapted to the age of the child and the situation, it is helpful for parents and adults to keep these tips in mind.

The information in this handout is provided by the Healing Patch. It is our hope it will provide you with some support and comfort during a difficult time.



1. Be honest.

It's important to tell the truth. Provide information in a simple, direct, and developmentally appropriate way.

2. Enlist support from extended family, friends, teachers, school counselors, coaches, and other adults.

Let them know that you and your child may need their help emotionally or with everyday tasks. Children sometimes turn to others outside of their immediate family for support. They may not want to further overwhelm their caregivers, and/or they may want to talk with someone who is more emotionally detached from the situation.

3. Keep the child informed along the way.

From diagnosis to death, it's important to make sure the children understand what is happening to their loved one and how this may affect their family. For young children, it might be helpful to explain a terminal illness as a “big sick,” so it is not confused with a “little sick,” such as the common cold.

4. Have more than one conversation.

Children may shy away from conversation or refuse to discuss. Continue to occasionally revisit the subject, letting them know that they can talk to you or others. Ask them if they have any questions or concerns about the person's illness.

5. Reassure the child they are not to blame.

Children tend to find ways to blame themselves for family hardships. Reassure them that the illness/disease is not their fault.

6. Encourage the child to talk and ask questions.

Answer honestly. If you don't know the answer, it is ok to say that you don't know. Perhaps start by asking the child what they understand and help to fill in the gaps. Help to clarify any misconceptions, such as the child thinking they may “catch cancer.”

7. Encourage the child to remain involved in the loved one's decline while encouraging choices.

If permitted, encourage the child to visit their loved one, while not forcing them to do so. Make them aware of any physical or cognitive changes due to the disease process, as well as any medical equipment providing care to their loved one. Even if the person is unresponsive, they may still be able to hear the child, allowing the opportunity for closure. If a child prefers to not visit their loved one, they could write notes or draw pictures for them. Providing children choices gives a level of control at a very out-of-control time for the family. This control can provide a sense of safety.

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The Healing Patch offers a Lending Library of resources that may be helpful in starting conversations and interacting with children and adolescents. There are various books on illness, including cancer and Alzheimer's disease, and on grief and loss.

To view available resources, view the "Children's Grief Resources" page for the Healing Patch at HomeNursingAgency.com.

The Lending Library includes more than 400 resources for anyone in the community to borrow at no cost.

8. It is ok for you to cry in front of the child.

Showing your feelings in front of the children is appropriate. Children learn it is ok to cry by seeing the adults in their lives sharing tears and verbalizing their sadness.

9. Model and encourage the child to express their thoughts/feelings in healthy ways.

Write in a journal, make artwork, play sports, exercise, listen to music, etc. Although life is difficult and uncertain, encourage yourself and the child to take breaks. Allow them to keep doing extracurricular activities and spending time with family and friends.

10. Validate and discuss the secondary losses associated with the illness.

In addition to the loved one's declining health, other changes or losses may impact the family, such as seeing physical or mental limitations in their loved one, ongoing hospitalizations and medical appointments that disrupt the daily routine, and lack of normalcy and structure in their lives.

11. Be prepared to see the child in pain and support/validate their grief.

No one likes to see a child in emotional pain. It is uncomfortable, and we tend to want to cheer them up. The best thing we can do is allow them to express their pain, validate their feelings, and provide physical comfort.

12. Stop dangerous behaviors.

If the child begins expressing behaviors that are hurtful to themselves or others, seek professional assistance. Encourage the child to express feelings in ways that do not hurt themselves, others, or property.

13. Provide opportunities to make lasting memories.

While visiting their loved one, the child could participate in activities that help to create a legacy for the person. Activities could include capturing their loved one's thumb print on clay, making beaded bracelets or handprint posters, or reminiscing/journaling their life story.

14. Instill hope and family support.

Ensure the child that they will continue to be cared for, that you all will make it through the loss together, that it is ok to not be ok, and that no matter how strong a feeling may be, all feelings do pass.