

School Age Children (Ages 6-12)

When Illness or Death Happens in a Family

Children's needs are unique and they are no strangers to death and illness. As adults, we need to understand their concerns, their fantasies, and their images of death. We must also utilize teachable moments to talk about death and illness during these profound and far-reaching changes in their life.

What they may be FEELING

- They may feel sad and show their feelings through crying or withdrawing.
- They may be angry. They may get upset easier and about things that didn't bother them before.
- You may find that they show their feelings (sadness, anger etc...) over things unrelated to the illness or death or because they miss the person.
- They may be scared. They may worry about other people getting sick or dying. They may feel like their life and world is uncertain and need more reassurance.
- They may initially react with strong emotions and then at times act as though the death or illness never happened.
- They may feel guilty for things they said or did when the person was sick or feel responsible somehow.
- They may feel lonely and as if no one understands how they feel and what they are experiencing.
- They may not be able to identify exactly how they feel because this experience is new or they may not feel much at all (numb).

How they may be BEHAVING

- Difficulty in school either with grades or behavior. May also perform better in school because they are able to distract from the pain of their life experience.
- They may withdraw as a response to the changes they are experiencing.
- Their moods and behavior may change more often and unexpectedly.
- They may sometimes act like nothing happened and not want to talk or express emotions.
- Increased crying because of the sadness, stress, or changes that are happening.
- Changes in their sleep including sleeplessness, increased need for sleep, or dreams/nightmares may occur.
- Physical complaints – For example, stomach aches, nausea, emptiness inside, or headaches.
- They may regress and return to acting like they did when they were younger. For example, wanting to be held and snuggled more, fearful of sleeping alone etc...
- Increased irritability and getting upset at things that never bothered them before.
- They may take on more responsibility especially in the home and with younger siblings.

What they may be THINKING

- They have a more developed understanding of illness and death and have the ability to talk about what they are thinking.
- They begin to understand that death is final and forever. They will be affected by the emotions and responses of those around them, especially in the home or at school.
- They may have magical thinking. For example, can the person come back after dying or can I go to heaven to see them. They may think something they or their loved one did/didn't say or do caused the illness or death.
- They want to understand what is happening and may ask more questions.
- They want to understand what things cause illness and death and what is happening to the body during an illness or after death.

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How you can help

- Be Patient. Their needs increase during this time and you may feel overwhelmed.
- Remember the changes in their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are expected and often common.
- Make sure they are sleeping and eating enough.
- Keep or establish a routine for them and a consistent environment where they feel safe and comfortable.
- Give choices about visits to the hospital or bedside. Let them visit and spend time with the sick or dying person and bring them to family gathering/funerals if they want to participate.
- Answer their questions about the illness or death truthfully using age appropriate language. They may need to have their questions answered more than once to help them understand what is or has happened. For example what caused the illness and can I get it too? Why did he/she have to die or get sick? Is the illness or death a punishment?
- Use your religious and spiritual beliefs to help them understand or explain the illness or death.

When to Get Help

- When there are concerns with eating and sleeping that begin to affect their health.
- When they become extremely withdrawn or aggressive and this affects their ability to function at home and/or school.
- When they say anything or do anything to harm themselves or someone else.
- When they ask or feel they need someone (counselor) to talk to about their experience.
- When death or illness happens it is a normal and healthy response to seek counseling. You don't need to wait for something to happen before you get additional help for yourself and your children.

Where to Get Help/Resources

- For any health related concerns, contact your pediatrician or doctor.
- In any emergency call 911 or go to your local emergency room.
- For counseling and resources related to long term illness or grief and loss call Pathways Hospice at 970-663-3500.
- For counseling in the community specific to an illness talk to your hospital counselor or social worker for local community resources.
- United Way 211 has a list of community resources by topic. Dial 211 from your phone to contact them or search on line at www.211colorado.org.
- To search for a local counselor in your area go to www.healthinfosource.com.
- Contact your health insurance or EAP (Employee Assistance Program) through your Human Resources Department at work to find out more about benefits for counseling services for you and your family.