Emotions in Grief

When asked to define what grief is, most people describe it as the intense sadness experienced after a death. Unlike media representations where grief is depicted as a couple weeks of crying and then moving on, the grief experience usually extends much further than this. Grief is a whole host of emotions that show up with differing intensities and at different times, for a lifetime after loss.

It is difficult to navigate this range of emotions, especially in a society with such a narrow understanding of grief. Commonly grievers feel allowed to express sadness in the first weeks, maybe months following a loss, but then feel expected to return to pre-loss functioning. Space isn't made for the range of grief emotions, and time isn't devoted to feeling them. Many cope with this mismatch in experience and expectation by trying to deny the complex emotions coming up, both for themselves and in their children. And when emotions are ignored, they have a way of coming out in challenging ways.

For children, this can often include problematic behaviors, learning challenges, persistent sleep and/or appetite disruptions, to name a few. These can also be normal grief reactions and usually decrease or resolve as the child processes the loss, which includes being encouraged to feel their feelings. Children not able to feel their complex feelings can get stuck and these reactions can intensify, causing disruption to the child's functioning and family system. Supporting your child (and yourself) in identifying and finding healthy ways to express their complex emotions is important to your child's (and your own) grief journey.

So what are some emotions common in grief? The range can be broad, such as sadness, anger, fear, confusion, shame, love, horror, depression, relief, hope, rage, guilt, numbness, shock, joy, hopelessness, and many, many more. Challenge yourself to name some not included on this list. And while emotional vocabulary may be more limited in your child, the range of emotions they can feel is not. You can support your child in developing their emotional vocabulary by defining emotion words and exploring their experience with their emotions.

Just as important as identifying emotions is finding healthy ways to express them. No feeling is a bad or wrong feeling. What matters is how we express them. For example anger is extremely common in grief, and is a great example of an emotion that finds its way out when unexpressed. Helping your child express anger in healthy ways - screaming into a pillow, writing or talking about how angry they are – is preferable to not addressing it and it coming out as breaking something or hitting. It is also important to avoid telling a child not to feel a certain emotion. An example of this is guilt. Guilt is common in grief, and while it is important to discuss and identify what they are feeling guilty about, it is important not to invalidate the emotion by saying they have no reason to feel guilty even if it is true from your perspective. If a child feels guilty because they believe it is their fault the person died, and that is not true, you can start by saying something like, "Guilt is such a heavy, hard feeling, isn't it? You know lots of people feel guilty after someone dies even when it isn't actually their fault." Then you can provide the education that it wasn't their fault, explaining the cause of death in developmentally appropriate language, while avoiding invalidating the emotion.

The Safe Crossings Program has tons of creative and fun tools for exploring and expressing emotions. If you'd like support developing your family's emotional grief vocabulary please get in touch!

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