

Six Basic Concepts of Grief

1 Grief is a natural reaction to loss.

Grief is a natural reaction to loss. When a person dies, individuals impacted by the death experience emotional and physical reactions. This is true for infants through adults, although the reactions will vary from person to person. Grief does not feel natural, in part, because we cannot necessarily control our emotions or other responses. The sense of being out of control may be overwhelming or frightening. However, grieving is natural, normal and healthy for bereaved students and adults.

2 Each student's grief experience is unique.

While many theories and models of the grieving process provide a helpful framework of tasks or stages of grieving, the path itself is a lonely, solitary and unique one for every individual. No book, article or grief therapist can predict or prescribe exactly what a student or an adult will—or should—encounter on this path. Those who wish to assist people in grief do so best by walking with them along the path, in the role of listener and learner, allowing the griever to teach about his or her unique grief journey.

3 There are no “right” and “wrong” ways to grieve.

Coping with the death of someone does not follow a set pattern or set of rules. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve. There are, however, “helpful” choices and behaviors that are constructive and life-affirming. Other responses are “unhelpful,” destructive or even harmful, causing long-term complications. The sheer pain of loss often feels “crazy.” It may be challenging to decide which thoughts, feelings and actions are helpful, and which are not.

Following a death, grieving students get plenty of advice from others about what they should and shouldn't do, feel, think and believe. What is often more helpful than advice is non-judgmental listening. This can help grieving students sort through the options and alternatives.

4 Every death is different and will be experienced by your students in differing ways.

Students react differently to the death of a parent, sibling, friend, teacher or principal. It makes sense—each relationship meets different needs and is uniquely personal. Some of the grief literature talks about loss in an almost competitive way as if some losses are worse than others. You may read that the death of a child is “the worst loss.” Or that suicide is the hardest to “get over.” Comparisons about which death is the worst are not helpful and may lead to unrealistic expectations or demands. While a student may speak for herself about how she experienced different losses, one cannot categorically say that any loss is worse than or easier than another. Each person's way should be honored as his or her way of coping with the death.

5 The grieving process is influenced by a multitude of factors.

There are many factors that influence a student's reaction to a death. They include the following:

- Social support systems available to the student (family, school, community, friends)
- The nature of the death and how the student interprets it
- Status of “unfinished business” between the student and the person who died
- The previous nature of the relationship
- The emotional and developmental age of the student

- Community views on the death (Stigmatized deaths such as homicides, suicides and AIDS are often looked at very differently from deaths by illness or accident)

6 Grieving never ends. It is something the student will never “get over.”

This is perhaps one of the least understood aspects of grief in our society. It seems that most people are anxious for us to put the loss behind us, to go on, to get over it. When a person dies, the death leaves a vacuum in the lives of those left behind. Life is never the same again. This doesn't mean that life can never again be joyful, or that the experience of loss cannot be transformed into something positive. But grief does not have a magical ending time. People comment on the pangs of grief 40, 50 or 60 years after a death. For the student, the grieving process will be re-experienced in some new way at each developmental level or experience of personal accomplishment.