

Signs of grieving in students

(adapted from: Stevenson, RG & Stevenson EP [eds] *Teaching Students about Death*)

Feelings

- having bouts of depression and sadness
- feeling different
- being unable to respond to praise or reward
- showing lack of enjoyment from pleasurable activities
- feeling bad about oneself
- feeling guilty
- feeling pessimistic about life and sorry for oneself
- being easily tearful or crying spontaneously
- showing significant changes in facial expression and eye contact
- showing a loss of enthusiasm and excitement
- displaying irritability and excessive anger and violation of the rights of others
- being atypically confrontational; opposing authority figures
- displaying accident proneness or forgetfulness

Thoughts

- unfocused, repetitive thoughts, preoccupation, or day dreaming
- loss of ability to concentrate or think clearly
- difficulty making decisions
- preoccupation with death or loss or being alone

Behaviours

- showing significant changes in personal appearance (including dress and grooming)
- being less talkative or uneasy and restless
- showing significant changes in normal behaviours (changes in personal norms, alcohol use, stealing, promiscuity, illegal behaviour)
- experiencing a change in eating habits
- marked change in school performance
- poor grades despite trying hard
- experiencing a change in sleeping patterns
- experiencing changes in bodily functions, for example, headaches
- showing changes in habits and interests
- having low energy or lethargy
- regressing to immature behaviours
- displaying clinging behaviours
- showing social withdrawal or avoidance

Long-term impact of loss on an adolescent's behaviour at school

- Apathy and withdrawal from many aspects of school and personal life.
- Behaving badly to get punished and assuage feelings of guilt and anger.
- Imitating the behaviour of a 'lost' person to keep that person 'present'.
- Changing values because the 'quality' of life may seem more important than the 'quantity'; or feeling so low that nothing is so important to worry about.
- Being (or acting) humorous in a way that may appear tasteless or inappropriate, or joking about losses and fears; laughter can release tension, restore control or hide fears.
- The emotional energy that grieving absorbs may not leave the resources required for school work; even time spent on schoolwork may not be as productive, leaving students feeling more guilt and confusion, particularly if the grief is delayed.

Gender differences in adolescent loss reactions and coping styles

Loss reactions

Masculine grievers:

- experience psychosomatic symptoms greater than feminine grievers, in the case of parental death
- experience an increase in conflict with teachers and superiors
- experience irritability, work inhibition, and sleep disturbances
- experience preoccupation.

Feminine grievers:

- experience an increase in conflict within close relationships
- experience lower self-esteem
- experience body image distortion, loss of appetite, and weight loss
- experience moodiness
- feel 'caught' between parents in the case of divorce
- report greater intensity in their reactions such as depression, anxiety, intrusive images, and recurrent thoughts
- experience more sadness
- lack initiative
- experience concentration difficulties
- may experience a prolonged expression of grief.

Coping styles

Masculine grievers:

- partake in risk-taking behaviour
- partake in more substance abuse
- experience avoidance (negative) / introspective reflection (positive)
- don't talk because they are often unsuccessful in intimate communications
- repress the event
- live up to social norms for what is expected male behaviour
- use self-reliance.

Feminine grievers:

- talk more, particularly with friends
- identify their friends as being useful in coping
- prefer to be around others
- are more likely to report being depressed.