

# *The* Good Grief Guide

## 3 Simple First Steps *for* Parents *and* Other Caring Adults who want to Help a Grieving Child Heal

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*As a parent, it's my responsibility to equip my child to do this –  
to grieve when grief is necessary and to realize that life is still  
profoundly beautiful and worth living despite the fact  
that we inevitably lose one another and that life ends . . .*

- Sam Harris

## The Truth about Grief

Grief hurts! It's no wonder that as a caring parent you want to make your grieving child feel better as quickly as possible. Grief is widely regarded as something to be avoided.

Yet grief is impossible to avoid. It's the natural, normal reaction to loss of any kind—not just loss through death, but also divorce or the end of any significant relationship, moving or loss of friends and familiarity, loss of employment or health, and many other losses. Every single person experiences loss and grief many times in their lifetime, and every person has their first grief experience in childhood.

Painful as it is, there's a purpose for grief. It can teach us precious lessons about what it means to be human and how to cope well with life's challenges. When we allow ourselves to feel grief and go through it, it can be *good* grief. Good grief brings healing and growth.

Through their childhood grief experiences children learn how to cope with future life events—for better or for worse. The things adults teach are the things they learned when they were growing up. Not knowing any differently, many parents model and pass on to their children unhelpful responses to grief. Any parent can give their child the gift of good grief. But first it may be necessary to unlearn what they learned about grief as a child.

With accurate information you can begin to build the foundation for good grief experiences. Three simple steps presented in this guide will help you examine what you believe about grief, discover misconceptions you may have about grief, and adapt your responses to loss in ways that will help your grieving child heal.

### Step 1: Become aware of the beliefs and attitudes that influence how you respond to your grieving child. Some questions to consider are listed below.

- Do you try to avoid unpleasant feelings of sadness or emotional pain by ignoring or denying them? Or do you acknowledge painful emotions as very real and valid?
- Does it make you uncomfortable and perhaps even anxious to be around someone who is grieving? Or are you inclined to offer comfort and support to the grieving?
- Do you believe that avoiding or bypassing negative feelings is a good thing to do? Or do you believe that it is better to recognize and allow negative and painful feelings?
- Do you believe that it is your job as a parent to soothe and protect your child in difficult circumstances? Or do you approach difficult circumstances with caring and support that teach your child to face and cope with life's challenges?
- Do you tend to try to fix an unpleasant feeling or situation that your child is experiencing? Or do you tend to empathize and acknowledge your child's feelings?
- Do you believe it's best not to talk to children about difficult things that are affecting them? Or do you believe it's important for children to have the opportunity to talk about hard things?
- Do you believe that everyone should be able to get over grief fairly quickly? Or do you believe that each person grieves in his or her own way and timing?

Awareness of your beliefs and attitudes is the first step toward recognizing and understanding how you respond to grief—your own grief, as well as others'. The next step is to identify common misconceptions about grief and commonly offered responses that do little to help a grieving person feel better. It's likely you are familiar with several of them.

## **Step 2:** Recognize and set aside common unhelpful misconceptions about grief, children and healing. A few of those myths are listed below.

**Myth:** Everyone should get over grief as quickly as possible.

**Truth:** There is no timetable for grief. It is an important part of healing after loss that is unique to each person. There's no predictable sequence, roadmap or statute of limitations for grief, and there's no one "right" way to grieve. No one has the right to tell you that you should be "over it by now" or that it's "time to move on."

**Myth:** The pain of loss will go away faster if you ignore it.

**Truth:** Ignoring your pain or keeping busy may distract you, but it won't make you feel better or help you get over your grief. The only way past the pain is to allow yourself to grieve. Find safe and comfortable settings where you can express your feelings with trusted friends or family, in a support group, or through artistic expression. It's important to honor your grief and take care of yourself.

**Myth:** It is best to "be strong" and not show painful emotions.

**Truth:** It's important for everyone who grieves to allow and express their painful emotions in order to heal. While you don't want to frighten your child with excessive emotion, you set a healthy example for your child by sharing your own feelings about the loss. Children need to know that feeling sad, frightened, angry or lonely are acceptable reactions and that crying is okay. They will learn that their feelings are normal and that it is okay to talk about them.

**Myth:** Children don't experience grief as deeply as adults do.

**Truth:** Children grieve just as deeply as adults; they just express it differently. Because their attention span is shorter, they tend to move in and out of grief, expressing grief in varying intensity. Each child's response is based on the knowledge and skills developmentally available to them. They have simpler coping skills than adults and limited capacity to deal with the reality of the loss. Even infants and toddlers grieve deeply. Anyone bonded to another will recognize when that person is no longer with them and feel the pain of the loved one's absence.

**Myth:** If a child seems okay, he must be okay.

**Truth:** Because children don't mourn the same way adults do, their grief is often not recognized. They may appear to be unaffected, playing and behaving as before. They grieve losses in spurts, several times a day. They don't understand their feelings or know that what they're feeling is grief. They may be confused and scared and don't know what to expect, although they may never express those feelings. The grief they feel goes unnoticed, often even by those close to them who don't bring up the loss for fear of reminding or upsetting them.

**Myth:** Children should be protected from difficult emotions they experience in response to loss.

**Truth:** It's impossible to prevent children from feeling emotions that are natural responses to life events. They need opportunities to talk about their loss and difficult feelings. Often adults try to make a child feel better rather than helping them cope with the emotion. They may give the child something to help them get over the loss or simply avoid the topic. These tactics don't work. Grief is a response to a unique relationship that has ended, and nothing can replace it. A new puppy does not replace the beloved family pet that died. Avoiding the subject doesn't lessen the pain.

Children need for adults to be truthful and open with them. It helps them make sense of what's happening. Answer their questions with simple, honest information. State that the person "died." Avoid saying he "passed away," "is sleeping" or "has gone away," which can be very confusing to children. Rather than giving specific details, you might say that the person was very sick or very old, and his body wouldn't work anymore. Be sure to explain that there are different ways people get sick, and that often people get better and do not die.

**Myth:** Someone who is grieving prefers to be left alone.

**Truth:** Some grievors may prefer solitude, but others would love to have someone to talk to. Grieving children aren't always able to ask for what they want. Adults can help by being nearby, wherever the child is. Asking a simple open-ended question to invite conversation and sharing your own memories of the person who died can communicate that you're a safe person to talk to about this huge life experience. Avoid offering advice or telling your child how to feel or what to think. Listen. Your availability and silent presence can be the best gift.

**Myth:** Time heals all wounds; you will get over your grief in time.

**Truth:** This false belief is probably the single greatest detriment to recovery from loss. Time does nothing to heal grief. It is what you do in time that heals. Recovery from grief or loss requires making a series of small and positive action choices that move you to a better place. Even in that better place, you won't "get over" grief. It becomes a part of who you are, and you learn to live with it. Grief softens and erupts less frequently as time goes on, but it can revisit at any time and in varying intensity when you are reminded of your loss.

These misguided ideas about grief do little to make a grieving person feel better and actually can inhibit healing. Being familiar with these myths and replacing them with accurate information clears the way for you to offer more helpful and healthy support to your grieving child and others. You can begin right away with some simple suggestions.

### **Step 3:** Learn and use helpful approaches in response to children's feelings of sadness and grief. Begin with the suggestions listed below.

- **Avoid** responses that discourage sad and painful feelings. Adults often try to distract a hurting child by giving them something to be happy about or something to make them feel better.

Instead of:

- "Don't cry! Let's go get some of your favorite ice cream."
- "At least we still have Buddy, and we can get a new puppy next week."

Say:

- "You must feel so sad."
- "It is so sad to lose a best friend. You loved Champ, and you will miss him!"

- **Ask**, “What happened?” if you don’t know why a child is crying. Stop what you are doing, look at your child, and listen to his answer without interrupting.

Then you might say something like:

- “I can understand why you feel so sad.”
- “I would be sad, too, if that happened to me.”

- **Be** a safe person for your child to talk to when he or she is sad. Be available. Listen. Avoid judging their feelings or telling them what to feel or do instead.

Instead of:

- “Why don’t you go visit Joey? You always have fun with him.”
- “Try to think happy thoughts.”

Say:

- “Would you like me to sit with you?”
- “I can see that you’re feeling sad. Do you want to tell me about it?”

- **Teach** by example. It’s okay to let your child know when you’re feeling sad about something. If you need to cry when your child is around, it’s okay to do it in front of him.

Say:

- “I am feeling very sad about Grampa today. I wish he didn’t die.”
- “I really miss your brother today!”

- **Allow** your child to be a child. Avoid encouraging your child to be a “big boy” or a “big girl.” Don’t tell a child to be “the man/grownup of the house” or be “strong for your mother/little brother, etc.”

- **Agree** with their difficult emotion.

Say:

- “I can see you’re feeling sad today, and I’m sad too.”
- “I am so sad that your brother died. You must miss him very much!”
- “I get angry sometimes, too.”

- **Share** your own sad experiences.

For example: “When I was a girl I lost my toy Wally the Walrus when he floated away from me at the beach. I was sad for a long time. I still remember how bad I felt!”

- **Give** hugs, sit silently nearby, agree with their feelings, invite them to talk, say “I am here” and “I love you.”

Your child will live with grief throughout his/her lifetime. S/he will revisit significant childhood losses in new ways as s/he grows through the developmental stages and experiences of life—and your child will encounter new grief. Having authentic, warm, and supportive dialogue with your child, and helping your child to understand and accept grief are keys to establishing a good grief foundation for dealing effectively with loss. This is one of the greatest gifts you can give your child.

For more parenting support and information about children and grief visit [www.goodgriefparenting.com](http://www.goodgriefparenting.com).