



Waves of Healing:

GRIEF AND PLAY THERAPY

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UVU Play Therapy Conference

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Learning Objectives

UPON COMPLETION OF THIS COURSE, PARTICIPANTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

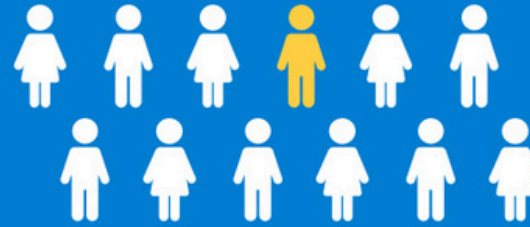
1. DESCRIBE THREE COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS IN CHILDREN ACROSS DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

2. IDENTIFY TWO PLAY THERAPY INTERVENTIONS FOR GRIEF.

3. DEMONSTRATE ONE PLAY THERAPY INTERVENTION FOR HONORING MEMORY.



1 in 12



children in the U.S. will experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18

8.3% ~ 6.0M
children will be bereaved by age 18



& MORE THAN
DOUBLES

14.7M
youth will be bereaved by age 25

STATS

GRIEF-RELATED ADVERSITY

Issues at home, financial strain, death of an important figure, move/loss of community, mental health concerns

HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Good health, strong relationships, school success, job stability, self-sufficiency

DISRUPTED DEVELOPMENT

Mental health concerns, relationship difficulties, academic problems, reduced resilience/self-esteem, early mortality

GRIEF CARE PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Caring community, positive role models, healthy coping skills, peer support, encouraging educators



UTAH

**1 in 15 children will
experience the
death of a sibling
or parent by
age 18**

**Grief doesn't move
in a straight line. It
comes in waves—
sometimes
manageable,
sometimes
overwhelming. Just
like the ocean, it can
shift from moment
to moment.**





Tide Pool

On some moments/days, grief feels like a tide pool—a quiet, still space where we can look gently at what's there.

We may feel reflective or tender
The emotions are accessible, but not overpowering

We can name what we're feeling—
sadness, gratitude, longing
It feels safe enough to sit beside the grief and notice its shape
These are days where grief is present, but we have space to breathe and explore it.



Other times, grief crashes in like a powerful wave, pulling us under without warning.

A smell, a date, a photo, or a song might trigger a sudden swell

We may feel disoriented, overwhelmed, or numb

Emotions may tumble together—rage, despair, loneliness, guilt

It can feel like we're drowning in sorrow, unable to catch our breath

These are days when grief consumes, rather than sits quietly beside us.





Both Are Normal

The presence of both tide pool and big wave days is not a sign of failure—it's part of grief's natural rhythm. Over time, the waves may get smaller, but they still come.

Learning to ride the waves—rather than fight or fear them—builds emotional resilience.

Understanding Children's Grief

- Children are concrete in their thinking
- Children generalize from the specific to the general
- Children are repetitive in their grief
- Children are physical in their grief
- Children grieve cyclically
- Children need control
- Children grieve as part of the family



Grief and Loss

“Children grieve in cycles. For example, they may be more inclined to play and divert their focus from the death when the death is recent and parents are grieving intensely. More than adults, children need time to take a break from grief. It is important to know that it’s okay to take a break. Having fun or laughing is not disrespectful to the person who died; this is a vital part of grieving, too“

- (Dougy center.org)



Factors Affecting Grief

- The age of the survivor and person who died
- The nature of the death- anticipated or unanticipated, violent or natural cause
- The relationship between the survivor and the deceased
- The survivor's support system (specifically caregivers)
- The emotional and mental health of the individual griever



Possible Grief Reactions in Children

Children are unique in their grief responses. The reactions depend on many factors including: age, personality, their relationship with the deceased, environmental influences, culture, etc.

1. Sadness and Loneliness
2. Denial- “They will come back”
3. Bodily Distress- i.e. tightness in throat or chest, loss of appetite, loss of energy, stomach aches, sleeping problems, headaches, etc. (Some may worry that they have the same illness/disease that the deceased had).
4. Anger- A normal and healthy grief reaction that needs to be expressed in appropriate ways
5. Guilt- Some children believe that they somehow caused the death. They need constant reassurance that they are not responsible for the death.

Possible Grief Reactions continued

6. Depression- feeling helpless, lethargic, apathetic, alone, withdrawn
7. Assumption of the mannerisms of the deceased- may try to imitate walking or talking patterns of the deceased
8. Idealization of the Deceased
9. Anxiety and Fear
10. Panic- “Who will take care of me now? What if something happens to mom? Some children express fears about going to school or leaving a surviving parent alone
11. Regression- Some children may regress to younger behavior patterns such as thumb-sucking and bed-wetting
12. School problems- difficulty concentrating or completing homework.
13. Behavioral problems, especially acting out in anger.

TALKING STICK

Supplies:

- Wooden Dowel (12 in)
- Paint (washable)
- Paint brushes
- Paper Plates

Purpose/ Themes:

- Expressing feelings- everyone has a voice
- Leaving their mark- legacy
- Group or family intervention:

Instructions:

1. Each person chooses a color of paint
2. Sit in a circle around a table. Pass around the stick.
3. The person who is holding the stick paints their hand and leaves their handprints on the stick
4. When they paint the stick, have them share a memory of the person who died.
5. After the stick dries, use it as a ritual to share feelings



Developmental Stages for Children in Grief

Infancy to Toddlers (0-3 years of age)

- Babies can miss and yearn for the sound, smell, sight or feel of the deceased.
- There is no concept of death.
- The child reacts to the emotions and feelings of the parents.
- The grief of others permeates their environment.

Reactions:

- Infants who are grieving may become agitated, rock, thrash, cry or knock their heads
- They may have difficulty eating and sleeping.
- They may become sick with colds or indigestion.
- Regression in toilet habits
- Anger outbursts and temper tantrums

Interventions:

- Give a lot of physical contact and reassuring attention
- Maintain the routine for physical needs: i.e. feedings, sleep schedules, playtime.
- Hold the child gently while they are crying and reassure with, “I love you and I am here.”
- Appropriate ways to express the “big energy” of anger and grief



Preschool (ages 3-5)



Developmental Stage/Task

- Narcissistic and Egocentric-They believe they cause or solve problems. Believe world centers around them.
- Lack cognitive understanding of death and related concepts.
- Limited language skills.
- Death seen as reversible, as abandonment, not permanent. Deny death as normal or final process
- Common conflicting statements: “Did you know my mom died? When will she be home?”
- They equate death with sleep. In time, the person will awaken.
- Death is measured in degrees - "kind of" dead to "real" dead.
- Children this age live mostly in the present.

Ages 3-5 Continued

Grief Responses:

- Intensive response but brief intervals.
- Very present oriented.
- Most aware of changes in patterns of care.
- Ask questions repeatedly.
- May show little concern when told of a death.
- May regress to infantile behavior.
- Fears separation from significant others.



Signs of Distress

- Regression: changes in eating and sleeping patterns, and potty-training.
- Bed wetting or Enuresis
- General irritability and confusion.
- Temper tantrums and behavioral issues

Interventions:

- Short, honest answers, frequent repetition. Do not use clichés.
- Lots of reassurance and nurturing.
- Consistent routine
- Play is their outlet for grief.
- Respond to their security needs.

Ages 4-7

Developmental State/Task

- Gaining a sense of autonomy
- Exploring the world outside of self.
- Gaining language.
- Fantasy wishing and thinking.
- Initiative phase seeing self as the initiator. Concerns of guilt.

Concept of Death

- Death still seen as reversible.
- Personification of death.
- Feeling of responsibility because of wishes and thoughts. Common statements: “It’s my fault. I was mad and wished she’d die.”

Grief Response

- More verbalization.
- Great concern with process. How? Why? Repetitive questioning.
- May act as though nothing has happened. General distress and confusion.
- Less willing to talk about death.
- Grief reactions ebb and flow.



Ages 4-7 Continued

Signs of Distress:

- Nightmares, sleeping and eating disturbed.
- Possible violent play. Attempts to take on role of person who died.
- High anxiety.

Interventions:

- Respond compassionately.
- Refrain from using clichés.
- Be responsive to their needs.
- Reassurance.
- Use art and stories to aid their expression of grief. Symbolic play using drawings and stories
- Allow and encourage expression of energy and feelings through physical outlets
- Talk about it.



Ages 9-12

Developmental Stage/ Task:

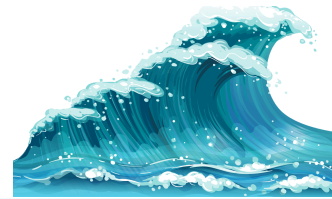
- Concrete thinking.
- Self-confidence develops.
- Beginning of socialization.
- Development of cognitive ability.
- Beginning of logical thinking



Concept of Death

- This is a difficult transition period, still wanting to see death as reversible but beginning to see it as final.
- View death not only as final but inevitable.
- Curious about the biological aspects of death.
- To hide their fear, they often joke about death.
- Not unusual for them to feel some responsibility for the death

Ages 9-12 Continued



Grief Response

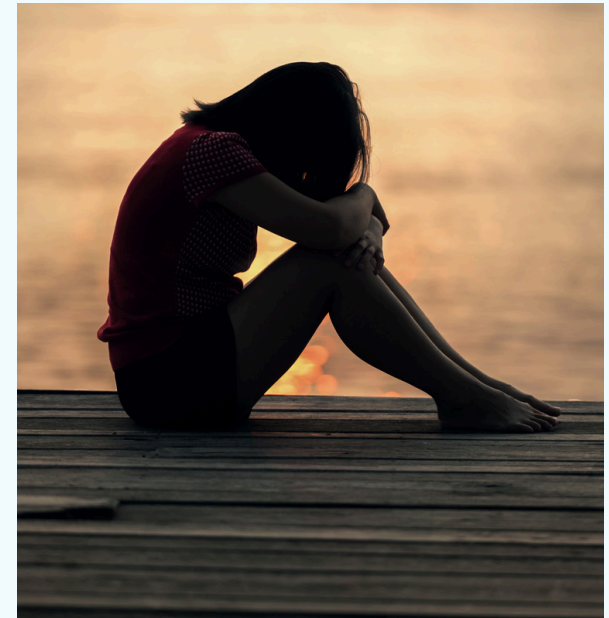
- Specific questions. Desire for complete detail.
- Concerned with how others are responding. What is the right way to respond?
- Starting to have ability to mourn and understand mourning.
- Daydreaming. At school, grades may fall.
- This is the "fix it" age.

Signs of Distress

- Regression: school problems, withdrawal from friends.
- Acting out.
- Sleeping and eating disturbed.
- Overwhelming concern with body.
- Death thoughts (desire to join one who died).

Possible Interventions

- Answer questions (developmentally appropriate)
- Encourage expression of range of feelings.
- Explain options and allow for choices.
- Be available but allow alone time.
- Symbolic plays.
- Allow for physical outlets.
- Listen and allow for talk about the death.



Teens (13-18)

Developmental Stage/Task

- Formal operational problem solving.
- Abstract thinking.
- Integration of one's own personality.

Concept of Death

- A more "ADULT" approach.
- Ability to abstract.
- Beginning to conceptualize death.
- Work at making sense of teachings.

Grief Response

- Extreme sadness.
- Denial.
- Regression.
- More often willing to talk to people outside of family and peer support.
- They have feelings of immortality at the same time realizing life is fragile.
- To defy death, they engage in risk taking behavior.
- Traditional mourning.



Teens 13-18 continued

Signs of Distress

- Depression.
- Suicidal thoughts
- Non-compliance.
- Rejection of former teaching.
- Acting out.

REACTIONS

- Preoccupation with death.
- May attempt suicide as a gesture.
- Often show anger and aggression.
- Assume the adult role, especially with younger siblings.



INTERVENTIONS

- Encourage communication and verbalization.
- Involve a trusted friend.
- Engage in loving confrontation when needed.
- Provide professional help when necessary.
- Encourage self motivation.
- Listen. Be available.
- Do not attempt to take grief away.

The Bill of Rights of Grieving Teens

By Teens at The Dougy Center

A grieving teen has the right....

- ...to know the truth about the death, the deceased, and the circumstances.
- ...to have questions answered honestly.
- ...to be heard with dignity and respect.
- ...to be silent and not tell you her/his grief emotions and thoughts.
- ...to not agree with your perceptions and conclusions.
- ...to see the person who died and the place of the death.
- ...to grieve any way she/he wants without hurting self or others.
- ...to feel all the feelings and to think all the thoughts of his/her own unique grief.
- ...to not have to follow the “Stages of Grief” as outlined in a high school health book.
- ...to grieve in one’s own unique, individual way without censorship.
- ...to be angry at death, at the person who died, at God, at self, and at others.
- ...to have his/her own theological and philosophical beliefs about life and death.
- ...to be involved in the decisions about the rituals related to the death.
- ...to not be taken advantage of in this vulnerable mourning condition and circumstances.
- ...to have guilt about how he/she could have intervened to stop the death.



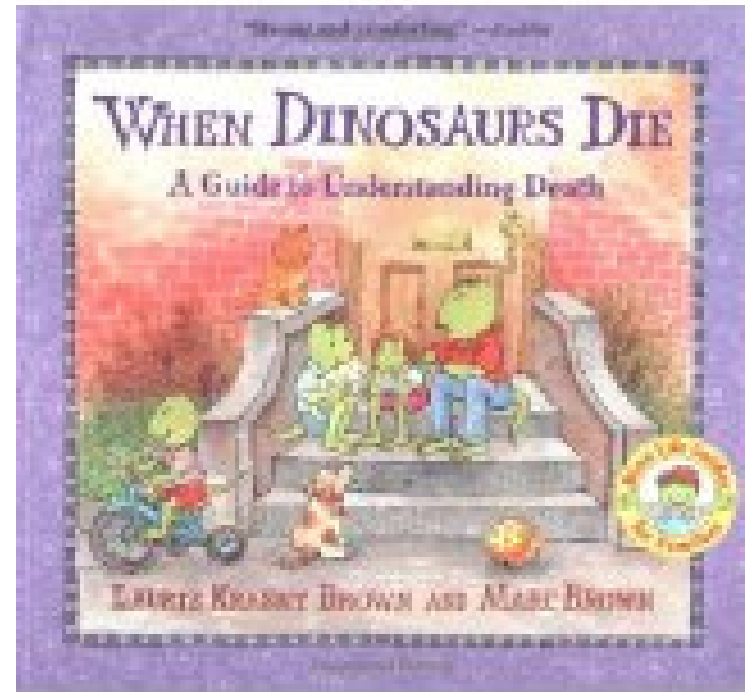
First Task: To understand that the person is dead

1. Children want to know what happened. They need honest, direct, factual information in order to understand the person is dead. Curiosity and speculation about the death are healthy parts of the process. (Developmentally appropriate answers and listen to what they are asking)
2. Dead is an abstract concept that takes time to understand. Children often feel that the person who died is gone temporarily. The younger the thinking ability, the longer time it takes for them to understand it is permanent.
3. We must have open discussions about death as a part of life to expand their understanding.
4. Each developmental stage, children will reprocess the death again.



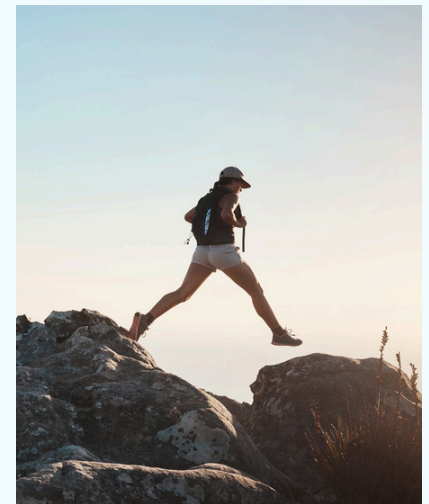
PLAY THERAPY INTERVENTIONS

- Dead, Alive or Fake Game
- Glove & Hands
- Feelings Charades
- Playing dead/ Revive
- Feelings box (coping skills)
- Reenacting event through imaginary play or sand tray (need medical supplies, dolls, dress up and death related sand tray figures)



Second Task: To Feel the Feelings about the person dying

1. Absence. Grief becomes a feeling in our bodies of the “goneness of the person who died”
2. Grief is physical and needs physical outlets movement and play is the language of grief children. The language is full of symbols and metaphors about their feelings.
3. All feeling are okay



BIG ENERGY PLAY

- Children often times feel great big feelings and experience these feelings in great big ways in their bodies but lack the communication abilities to adequately describe what it is that they are feeling.
- Helping kids connect and understand to their bodies and where they feel emotions. Somatic complaints can help them understand their emotions which are underlying their physical hurt and discomfort
- Sometimes there are no words for the feelings and emotions in grief



BIG ENERGY INTERVENTIONS

The “big energy” of grief. Children show grief through behavior and grief has a lot of energy. They need large motor activities to work through sadness, anger, confusion, etc.

- Tearing up phone books- write what makes you angry and tear it up. Usually results in a torn paper fight
- Sword fight with swimming noodles
- Snowball fight with Marshmallows
- Volcano room
- Bubble wrap
- Punch or splat balls



Defenses

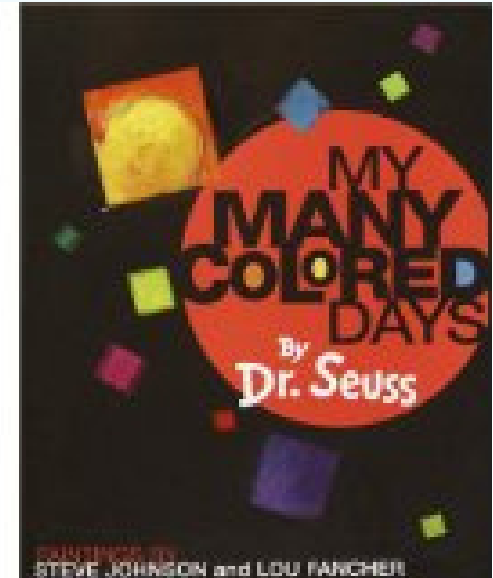


Defenses	Behavior	Meaning
Combative/Acting Out	Showing a display of power	Hiding Powerlessness
Overachieving	“Trying to be good.”	Feeling “bad” or responsible for the death
Withdrawal	Quiet, unproductive	Expressing Powerlessness

My Many Colored Days

Supplies:

- My Many Colored Days
- Food Coloring
- Shaving Cream
- Paper
- Bowls & Spoons
- Paintbrushes



1. Read Book- Discuss that there are lots of feelings associated with grief
2. Put small food coloring in bottom of bowl and put shaving cream on top.
3. Describe that sometimes we hide our feelings from others
4. Stir the Shaving cream and as the food coloring shows process what emotion that color reminds them off.
5. Do several different colors labeling emotions
6. Have client paint picture describing their grief feelings.

Third Task: To go on Living and Loving after the person has died

1. Coming to terms with the death
2. When we begin to heal, we move from
“Why did it happen?” to
“What can I do now?” to
“How am I going to do it?”
3. Sometimes, someone who is grieving feels happiness and then feels guilty and disloyal to the dead one. Encourage children and adults to take a “time out” from grief.



TEAR SOUP

Supplies:

- Tear Soup by Pat Schweibert
- Pot
- Long spoon
- Play food (vegetables, etc)

Purpose/ Themes:

- To express feelings of sadness and emphasize with family members.
- Identify similarities and differences in grief process.
- Provide opportunity to share memories of deceased.

Instructions:

1. Read Book
2. Make your own tear soup having each person share a memory when they add the vegetables.



TIBETAN PRAYER FLAGS

- “Prayer flags” is borrowed from a Tibetan tradition of hanging small colorful flags mostly in the Himalayas (esp. Nepal).
- For over 2,000 years, this has been a way to send prayers of peace, compassion and strength out into the world as the wind blows the messages through the air.
- The prayers, mantras and symbols written on the flags are intended to benefit and bless all beings.
- The flags can be messages to the person who died carried in the wind.

Supplies:

- Fabric or sheets
- Colorful permanent markers
- Twine or rope
- Tear fabric into flag strips (2"x8" or 6-8 square). Decorate with a simple drawing or painting and/or write to convey your message Fold the top edge over the string and sew or staple. Then hang in a place exposed to the elements.



OTHER INTERVENTIONS:

- Candle ceremony
- What I miss most, miss least?
- Before death, death and after sand tray
- Grief pamphlet- what to and not to say
- Memory stone/ (sanctuary)





People tend to believe that grief shrinks over time



What really happens is that we grow around our grief

Resources:

<https://nacg.org/>

<https://www.dougy.org/>

<https://judishouse.org/>

<https://www.newyorklife.com/assets/foundation/docs/pdfs/2024-State-of-Grief-Report.pdf>

<https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/grief/>

<https://infoaboutkids.org/emotions/trauma/>

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