

How Can I Tell When My Grieving Child Needs Help?

by Mommy's Light Lives On Fund®
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As a relative or friend of a grieving family, you may notice changes in the children/teens' behaviors. While some of these behavioral changes may fall within a normal range, some do not.

RED FLAGS - Signs that a grieving child/teen needs immediate help:

- Hurting himself
- Hurting someone else
- Damaging property

Hurting oneself or someone else includes:

- Self-injury
- Having more "accidents" or getting hurt more than usual
- Saying that she wants to die
- Threatening to hurt someone else
- Treating other people badly, so much so that she is losing friends

If you are the child/teen's parent or guardian, immediately contact your child/teen's health care provider or school counselor for bereavement support referrals. If you are a relative or family friend, share this information with the child/teen's parent or guardian.

YELLOW FLAGS - Signs that a grieving child/teen might need more support.

A yellow flag is just like a yellow light: it means caution. Note – As a relative or family friend, these yellow flag behaviors may be difficult to observe because you do not know what is happening when you are not around. If you are in the position to observe any of these yellow flag behaviors, then you may want to share this information with the child/teen's parent or guardian. Be sensitive to the situation and do not use this list as an opportunity to "help" where your "help" is not wanted or asked for.

Asks for help: The child/teen indicates he wants additional help.

Never speaks about the person who died: The child/teen chooses never to talk about the person who died, even when others bring it up. The child/teen perceives that she has no one with whom to speak.

Expresses excessive anger: When someone dies, children/teens (and adults) often feel angry and/or frustrated. That's okay and healthy. Too much anger or frustration, however, can cause a child/teen to feel overwhelmed or out of control, and that can be unhealthy.

Has physical symptoms that do not have an obvious physical

cause: Children/teens who are grieving, like adults, might have physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach aches. This is normal. If these symptoms persist, the parent or guardian may want to take the child/teen to a health care provider. If nothing physical is found to be wrong, and a child/teen continues to have physical symptoms, the parent or guardian may want to consider getting additional help.

Significantly changes social interactions: Some children/teens do not interact with friends and family as they did before the death. A period of withdrawal is normal and healthy. If the withdrawal persists and the child/teen does not resume some activities outside of school, the parent or guardian may want to talk with her. This isolation may be a sign of needing additional help.

Has dramatic changes in academic performance: Many children/teens' grades change during the year in which the death occurs. If the grade changes continue into the following academic year, or other changes in performance continue for months, the parent or guardian may want to consider that the child/teen might benefit from more help.

Is overachieving: We tend not to recognize a dramatic increase in performance or participation as a sign of grief because it looks like things are "going well." Significant changes occur for a reason. It's important to try to understand the reasons for any dramatic change, regardless of whether it is perceived as positive or negative.

Guilt: Almost all children/teens feel guilt or regret about something related to the death. "I didn't get to say goodbye." "We had a huge fight." Many children/teens need information about why the death was not their fault. Guilt is the one emotion it's important to ask about: "Most children feel guilt about something related to their mom's death. Do you?"

Fear and worry: New fears often emerge after a death. A child/teen might be afraid that someone else will die, or worry that he will get sick, or be left alone. When fear and worry keep a child/teen from doing what he wants to do, he might benefit from additional help.

Anxiety: Most children/teens will be anxious after someone dies. For many, the anxiety decreases within months. For some, anxiety persists, causing behavioral changes, and might interfere with a child/teen's interactions with others.

How Do I Get More Help For A Grieving Child/Teen?

There are professionals who can help, including counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers. Health care providers or

counselors may be able to refer you to professionals who specialize in childhood and teen bereavement. Often the best referrals are from families who have benefited from bereavement counseling.

What to Look For in a Bereavement Professional:

- Ask about the professional's specific education and experience with bereaved children and teens.
- Ask how many bereaved children/teens the professional has treated.
- Ask what format the bereavement support will take (group or individual) and how often and how long each session will run.

Any professional who tells or encourages a child/teen to "get over the death" or to "grow up" is unlikely to help your child/teen.

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