

Helping Children & Teens Cope with Fear After a Death

from The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

It's common for children and teens to have an increased sense of fear and anxiety after a death. (It's common in adults, too.) Children and teens's questions and concerns are normal: *How will we live without the person who died? Who will take care of us? Will someone else die? Where do people go after they die? Will I die, too?*

Some children and teens develop fears about places or circumstances related to the death. They might get nervous or uncomfortable encountering reminders like driving by the hospital, hearing a fire-truck siren, or going to the doctor. Fear is the body's natural alarm for danger. When someone dies, it is natural for our bodies to be on "high alert." Acknowledging that this is a normal reaction can help reduce children feeling overwhelmed. Knowing how to help your child or teen can be challenging. We are here to offer support.

Listen and Ask Questions

Try hard to just listen instead of thinking about what to say.

It's natural to want to reassure children and teens and take away their fears, but it can be more helpful to **start by listening and really hearing their worries.** If you want to offer reassurance, do so without making promises that can't be kept. For example, children and teens may worry that you or someone else they know will die too. Rather than saying, "Don't worry honey, I won't die," it's more helpful to say something like, "I know you're worried about other people dying too. While everyone does die, I plan to take good care of myself and to be here for a very long time. If something were to happen to me, there will always be someone to take care of you."

Ask what they need.

Children and teens often know what they need, but may not feel like their ideas are valid or worthy. Look for opportunities to ask children and teens what they need, and validate their suggestions. If a child gets panicky when a fire truck goes by, start by noticing and saying, "When the fire truck goes by, you seem to get scared and cover your ears." Then ask what's needed: "When you get scared about the fire truck, what do you think would be helpful? What could I do to help you feel safe? What could you do to help yourself feel safe?"

Talk Together

Help children and teens acknowledge their fears.

When fears arise, children can feel overwhelmed. Their natural instinct may be to push the fears away. As an adult, you will likely also want to push fears away for your children or teens so that they feel better. As scary as fears are, it's more helpful to start by acknowledging them, rather than dismiss or minimize them. While it might seem strange at first, saying fears out loud can be a positive step toward facing and coping with fear. Your child or teen might say, "I'm scared right now and worried that something bad will happen if I go to sleep," or "Being in the car makes me nervous because of the accident." It can help if you ask about their fears and help model saying them out loud. Helping children and teens acknowledge their fears can help stop the fears from growing stronger.



Night time can also bring up a lot of worries and fears after a death. Children and teens often find it difficult to fall asleep or will wake up with nightmares.

Some children might want to sleep in the same room or bed with their parent or siblings.

Even those who are okay sleeping by themselves might need additional comforts like leaving a light on, having the door open, being read to sleep, or holding a special stuffed animal.



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Provide solid and helpful information.

Some fears and worries are rooted in a lack of knowledge. You can help children and teens manage their fears by asking if they have questions about the death or the person who died. Answer honestly, in language they can understand. You can also ask them what they think and what they have heard from other people. Sometimes just having the details they're wondering about will lessen their fears.

Encourage children to investigate their fears.

Invite children and teens to be detectives about their fears. If they're afraid something's hiding under the bed, get down on the floor with a flashlight and look under the bed with them. Find out what they're afraid might happen: "What are you afraid will happen if something is hiding under the bed?" You might help them explore where they feel the fear starting in their bodies (in my throat; in my stomach; in my shoulders). Where does it travel to next? What seems to make their fear get bigger? What makes it smaller? You can also encourage them to talk to their fears. It could sound something like, "I hear you fear, but I don't want to talk to you anymore tonight, I need to get some sleep. I'll check in with you again tomorrow."

Provide Comfort

Establish routines.

Because so much has changed that children and teens couldn't control, consistency and predictability go a long way towards helping them feel safe after a death. Routines around going to bed, meal times, school, and activities can provide reassuring structure. While routines are helpful, it's also good to remain flexible and allow for things to shift and change when needed.

Offer choices.

When someone dies, children and teens, as well as adults, often feel powerless and out of control. Providing choices helps to rebuild a sense of control, and lessens their fears about the world being unsafe. These choices can be as small as, "Which of these two cereals do you want?" or as big as, "Would you like to attend the memorial service?"

Help children create a comfort thought or image.

Fears often show up in the form of a repetitive thought or image that children can't get out of their minds. Trying to push the image or thought away doesn't usually work very well, and sometimes makes the fear grow even louder. Encourage children and teens to come up with a phrase or an image that they find comforting, instead. Every time the scary fear or thought arises, they can replace it with their comfort thought or image. For example, after seven-year-old Maya's dad died in his sleep, she became fearful that bad things always happen at night. She was also frightened by the memory of ambulance lights flashing outside her bedroom window. Maya loves giraffes, so she and her mom cut out a picture of a giraffe and pasted it on a piece of paper with the words "It's safe to sleep" drawn in bright pink crayon. They framed it and put it on the table next to Maya's bed so that she could look at it anytime she wanted.



When bad or sad things happen, it's natural to be afraid more bad things will happen.

Our Mission

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences.

The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from over 40,000 Dougy Center participants over the past three decades. To order online, visit www.dougy.org or www.tdcbookstore.org or call 503.775.5683.



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