

Childhood Grief & Loss

developed by: Susan Dannen, LISW



Child Care Resource & Referral

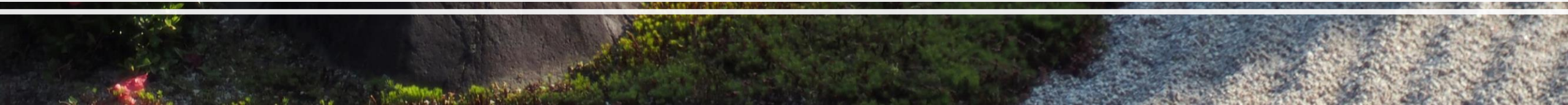
Session Overview

A lit tealight candle in a silver holder is positioned on the right side of the image, casting a warm glow. To the left, several white chrysanthemum flowers are arranged, with green leaves visible behind them. The background is a dark, textured surface.

- Grief & Loss Model
- How Children Understand Grief & Loss after a Death
- Ambiguous Loss: Unresolved Grief
- Traumatic Grief
- Grief & Schools



Model of Grief





“The pain of grief is just as much a part of life
as the joy of love . . .” Colin Murray Parkes



- Grief is a natural set of emotions that impact us after a loss
- Grief isn't a single emotion, but something we experience mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually

Tonkin's Model of Grief

- **Fallacy** “stages of grief”
- **Fallacy** “healing from grief”
- **Grief never goes away, life just grows around it: Lois Tokin**





How Children Understand Grief & Loss

<https://www.hamiltonsfuneralhome.com/academy-of-grief-and-loss/grief-loss-resources>

https://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home/Topics/Topics/Emotional+Health/Understanding+death+and+dying_+Ages+and+stages.aspx

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hard-realities/201301/how-do-children-comprehend-the-concept-death>



Concepts of Death

Developmental Level & Experience

- **Nonfunctionality:** physical activity stops once something dies
- **Irreversibility:** once something dies it can't come back to life
- **Universality:** all living things eventually die

Infants: 0-6 Months

- Memory of specific personal relationships is undeveloped
- There is no ability to understand death
- A loss may be felt, as an absence or sense of “something different.”
- Impact can be “imprinted” in mind

<https://ummc-eap.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/DeathByAgeGroup.pdf>

https://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home/Topics/Topics/Emotional+Health/Understanding+death+and+dying_+Ages+and+stages.aspx



Infants 1-2 Years

- Death of a primary caregiver will usually result in **unhappiness & depression**
- No ability to attribute “meaning” to the loss
- Can be **impacted by a caregiver’s stressed & emotional grief reactions to a death in the family**



<https://ummc-eap.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/DeathByAgeGroup.pdf>

https://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home/Topics/Topics/Emotional+Health/Understanding+death+and+dying_+Ages+and+stages.aspx

Infants & Toddlers

- **Imprinted loss**, especially when their needs aren't met or loss results in extreme stress
- **Highly sensitive to disturbances** in their surroundings or routine.
- **Deeply aware when something impacts their security**, including noticing their caregiver is missing



Ages 2-4 Years

- **Nonfunctionality:** All things moving are alive, if not moving – not alive
- **Present oriented:** no concept of “forever”
- **Irreversibility:** Death is reversible: something "dead" can come back to life, “fixed”, “wake up”, “come back”
- **Universality:** No concept they could die. The concept they may die won't enter their minds (unless someone close to them who is the same age dies)

Ages 5-8 Years

- **Nonfunctionality:** Death = physical body stops working
- **Irreversibility:** May still believe death is reversible, but starting to understand things can't come back to life (plants, animals, & insects)
- **"Magical Thinking":** have incomplete understanding & will fill in gaps with fantasy elements (things from stories or imagination)
- **Universality:** Don't take death personally. Death only happens to "old" or "sick" people

<https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-with-grief>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hard-realities/201301/how-do-children-comprehend-the-concept-death>

<https://www.hamiltonsfuneralhome.com/academy-of-grief-and-loss/grief-loss-resources>

Ages 5-8 Years

- Interest in the **physical aspects**: birds, animals
- May **become fearful of sickness & injury**: don't quite understand why people die
- Tend to **ask specific questions & want details**
- Can **fixate on why**: especially if it goes against their logic - not old, not sick



Ages 9-13 Years

- Understand 3 Concepts of Death
- Aware personal death possible
- Objective curiosity: “What does the body look like?”, “Is it stiff?”
- Even though understand still, lean towards denial
- Increased interest in what happens after death



<https://ummc-eap.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/DeathByAgeGroup.pdf>

<https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-with-grief>

<https://www.hamiltonfuneralhome.com/academy-of-grief-and-loss/grief-loss-resources>

Teenage Years

- Understand more abstract concepts
- Realize death is final but tend to ignore own mortality, it is still something that happens to others
- Curious about the abstract: “What is the purpose of life?”
- Death may be romanticized or seen as tragic

Phases of Grief

First Phase

Recognizing a death has happened: protective phase, need to feel safe





Phases of Grief

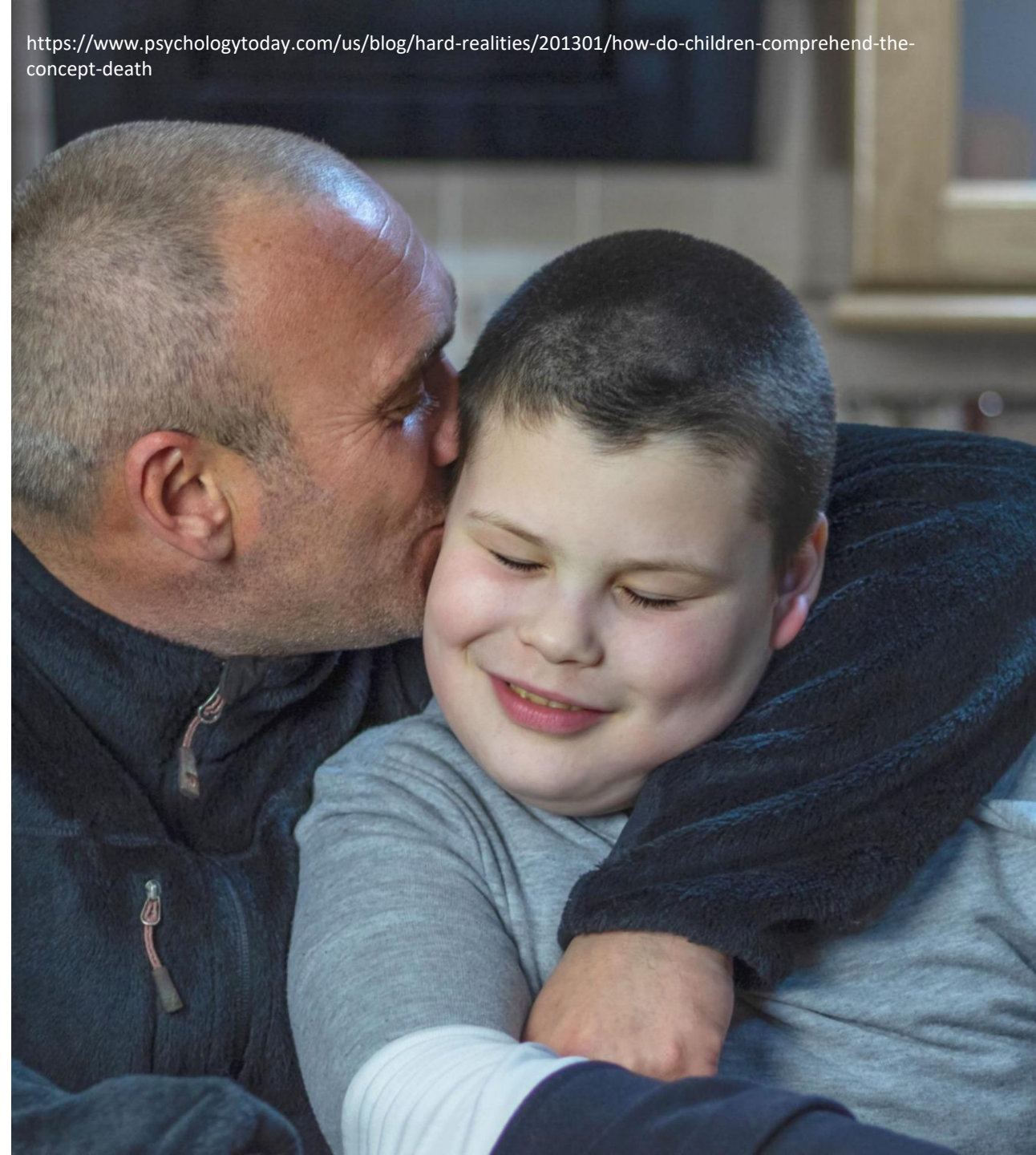
Middle Phase:

- Figuring out the **Reality of Death**:
- Feeling **emotions**
- Coming to terms with the loss, while still holding the memory
- Takes longer for children than adults

Phases of Grief

Last Phase:

- Coming to terms with **identity** after the loss:
- **Who am I** without this person
- **How to I relate** to others
- Coping with **fears & memories**



Greif Over Time

https://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home/Topics/Topics/Emotional+Health/Understanding+death+and+dying_+Ages+and+stages.aspx

<https://www.usurnsonline.com/grief-loss/grief-in-children/>

- Studies show **children don't fully process their grief till their 20's.**
- **Delayed Grief:** Grief may be experienced differently as the child starts to understand finality
- Grief when **realize that self or loved ones could die**
- Faced with **special occasions**

What Kids Want You to Know: Video

- <https://youtu.be/OI9qllkZixM?si=PFfF8PMu8oJ46LTp>





The Grieving Child



Everything I Needed to Know: Handout

[Everything I Learned About Grief I
Learned in Kindergarten
\(hamiltonsfuneralhome.com\)](https://www.hamiltonsfuneralhome.com)



Signs of Grief

- Anger/Irritability
- Crying/Sadness
- Clinginess/Wanting to be held more
- Regressed behavior (acting younger than age)
- Difficulty focusing
- Shock/Disbelief



Signs of Grief

- Anxious
- Feeling abandoned
- Changes in behavior or play
- Physical reactions: pain, sleep, eating
- Feelings of guilt

Teens

- Withdraw or isolate
- Increased irritability/anger
- Trouble sleeping
- Feel “out of control”: overwhelming or frightening
- Respond with “reckless” behavior: substance use, acting out, unnecessary risks
- If they can self-regulate: talk to friends, use creative outlets

When to Seek Professional Support

- 
- A person is shown from the side, with their head buried in their hands in a gesture of distress. On their left forearm, the word "#Sad" is written in red marker. The background is a dark, textured wall.
- Inability to sleep
 - Fear generalized: world is “unsafe”
 - Severe & persistent irritability & moodiness
 - Inability to focus on anything
 - School performance/grades drop
 - Appetite impacts nutrition or significant weight loss/gain

When to Seek Professional Support

- Excessive & prolonged behavior problems
- Persistent regression
- Excessive isolating: drops activities or friends
- Ongoing or severe depression
- Wanting to be with the deceased person

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Grief-008.aspx

https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-with-grief/#block_88b44244-283a-44b0-a191-e266c0171aee

A photograph of two women embracing in a garden. The woman on the left is wearing a black hoodie and has her eyes closed, resting her head against the other woman. The woman on the right is wearing a yellow floral dress and has her hand on the first woman's head. The background is a lush green garden with pink roses.

After the Loss:
Supporting Children
in their Grief



Top 10 Misconceptions: Hamilton's Funeral Home

- Won't say or do the right thing
- They won't want to talk
- I might upset them
- They need to keep busy
- Getting rid of reminders helps
- I won't mention it unless they do

Top 10 Misconceptions: Hamilton's Funeral Home

- Once they've felt feelings, that should be the end of it
- It is morbid to want to touch or talk about the body
- Using the words death and died are so harsh. It's easier to say "passed away" or "gone to heaven"
- If they are not expressing grief, children aren't grieving

Telling a Child About a Loss

- **Closest person** to the child
- **It's all right** if the person shows emotions
- **If too overwhelmed**, choose another close adult
- **Tell them as soon as possible**: don't hear from someone else
 - Find an **appropriate, private place**
- **Be honest, open & direct**: kids will want to know how & why, decide what they need to know & can manage

Take Care of Yourself

- **Kids cope better with a healthy & present adult:** research shows how well a child does after a loss is linked to how well the adults in their life are expressing & managing grief
- **Find good support for yourself:** family, community, faith, therapy, groups
- **And . . . Allow others to support you**

Take Care of Yourself

- **Keep your routines** so your kids can keep theirs
- **Engage in comforting activities:** writing, art, nature, walking
- **Take care of your physical body:** rest, eat healthy, exercise

After the Loss

- Follow their lead
- Encourage children to express feelings & ask questions
- Use accurate language: Avoid phrases like “passed away,” “gone”
- Maintain normal routines: Grief takes time but children benefit from the security of regular routines and knowing that life goes on
- Be proactive: talk to teachers & other adults & find local resources

After the Loss

- Check in with them often
- Use your judgement & give them options
- Validate & Encourage Feelings: especially anger & guilt, they may worry about how you will feel
- Help them find healthy outlets
- Share your religious or spiritual beliefs
- Memorialize the person: remembering is part of grieving & healing



Ambiguous Loss: Unresolved Grief



- Loss without closure
- Loss & sadness not associated with a death
- Relationship or situation
- Distinguishes between physical & psychological loss
- Often lack of recognition
- 2 Types

What is Ambiguous Loss?

Created by: Dr. Pauline Boss



Type 1: Physical Absence with Psychological Presence

- **Examples:**
- **Unexplained:** missing person
- Deployment
- Foster care/Adoption
- Incarceration



Type 1: Physical Absence with Psychological Presence

- **Examples:**
- Immigration or Deportation
- Natural disasters
- Loss of contact: divorce, estrangement, COVID



Type 2: Psychological Absence with Physical Presence

Examples:

- **Changes** due to Alzheimer's or dementia
- Traumatic **brain injury**.
- **Drug/alcohol** addiction



Type 2: Psychological Absence with Physical Presence

Examples:

- Chronic mental illness
- Losing a “piece” of the person: physical changes, accident, illness, food allergies

The background of the slide is a photograph showing the lower legs and feet of a person walking on a cobblestone path. The path is wet, and the person's feet and legs are reflected in the water on the ground. The overall tone is somber and reflective.

Good-byes

- **Goodbye without leaving:** physically but not emotionally available
- **Leaving without a goodbye:** Uncertainty where they are
- **Situational goodbye:** loss not related to a person, loss of future, personal security, finances, “ideal”



Understanding Loss

Psychological Absence

- **Connection:** do they still love me, will they forget about me, did I do something wrong
- More support for physical loss but **not psychological**
- **Others not aware:** secrets
- **Re-organization** of roles & responsibilities

Understanding Loss

- Threatened Loss:
Undocumented Parents
- Sense of *instability*
- Not familiar: language & customs
- Lack of relationships
- Concerns about those left behind
- Deportation
- Discrimination
- Victimization





[When Parents Divorce \(hamiltonsfuneralhome.com\)](http://hamiltonsfuneralhome.com)

Understanding Loss

- Divorce: Handout
- Loss of **security**
- Changes in **routine**
- **Magical thinking**: if “good enough”
- **Blame**: am I at fault, which parent is at “fault”
- **Caught in the middle**

Understanding Loss

Physical Absence

- **Reversible or not:** mend marriage, come back from deployment
- **Extent of impact:** holidays, ability to contact the person
- **Comprehend Cause:** why is this happening is often more complex



Helping Kids with Ambiguous Loss



How to Help

- Work toward acceptance
- Radical Acceptance: Embracing those things we can't control, without judgement
- Acceptance isn't closure but helps make peace with the new reality
- Discover compassion & hope

How to Help

- Create an environment of acceptance & **validate the child's feelings**
- Normalize having more than one feeling at the same time
- **Compounded loss**
- **Don't Compare:** one loss is not bigger or smaller than another





How to Help

- Enhance connection & belonging: who in their circle can step up?
- Highlight strengths and resilience: Emphasize coping abilities
- Openly discuss grief experiences
- Destigmatize losses



How to Help

- Provide safe spaces for expression
- Build supportive networks: increase the circle
- Seek support: support groups, professional help

How to Help

- Rituals to say “good-bye”
- What did I lose? What did I find? Activity: COVID example



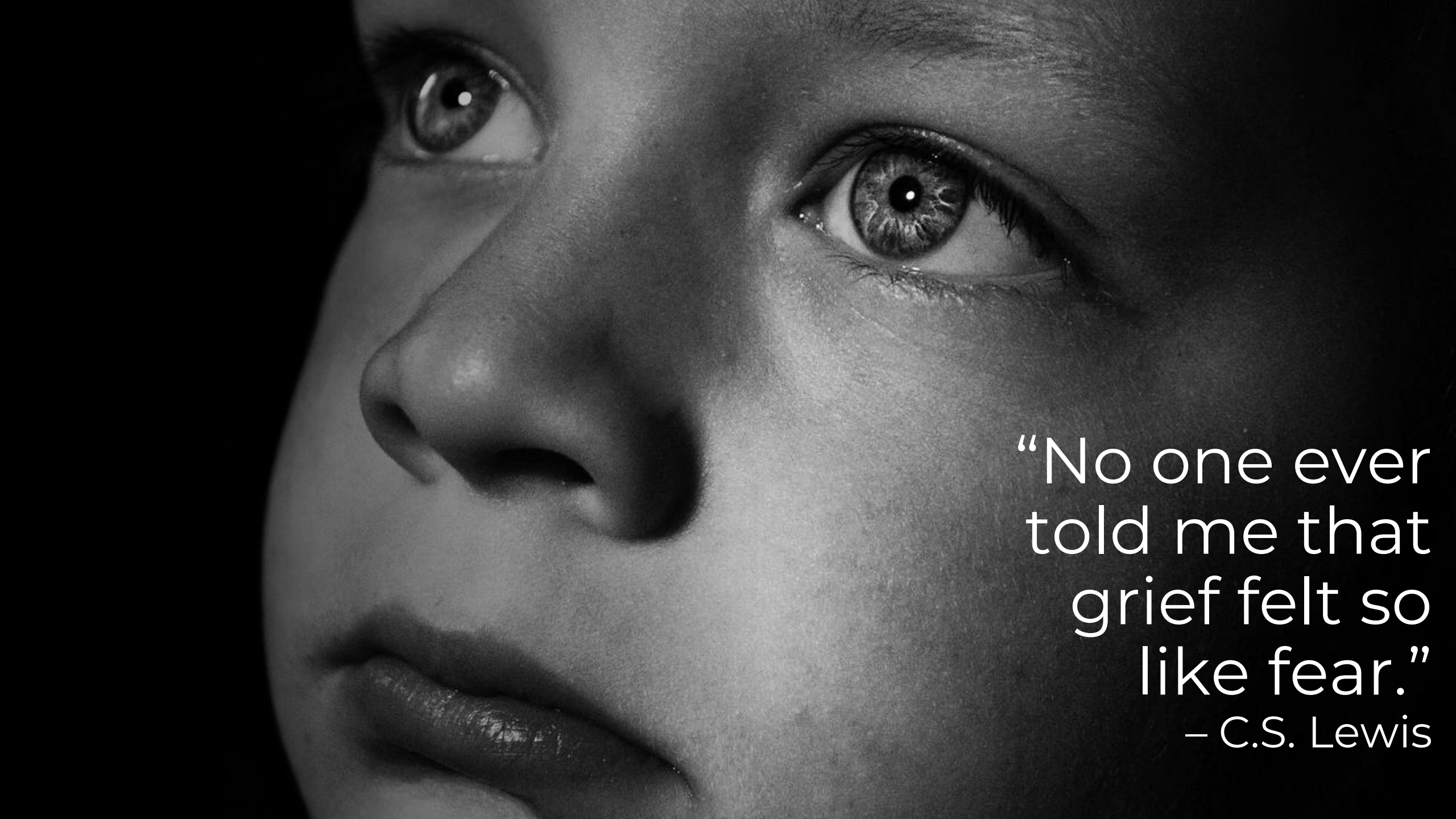


Coping with Grief for Kids: Video

https://youtu.be/v0ZX7ErBm_U?si=JHoQ6XZRR5JpQzVS

Traumatic Grief





“No one ever
told me that
grief felt so
like fear.”

– C.S. Lewis

Trauma

Experience triggers an intense physical & emotional stress reaction exceeding the person's ability to cope & challenging their reality, causing a perceived loss of control



Trauma

- How the child experiences or understands the death: the meaning they make of it, will impact their perception of it being traumatic
- Trauma is an overwhelming reaction & can hinder the grieving process





Grief

Move in & out of intense emotions
& able to participate in everyday
activities

Traumatic Grief

- Severe & persistent grief
- Significant distress beyond what is typical for their stage of development
- Interferes with everyday life





Triggers for
Traumatic Grief

Triggers

Unexpected: doesn't fit the child's understanding, not old, not sick



Accidents, natural disasters, abrupt death from illness: didn't "look" sick, young child, same age child



Triggers

- Death by **suicide or murder**
- Witnessing or **hearing details** of a horrifying death
- **Sudden**: no thought the person might die
- The loss is a **caregiver or a significant loved one**

Increased Risk of Traumatic Grief

- Neglect or abuse
- Home or community violence
- Loss of birth family
- Poverty & deprivation
- War or displacement
- Mental health struggles
- Neurodevelopmental or learning difficulties



Signs & Symptoms

A close-up profile of a young woman with freckles and long dark hair, looking down. The text "Signs & Symptoms" is overlaid in white.

Grief

- **Sadness** is the primary emotion
- **Grief** feels real
- **Talking** feels releasing
- **Pain** is related to the loss
- **Anger** is nonviolent

Traumatic Grief

- **Fear** is the primary emotion
- **Trauma** feels unreal
- **Talking** feels overwhelming
- **Pain** involves fear & helplessness
- **Anger** may include violence toward self or others

Grief

- Guilt about things left unsaid or undone
- Self-image & confidence generally remain intact
- Dream about the person you lost
- Symptoms lessen naturally over time

Traumatic Grief

- Guilt: blame self or think it should have been you
- Self-image & confidence are damaged
- Dream about self or others in danger
- Untreated, symptoms may worsen

Signs of Traumatic Grief

- Intrusive memories about the death
- Physical or emotional arousal: trouble sleeping, aches/pains, fears about safety, hyper alert, overly anxious



Signs of Traumatic Grief

- **Persistent & lasting** irritability, anger, or rage
- **Decreased focus:** only able to focus on the loss
- **Intense feelings** of sadness, pain, sorrow, hopelessness, emptiness, or low self-esteem: feel “detached” from self



<https://www.verywellhealth.com/grief-and-mourning-process-1132545>

<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/traumatic-grief/effects>

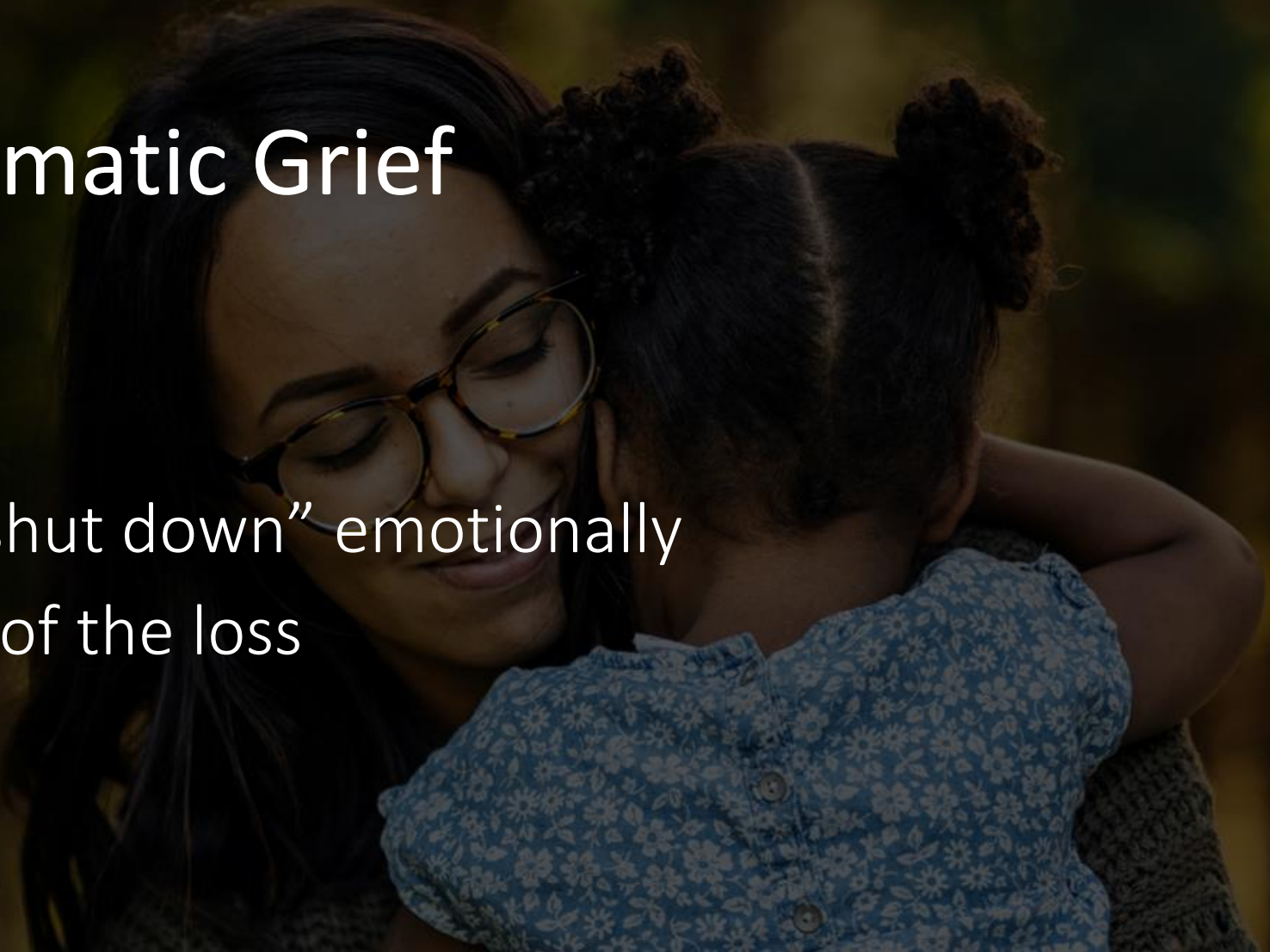
Signs of Traumatic Grief

- **Struggle to accept** the loss is “real”
- **Self-harm**, such as abusing substances, excessive risk taking, intentionally injuring self
- **Suicidal thoughts** or behaviors



Signs of Traumatic Grief

- **Numbing:** may “shut down” emotionally
- **Avoid reminders** of the loss
- **Risk-taking**





Triggers

- Trauma triggers: places, situations, people, sights, smells, or sounds that are reminders of the moment of death: screeching tires, street where they died, sirens



Triggers

- Loss triggers: people, places, objects, situations, thoughts, or memories that are reminders of the person who died: photos, favorite place

Triggers



- **Change reminders:** situations, people, places, or things reminding the child of **changes in his or her life** resulting from the death: moving to new home, new child-care provider

Impact

- Struggle to have or enjoy positive memories of the person who died
- Difficulty coping with the changes happening because of the death
- Interferes with typical development



Traumatic Grief: Supporting Children

Providing Support

- Give time, space & permission to grieve
- Encourage them to express feelings in creative ways: may struggle to have the “words” to express grief

Providing Support

- Listen & ask questions in a non-judgmental way
- Let them know you are ready when they are, don't force it



Providing Support

- Model calming & practice coping strategies with your child.
- Keep in mind the signs of traumatic grief



Providing Support

- Seek guidance from a professional if reactions go on too long, interfere with daily life, or you are struggling to communicate
- Children & their caregivers may benefit from professional therapy with someone trained in childhood trauma & grief issues.



Traumatic Grief: Video

<https://youtu.be/Gq4RH8F8RSQ?si=R9SSLe3A8MKjORRe>



Supporting Kids at School & Death Crises at School

General Guidelines

- Be aware of common grief reactions
- Use clear language
- Clarify misconceptions & assumptions
- Patience & Repetition
- Empathetically listen
- Express your own feelings but avoid assumptions
- Cultural Sensitivity

General Guidelines



- Consider developmental abilities
- Maintain routine
- Encourage discussion
- Use their questions to guide further discussion
- Don't pressure to talk & provide for other expression of feelings
- Talk to classmates
- Help the student find support



Group Activities

- Create a memorial mural
- Plant a memory garden
- Volunteer
- Group Meditation
- Day trip to river

When a Teacher or Student Dies

Communication: letter or email

- Facts
- Range of reactions to grief
- Talking points for parents
- Indicators your child may need professional support
- Who to contact for questions
- Community resources

When a Teacher or Student Dies

Information sharing: factual

- **Staff:** meetings & bulletins
- **Students:** announcements & meetings
- **Parents:** relevant updates
- **Teachers:** provide guidelines & have a referral process
- **Vulnerable students:** recent loss or death, witnessed a death, emotionally sensitive



Crisis Plan

- Crisis plan: one for general (any situation) & one for specific (known situation)
- Create a Crisis Team: identify interest, commitment timeframe, meet first of every school year
- Crisis team group text or email
- Roles: media spokesperson, family liaison



Crisis Plan

- **Students & families:** Letter with facts, set time to ask/answer questions, continued updates, student participation
- **Sharing & debrief with crisis team & students:** projects to express grief
- **All staff: aware of plan & timelines, debriefing, support:** set up breaks, set sharing time



Crisis Plan

- Response: honoring the life no matter what the cause of death...
- Honors the person who died
- Honors the family of the deceased
- Provides a space for all of those affected by the death
- Shows staff & students they are part of a caring community that responds supportively

GRIEF RESOURCES

Hamilton's Funeral Home: Academy of Grief & Loss (Iowa)

<https://www.hamiltonsfuneralhome.com/academy-of-grief-and-loss>

Every Step Grief & Loss (Iowa)

<https://www.everystep.org/services/grief-loss/about-amanda-the-panda>

National Children's Trauma Stress Network <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/traumatic-grief/effects>

What is Traumatic Bereavement <https://uktraumacouncil.org/resource/what-is-traumatic-bereavement>

How Children Process Grief and Loss Through Play <https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-children-process-grief-and-loss-through-play>

GRIEF RESOURCES - SLIDES

- Hamilton's Funeral Home: Academy of Grief & Loss (Iowa)
<https://www.hamiltonsfuneralhome.com/academy-of-grief-and-loss>
- Every Step Grief & Loss (Iowa) <https://www.everystep.org/services/grief-loss/about-amanda-the-panda>
- Psychology Today: "How Do Children Comprehend the Concept of Death"
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hard-realities/201301/how-do-children-comprehend-the-concept-death>
- Psych Central: "Grief by Age" <https://psychcentral.com/lib/children-and-grief#grief-by-age>
- Grief in Children: <https://www.usurnsonline.com/grief-loss/grief-in-children/>
- How Children Process Grief and Loss Through Play <https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-children-process-grief-and-loss-through-play>

GRIEF RESOURCES - BOOKS

- Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley (Author, Illustrator), for ages 4-8
- I Miss You: A First Look at Death, by Pat Thomas, for ages 4 and up
- Good Answers to Tough Questions About Death, by Joy Berry, for ages 6-12
- A Complete Book About Death for Kids, by Earl Grollman, for all ages
- The Goodbye Book, by Todd Parr, for ages 3-7
- When Someone Very Special Dies, by Marge Heegaard, for ages 8 and up
- The Fall of Freddie the Leaf, by Leo Buscaglia, for all ages

GRIEF RESOURCES - BOOKS

- When Someone Dies: A Child-Caregiver Activity Book: National Alliance for Grieving Children
- Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope, by Janis Silverman, for ages 8 & up
- Modern Loss: Candid Conversation About Grief. Beginners Welcome – Rebecca Soffer and Gabrielle Birkner, for Teens
- Weird Is Normal When Teenagers Grieve, by Jenny Lee Wheeler
- It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand – Megan Devine