

# ISSUES OF GRIEVING CHILDREN

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- ✦ **Living in the shadows of the deceased.**
- ✦ **Taking on chores, responsibilities, identity of the deceased.**
- ✦ **Becoming INVISIBLE.**
- ✦ **Loss of Emotional Support.**
- ✦ **PROTECTION games, keeping SECRETS.**
- ✦ **Being ISOLATED.**
- ✦ **Not being included in family concerns, decisions.**
- ✦ **FEAR of being afraid, weak.**
- ✦ **Loss of TRUST.**
- ✦ **SILENCE (family rules: don't speak, don't rock the boat, etc)**
- ✦ **Search for NEW IDENTITY.**

## **Living in the shadows of the deceased.**

Children often tell us that they are tired of living in the “shadows” of either the deceased or the person who is dying. If someone is dying in the family, children often wonder if they need to “get sick too” in order to be noticed. Having someone who is dying in the family takes a great deal of energy and children are often asked to become “invisible” or to “not rock the boat” because no one has any energy to devote to them.



There may be some jealousy issues as children begin to resent the attention the dying person is receiving, often at their own expense. If the dying person happens to be a sibling, the well children in the family may begin to mimic the symptoms of the dying child in order to obtain attention and sympathy from family members. Feelings of jealousy may arrive on the heels of the special attention a dying person often receives. In some families, the dying child takes “center stage” and all attention is riveted to that child.

Other children in the family may especially begin to resent the dying person/sibling, especially when their own activities and life interests may have to take a “back seat” to the needs of the dying child. Some families notice an increase in poor behavior on the part of the well children, especially if the family has been able to receive specialized attention due to the impending death, such as a trip to someplace special or a visit from a special person.

Surviving siblings often express resentment towards the deceased person for continuing to occupy the attention of family members. One child expressed his concern by asking, “Do you know how horrible it is to live

with a dead, perfect brother?” Another child responded by saying, “Yeah. Dead brothers don’t make any mistakes and I still do.”

Families must be very careful not to “saint-ti-fy” the deceased as well. Many children wonder if the rest of the family will only remember the “good stuff” about the deceased while they seem to dwell on the “not so good stuff” of the remaining people in the family. Grieving people often fail to recognize the “humanness” of the deceased as they strive to recall only the good memories and parts of their life with the deceased.

Some families have even, inadvertently, created a “shrine” to the deceased by placing special candles and mementoes around a photograph of the deceased. Surviving children often wonder if they, too, will be “enshrined” after they are gone. Some believe they will not while others wish they had that much attention now while they are still alive.

Some children express concern about trying to live with the shadow of the deceased in the home as nothing seems to have changed since the death, including routines and furniture arrangements. One young man expressed his lack of enthusiasm for eating at the dining room table each night after his mother had died, saying, “It’s like eating in a tomb.

My mom’s chair is still there, but no one says anything about her and we all eat really fast and in silence. I can hardly wait to get away from the table. Sometimes I try to do something so I can get away sooner, like kick my brother or say something I know will get me in



trouble. I’d rather be in trouble than sit at that silent table.” (excerpt from *What Color Is Dead? Death From a Child’s View*, Sims, 1999).

## **Taking on chores, responsibilities, identity of the deceased.**

Following the death of a parent, a child may be told “Now you are the Man of the house” or “You have to help take care of the younger kids now”. This places an unnecessary burden on the child and demands that the child give up his own childhood in order to take the place of the deceased in the family landscape.

Some children will also see what needs to be done and assume the roles and identity of the deceased in order to accomplish those tasks. When children have to take on the roles and possibly the identity of the deceased, they experience the loss not only of the person who died, but also the loss of their own childhood and place in the family and in society. A teen aged daughter who is asked to take on the caretaker role for her younger siblings will not only grieve the death of her mother, but the loss of her own young adulthood years as well. This does not mean she is not willing or able to take on some of the deceased’s functions, but no child should be asked to **BECOME** the deceased.

## **Becoming INVISIBLE**



Being invisible is one of Man’s greatest fears. To not be noticed, recognized or acknowledged simply is not acceptable to Man. You know this is true when you realize that a child will accept the back of a hand more readily than a turned away back. A child will accept negative attention over lack of attention. Being invisible is simply not in most people’s mindset.

Of course, there are some times when one may wish to be invisible (when one is in harm’s way such as in domestic violence, criminal events, disasters, etc). However, most of us crave attention and if not attention, at

least recognition that we exist. Emotions are the same way. If we do not acknowledge our emotions, they do not disappear. They may be suppressed for a time, but they will resurface again and again until we acknowledge them and deal with them.

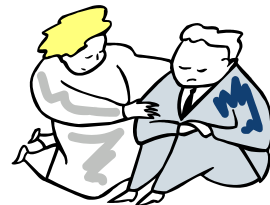
Children do not like to be invisible and will seek attention in many ways. If they feel they are being ignored, they can use their behaviors to draw attention to themselves and remember, they will accept **NEGATIVE ATTENTION OVER LACK OF ATTENTION!**

When children feel they are being ignored they can demand more attention or create situations where they become the center or focus of attention again. This is often done unconsciously (at first) but may become a habit if allowed to continue. Children need information, education and support during their bereavement in order to minimize the “acting out” or negative behaviors that will certainly bring them attention, but may not be the type of attention they seek.

Help a child find appropriate ways to express their emotions and requests for attention in positive ways. (More will be discussed in the following chapters.)

### **Loss of Emotional Support**

Grief is a thief, stealing not only the life of someone we love, but our energy and resources as well. A grieving family may not have the energy to devote to a child and often asks surviving children to



“be quiet” or “stay out of the way” during the mourning period. The trouble is the mourning period can last many months and no one likes to be invisible for that long!

Children need as much emotional support as the adults do, but not have appropriate ways to get it. Try to be available for grieving children on an emotional level, if possible. They need someone to listen to them as they explore their own emotions about loss and they need someone who will also allow them to be children, not just “silent little adults.” Often the most valuable part of any support program or service is the emotional availability of someone for each grieving person.

### **PROTECTION games, keeping SECRETS.**

Children, as well as adults, often try to protect their loved ones from learning the extent or depth of their grief by shielding it from each other. Just as many adults do not feel comfortable crying in front of their children, children may also not feel like expressing themselves in front of their parent(s). They are trying to protect you just as you are trying to protect them from the depth of despair you may be feeling. This is often why children can talk with strangers more readily about their feelings than they can share with family members. They do not have any investment in talking with “outsiders” while they may wish to spare any additional pain to those they love. It is a compliment although not often recognized as one.

Help children find ways to share their thoughts and feelings within the family circle so they can learn to lean *on* each other instead of *away* from each other.

### **Being ISOLATED**



Everyone always thinks that they are the ONLY ONE who has ever experienced \_\_\_\_\_ or that NO ONE ELSE KNOWS HOW I FEEL. This is actually true! Although we all experience SIMILAR events or emotions,

no one has truly experienced YOUR situation or emotions. It is easy to see why many children (and adults) feel isolated in their grief. Everyone is truly unique and every experience and emotion will be received and perceived differently.

In an attempt to lessen the isolation, we often try to “connect” with the bereaved by using the phrase, “I understand”. You don’t! It is difficult to make sense out of our own pain and experiences, let alone assume we can understand what someone else is experiencing. By saying, “I understand” you are not actually connecting with the other person at all, but rather disconnecting. The bereaved person will simply look at you and think, “No, you don’t understand” and the door between you shuts and no further communications are possible. Rather than using the phrase, “I understand”, try asking the person to “tell me about \_\_\_\_\_”. This is a DOOR OPENER and can lead to further discussion.

Remember to suspend judgment when listening. Remember, everyone has the right to their experiences and emotions just as they perceive them. You may disagree or not believe them, but try to respect their point of view and their interpretation of their experiences and emotions. You can offer some alternative suggestions, perhaps, but telling someone his thoughts and/or emotions are wrong or that you “understand” them will only increase the sense of isolation they are experiencing.

### **Not being included in family concerns, decisions**

Children are often shuttled off or ignored during bereavement simply because no one knows what to say to them or how to say it. This increases their sense of isolation and despair. Try to include children in age appropriate discussions and allow them to participate in family decision-making. Often we exclude children in the planning of funeral rituals

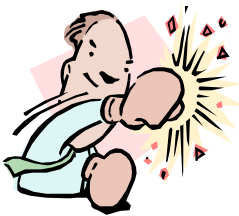
because we are uncomfortable ourselves and we do not want our children to see that.

Children may not even be invited to participate in funeral rituals because the adults cannot imagine what it might be like for a “child to experience this horror when I can’t even handle it.” (excerpt from *What Color Is Dead? Death From a Child’s View*, Sims, 1999).

By including children in family discussions and decision-making, children learn how to handle difficult emotions and experiences rather than grow up isolated from the realities of today’s life. Just make sure that discussions are age appropriate and that the adults in the family agree ahead of time to include the children. There is little worse than a child watching and listening to the adults in his family argue over his presence!

### **FEAR of being afraid, weak**

No one likes to show their weaknesses or their fears so we will often use a mask to hide those feelings from others. Anger is often used as a MASK for feelings of fear, terror or weakness. If crying is considered to be a weakness in a family, then those who are “criers” may attempt to hide those tears behind a mask of anger. Anger has a lot of energy associated with it and is an excellent mask for hurt and fear. I would much rather show you my fist than my fear!



Always try to “see below” the emotion of anger and detect the true emotions that may be hiding in the heat of anger. Look for a sense of frustration or if you dare, go even deeper and below frustration to see if there is a sense of helplessness involved. No one likes to feel helpless, so we will often mask that powerless feeling with anger and hostility.



When you meet anger with anger, you increase the sense of invisibility, the sense of frustration at not being “heard” and increase the volume associated with anger. Remember that anger is the Tip of the Iceberg, not the whole show. See *what else* is there and respond to the true emotions, rather than get “caught up” in the anger.

### **Loss of TRUST**

When someone we love dies, we often experience a loss of trust in the way things are “supposed to be”. When children experience loss, their sense of trust in the world and in the adults who are supposed to protect them can be shaken as well. Many children will begin to re-examine their trust level as they watch the adults in their world attempt to solve the “problems of death” and fail. Death is not something that can be “fixed” like a broken toy.

While it is a painful experience, children should not be shielded from experiencing real life. Although painful things do happen, it is not the end of the world for long. It is not possible or even desirable to eliminate all stressful events from the lives of our children. Children learn to cope with loss **BY MOVING THROUGH THE ANXIETY THEY FEEL WITH THE HELP OF SUPPORTIVE ADULTS.**

As positive experiences in dealing with loss accumulate, we develop the ability to see ourselves as competent, strong, worthwhile individuals and to see life as a challenge we can meet.

### **SILENCE (family rules: don't speak, don't rock the boat, etc)**

This is a major concern of children as they often are told not to speak of the death or to cause any extra difficulties in the family. While initially a grieving household is filled with noise, within a few days of the funeral, the noise level drops considerable as the phone stops ringing, people stop

coming over and no one wishes to speak to the bereaved. This increases the sense of isolation and loneliness for the bereaved. Many discover they are grieving not only the death of someone they love, but the loss of friendships, self-esteem and self-identity as well.

Families who can learn to communicate with each other, even in stressful times, will have a much more secure and safe haven to which to retreat when the grief grows too dark and the pain too deep to share.

Silence is also often experienced by the bereaved when others no longer speak to them. Many times this is done simply because no one knows what to say to the bereaved and so they choose to say nothing at all rather than say something that “might add to the pain.” Silence is what adds to the pain!

Always leave an invitation to talk or visit. The bereaved do not have to take you up on your invitation...just knowing you are there and care will help immensely.

### **Search for NEW IDENTITY**

As the bereaved begin their search for a new identity, they must uncover all the scattered pieces of their puzzle and then try to reassemble



them. As they discover they can never “go back to the way things were”, they will be searching for new ways to complete the puzzle, playing with fewer pieces.

Children most often can understand this metaphor and are willing to think about the possibility of creating a new identity, establishing a New Normal. While they are creatures of habit, they are also adventurous and are often willing to explore new pathways and new ways of doing things.

WHO AM I NOW? Is the most important question anyone can ever ask himself or she and the bereaved must address this question frequently as they move through the grief journey.

Am I still a sister or brother? Am I still a mother or father, daughter or son, husband or wife? Can I still all myself\_\_\_\_\_? WHO AM I? is the basic task we all must struggle with, working until we find an answer and then being flexible enough to continue modifying the answer as life takes its toll. WHO AM I NOW? is the search for personal meaning in a world forever changed by grief.

