



# Grief Reactions Over the Life Span

### **The child, 3-5 years old:**

A child of this age is egocentric (child focused), believing that the world revolves around them. The death of a loved one will be very self-focused, where the child believes that s/he is responsible for the death. They might feel abandoned and the grief of losing a loved one as part of a disaster or crisis event may interrupt age appropriate activities and force a child to address issues for which the child is not developmentally prepared. Emotions presented can vary greatly, from sadness, anger, anxiety, and guilt (Worden, 1996).

### **The child, 6-12 years old:**

School age children at this stage learn basic skills, but attach their cultural values to it. Death of a loved one during a disaster or crisis event can result in a child not wanting to leave home, hoping to reassure the safety of others. For the school aged child, like the younger child, grief crisis may interrupt age appropriate activities and force a child to address issues for which the child is not developmentally prepared. Children this age might believe that certain behavior will bring their loved ones back. They might be preoccupied with fear. They might also experience sadness, anger, anxiety and guilt.

### **The adolescent, 13-19 years old:**

Adolescents, more than the school aged child, often deal with self-esteem and identity issues. They want to differentiate from their parents. If they lose a loved one during a disaster or crisis event, they might feel guilty because of what they might have said to the person before they died. Adolescents, just like the young and the school aged child who experiencing this kind of loss during a disaster or crisis event, may experience an interruption of age-appropriate activities since this kind of loss can force an adolescent to address issues for which they are not developmentally prepared. Adolescents often express their grief and loss issues through their body language and acting out behavior. In addition, adolescents might be internally preoccupied with death, which might be manifested through poor school performance.

### **The young adult, 20-40 years old:**

Young adults can be devastated by the death of a loved one during a disaster or crisis event. For example, losing one's child can be paralyzing for parents. Parental grief can be a long lasting and powerful experience, and is influenced by the developmental task expected by the parents. The parents might blame themselves for not protecting their child better during the disaster or crisis event. Their emotions might range greatly and include such things as loneliness, sadness, disbelief, anger, anxiety, etc. Young adults losing a spouse or partner might feel emptiness and isolation and their social connections might change as they are no longer a couple but an individual. Losing a spouse or partner at this age means not only grieving, but assuming the (often unfamiliar) responsibilities and roles of the deceased and may include helping children through grief.

**The middle aged adults, 40-60 years old:**

Middle aged adults, similar to young adults, can be badly impacted by the sudden loss of a loved one during a disaster or crisis event. They might grieve the loss of their child(ren) and potential future grandchildren. They might feel guilty for not having been able to protect their child(ren). Losing a spouse or partner during a disaster or crisis event can leave middle aged adults with (often unfamiliar) responsibilities and roles, experiencing financial hardship, and/or dealing with grieving children. Middle aged adults might grieve future plans for retiring together.

**The elderly adult, 60 plus years:**

Elderly adults, depending on their age, have acquired memories, cognition, material things, accomplishments, spiritual realizations, and losses. They often have experienced multiple losses, such as jobs, health, independence, social roles, familiar living surroundings, and loved ones. Although loss is often expected during this age, unexpected losses of child(ren) and/or spouses or partners during a disaster or crisis event can be detrimental, since children are often also caregivers. Loss of a spouse or partner might result in feeling more dependent on others. Often the elderly adult lacks the social support needed, which can be detrimental during this time.

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