

How to help students who are grieving?

A training module for school
teachers



Learning outcomes

At the end of the module, teachers will be able to

- define grief, bereavement, and mourning
- understand the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses of grieving children and adolescents
- connect theories of grief to a real time setting
- demonstrate rituals to aid the grieving process

Session 1

Defining grief, bereavement, and mourning.

The session will start with a short discussion on what the teachers already know about grief. The discussion will be followed by a simple introduction of grief and a reminder that each child is unique and the grieving process for each child will be different.

Further, other terms related to grief, such as mourning and bereavement will be introduced. The objective of this session is to help teachers develop a basic understanding of grief and the related terms.

Duration : 1 hour

Session 1

Defining grief, bereavement, and mourning.

What is grief ?

In the simplest manner, grief has been described as the experience of loss due to death of a loved one (Worden, 2018 as cited in Sanghvi, 2020).

It is crucial to understand that the intensity and duration of the experience would vary for each child as it depends on multiple factors, such as nature of attachment with the deceased, personality, and coping styles (Sanghvi, 2020).

Session 1

Defining grief, bereavement, and mourning

What are bereavement and mourning?

While bereavement is a state after the loss that includes a range of grief and mourning processes, mourning is process through which one can adapt to the grief (Sanghvi, 2020).

Remember :

- 1.It is natural to grieve after facing loss.
- 2.Grief is not the same for everyone.

Session 2

Understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses of grieving adolescents

For this session, I will use a blackboard to create three columns. I will read out common responses among grieving children and ask them to identify whether the response is emotional, behavioral, or cognitive. Based on their responses and the discussion that follows, I will jot down the common responses in the respective columns. The objective for this session is to enable teachers to identify how grief manifests in a classroom setting and how to differentiate between emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses.

Duration : 1 hour

Session 2

Understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses of grieving adolescents

Emotional Responses of Grieving children

- **Sadness** - One of the most common indications of sadness is crying. However, Lyles (2010) discusses that children report that despite their sadness, they try not to cry in school or in front of their peers. Therefore, it is important that a teacher notices when a child feels overwhelmed.

Session 2

Understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses of grieving adolescents

Emotional Responses of Grieving children

- **Anger** is a common response to loss. Children and adolescents may feel that their life is unjust and hence, respond to grief with a feeling of anger. Displaced anger becomes a possibility in various situations. For example, a child may fight his peers when they are angry about losing their loved one (Lyles, 2010). In such situations, it becomes important for the teacher to understand where the anger is coming from.

Session 2

Understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses of grieving adolescents

Emotional Responses of Grieving children

- **Guilt** - There may be times when the child feels responsible for the death of the loved one. Adolescents are ego-centric (the cause and effect world revolves around them) and as a result, they are likely to feel like they are the cause of the loss regardless of the circumstances around the death (Lyles, 2010).

Session 2

Understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses of grieving adolescents

Emotional Responses of Grieving children

- Other emotional responses may include feeling lonely, abandoned, and insecure.
- Adolescents may also be worried about the safety of themselves and other family members (Glass, 1991).

Session 2

Understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses of grieving adolescents

Behavioral Responses of Grieving adolescents

- Some of the common behavioral responses include anger outbursts, issues with eating and sleeping (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006).
- Children may also continuously ask questions related to death (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006).

Session 2

Understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses of grieving children

Behavioral Responses of Grieving children in a Classroom Setting

- Difficulty with classwork and homework
- Absentmindedness in the classroom
- Withdrawal from friends and peers
- Constant fights with peers, which stem as a result of displaced anger.

Session 2

Understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses of grieving children

Cognitive Responses of Grieving Adolescents

- Adolescents are capable of logical reasoning, problem solving, and abstract thinking since according to Piaget, they are in the formal operational stage of development (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006).
- However, it does not mean that adolescents cannot fall into negative thought patterns while grieving.

Session 2

Understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses of grieving children

Cognitive Responses of Grieving Adolescents

- Some of the common thought patterns of grieving adolescents include denial, difficulty in concentrating, forgetfulness or confusion, and preoccupation with the deceased (Lyles, 2010).
- Adolescents may also feel compelled to act according to societal expectations (Glass, 1991).

Session 3

Connecting theories of grief to a real time setting

For this session, I will look at two theories, which involve understanding the stages of grief and tasks of mourning. The rationale behind using two theories is to ensure that once teachers understand how grief is processed and what are the tasks to process the grief, the teachers can connect the responses to grief to these stages and help the children with tasks of mourning through rituals.

Duration : 1 hour

Session 3

Connecting theories of grief to a real time setting

Kübler-Ross identified five stages of grief including

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

(Ross, 1969 as cited in Buglass, 2010).

Session 3

Connecting theories of grief to a real time setting

Reminder

Dealing with a complex emotion like grief is not a linear process. Therefore, it is important to understand that although a Ross has identified a pattern, which includes stages of grief, the stages may overlap and one may go through the stages in a non-sequential manner.

Session 3

Connecting theories of grief to a real time setting

A different approach to loss was identified by Worden (1991), which involves setting tasks for mourning to adapt to grief. The tasks include

1. Accepting the reality of the loss
2. Working through and experiencing the pain of grief
3. Adjusting to an environment without the deceased by embracing new roles
4. Relocating one's relationship with the deceased through memories and continuing with one's life.

(Worden, 1991 as cited in Buglass, 2010).

Rationale

Connecting theories of grief to a real time setting

The rationale behind using the stage theories to understand grief is that stage or phase models attempt to find patterns and similarities in human behavior (Buglass, 2010). Since the situation is based in a school setting where many children are grieving, some children may feel comfort knowing that their experiences are shared by others and that the emotions that they are feeling do not apply only to themselves.

.

Session 4

Demonstrating rituals to aid the grieving process

For this module, I will ask the teachers to discuss some activities through which they can help the grieving children. Based on their responses, they will be introduced to rituals and their importance. It is possible that the teachers may have already facilitated certain activities, but are not aware that those activities are rituals. Further, some rituals which can be incorporated within a classroom will be described. The agenda for this session is to enable teachers to provide support to grieving students.

Duration : 1 hour

Session 4

Demonstrating rituals to aid the grieving process

Rituals work because they help an individual slow down and pay attention to what they are feeling.

Some rituals that can be used in a classroom setting involve

- Providing students with papers, crayons, or clay to express what happened (if they wish to) or how they feel.
- Writing a letter to the deceased to embrace letting go.
- Allow to bereaved child to tell their story as many times as necessary
- If students wish to grieve personally, encourage them to keep a journal to record their experiences.

Session 4

Demonstrating rituals to aid the grieving process

- Create a memorial wall with stories and pictures
- Read an age-appropriate book/story on grief to the class. Ask your librarian for suggestions.

Remember

- Do not force the child to participate in a ritual that they are not comfortable with.
- Allow them to take a walk outside the classroom if they feel overwhelmed.
- Hold a safe space for discussions.

Session 5

Discussing actions that can be taken by the school

This session will be interaction based. Teachers will be asked to work in pairs and come up with two to three actions that a school can take to address grief and help grieving children. All the relevant points from their discussion will be written on the blackboard and further steps would involve creating an action plan to communicate with the school administration.

Duration : 1 hour

Session 5

Discussing actions that can be taken by the school

- The school can encourage teachers and students to facilitate peer support groups. However, it is important that a counselor is available in case a student feels overwhelmed.
- Students in their mid-to-late teens tend to feel more comfortable expressing their feelings to adults. Hence, every school must have a permanent counselor.
- Responses to grief may include a poor academic performance, which is a result of decreased concentration. It must not be held against them.

(Addressing Grief: Tips for Teachers and Administrators, n.d.)

Session 5

Discussing actions that can be taken by the school

- In many cases, students want to cry but not in front of their peers (Lyles (2010). Thus, having a quiet space or a room where the student can go and cry if they need to can be created.

Remember

- Be sensitive to cultural differences of students and their families in expressing grief and honoring the deceased.
- For children with developmental disabilities, their limited communication skills do not mean they are unaffected by the death. Attend and be sensitive to their needs.