

Worry and Grief in Children



Between peer pressure, school, and all the stressors of growing up, kids already have enough worries, but worries may be exacerbated when there is a death in the family. Because of differences in personality, temperament, and life circumstances, some children naturally worry more than others. Younger children will primarily worry about themselves, but older children may worry about things outside of their immediate lives, such as violence, terrorism, their future, and even their own health. Establishing open and honest communication can be helpful in addressing your child's worries after a death. Here are some ideas on how to help your child cope:

- **Listen and be present.** Take time to ask your child what is going on at school, with friends, etc... Take an active interest in every aspect of their lives. Try asking them to identify a “high” and a “low” of their day. If a child seems worried about something in particular, ask more about it, and then patiently listen. Just let your child talk instead of offering advice. Often times just sharing their story or venting to you will provide an immediate sense of relief. Like we do in Bo's Place groups, disconnect from the digital world while having this conversation. Show your child that they have your full attention.
- **Offer reassurance and highlight the positive.** In the case of the death of a parent, children may worry about the surviving parent. Children often ask “What would happen if you died, too?” Acknowledge your child's fears and assure them that you intend to make healthy lifestyle choices and hope to live a long time. Let them know the safety plan for who would care for them if something were to happen to you. Parents might also emphasize that the home, even if it suddenly feels sad, is still a comfortable safe haven. Offer the child reassurance, whether it is in the form of a hug, a heart-to-heart talk, or quality time spent together. Encourage your children to let go of their worries, even if temporarily. Further, after fully listening to a child's worries, emphasize the positive aspects of the child's life, and redirect the conversation to something they enjoy.
- **Put things into perspective.** Help your child identify the root of the worry. Sometimes in talking it out, children realize their fears may be unfounded or exaggerated. Emphasize that many problems are temporary or have a solution. Teach your child that there will always be new opportunities and better days ahead to help build resilience and optimism. However, be sure to never belittle your child's problems or grief, because to them they are very real.
- **Make health a priority.** The National Sleep Foundation recommends that children ages 5-12 get 10-11 hours of sleep a night, and that teens get 8 ½ - 9 ¼ hours. Constant worry can lead to sleep deprivation, but can also be a result of it, as sleep deprivation causes children to be more anxious and easily irritable. To help with sleep, encourage your child to exercise in any form. Anything that increases heart rate and burns adrenaline will act as a natural anti-anxiety measure. A good way to encourage exercise is to make it a family activity, for instance, taking evening walks together.
- **Be a good role model.** The most powerful lessons we teach children are the ones we demonstrate. Although you cannot assume children will grieve the same way adults do, many children will emulate how their grown-ups respond to their own worries and grief. Try to set a positive example in how you react to problems and worries. By both acknowledging your worries and maintaining optimism in the face of adversity, you can teach your children that they can do the same.

Further Reading:

- *Is a Worry Worrying You?* by Ferida Wolff and Harriet May Savitz





- *Wemberly Worried* by Kevin Henkes
- *Wilma Jean and the Worry Machine* by Julia Cook
- *The Mourner's Book of Courage* by Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.
- *Mindfulness for Prolonged Grief* by Sameet M. Kumar

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