



# UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S GRIEF

## The Bottom Line

Though grief is a normal part of life, during a times of uncertainty or stress, grief may have a different and more complex effect. Children and youth with existing layers of trauma, such as those in the child welfare system, may have a more difficult time coping with this added stress.

Grief, in general, is a complex emotional response. Pandemic grief is a response to abrupt and profound change, increased isolation, imminent risk(s), and continual exposure to stress. Complexities particularly arise in relation to the uncertainties and stress.

COVID-19 has led to suffering and large-scale loss in a variety of domains simultaneously. This increases complications in the grieving process and creates differences between pandemic grief and 'normal' grief.

## Challenge With Grief During a Pandemic

Bookends are normal sequences of grief where there is a known beginning, middle, and a foreseeable end to intense feelings of grief. During a pandemic, it is harder for children and youth to deal with these emotions with no structure or predictability about when these hard times will end for them and those they care about. For children in care, these feelings can be exacerbated by trauma layering and/or trauma reactivation.

## Possible Responses

- Children require structure to balance feelings associated with unpredictable events. A set routine helps them deal with regular and complex forms of grief and brings back some sense of control and normalcy. It is also important for children to have things to look forward to, such as weekly traditions or virtual meeting times with friends.

## Challenge With Grief During a Pandemic

Children may be faced with feelings of grief and anxiety from publicly available death tolls, obvious adult stress, sudden serious changes in the world, prolonged social isolation, and much more due to COVID-19. These feelings can be accompanied by feelings of grief and frustration from missed opportunities such as rites of passage (i.e. a cancelled graduation ceremony or birthday party).

## Possible Responses

- Social connectedness is a powerful buffer in times of stress. It is important to provide youth with frequent opportunities for significant online connection with their caregivers and peers. While online connection can drastically reduce feelings of social isolation, it may not always be enough to tackle these feelings entirely. Where permitted, create environments where youth can connect to important people in their lives in person while adhering to physical distancing guidelines with personal protective equipment (PPE).

## Challenge With Grief During a Pandemic

Youth may be angry at missing certain opportunities like graduation, or a planned trip. Conversely, youth may feel their problems, like cancelling a graduation ceremony, are insignificant right now and feel guilty for being upset about these things. Contrary to this, they may also feel a sense of shame or guilt if they experience a moment of joy while so many others are struggling. This may lead to confusing and conflicting feelings.

Consistent toxic stress and trauma-layering can have negative impacts on health in all forms. This allostatic load may be especially present for children in child welfare, who have often experienced intergenerational trauma, a life devoid of nurturing trusted adults, and a history of hostile environments. These stressors paired with social isolation and general anxieties associated with COVID-19 may make this time particularly difficult for those in care.

## Possible Responses

- “In-between moments” are the moments that are perceived as regular and comforting for children. These are activities that the child and their caregiver may do together on a routine basis that happen parallel to one another, such as preparing supper or walking. Having a conversation about the child’s feelings during these non-pressured times may have a greater effect than having a serious sit-down conversation. With advanced access to social media, children may know much more than you thought they did and may require clarity and open communication about the events of the world.
- Self-disclosure is important to allow trauma-impacted children to feel a sense of trust. Many children may feel opposed to discussing their feelings and experiences with a service provider who does not disclose their own.
- For children who have been impacted by trauma, it is important to have conversations that do not force them to go outside of their window of tolerance. This may trigger hyperarousal and lead to catastrophic thinking and behaviour.
- If a child does go outside of their window of tolerance, the only primary goal is to bring them back within their comfort zone. Try participating in Inherently Non-clinical Relational Activities (INCRA). During times of hyperarousal, focus on somatic activities to draw attention away from the mind and focus it on the body. These activities can include exercise, bike rides, dancing and singing along to music, or going for a walk.
- Teach children/youth to practice self-regulation through mindfulness and grounding exercises. Sometimes trauma-impacted children think this only includes meditation and become uninterested. Support the child in reaping the benefits of other techniques.



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