

Managing Grief & Anxiety During COVID-19



As the world continues to navigate a global pandemic, parents may notice that their children are exhibiting behaviors often associated with grief or anxiety.

CAUSES OF GRIEF & ANXIETY DURING COVID-19

During this time of crisis, children may be grieving due to the loss or illness of loved ones, missed milestones, or feelings of helplessness. No matter the cause, children's grief or anxiety should be respected and taken seriously.

Loss of a loved one. COVID-19 has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths worldwide in just a few short months. As a result, many families are coping with the sudden loss of a loved one. For some children and adolescents, this may be the first death of a family member or friend that they have ever experienced. The intensity and depth of the gifted child's emotions can make this even more difficult. In addition, some gifted children may develop asynchronously, meaning, they think about events in an adult way, but may not have the social-emotional development to support such thinking.

Anxiety for family. For others, heightened anxiety may be the result of worrying for family members who are essential workers, immunocompromised, or at risk. Children may be grieving that they cannot see a grandparent who is quarantined in a nursing home or a caregiver who is self-isolating because they are a healthcare worker. They may also be worried about never seeing them again.

Fear of contagion. Even if one's family is not at a high level of risk for exposure, many individuals may continue to exhibit fears related to contamination and contracting COVID-19. Despite parental reassurance that they are doing everything they can, these fears are often exacerbated by intense media consumption or frequent exposure to others talking about the virus...and can be all-consuming.

Grief regarding loss of experiences. For many adolescents, important life events such as graduation ceremonies, summer scholar programs, and tournaments have been canceled. For many, these events would have been the culmination of years of hard work, and the excitement has given way to grieving the loss of celebrating these achievements with their families and peers.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

» Grief and anxiety are normal and healthy emotions that individuals of all ages experience. However, grief and anxiety can lead to maladaptive thought patterns and behaviors in some people.

» Families can provide supportive environments in which effective coping skills and resiliency are fostered. Parents are encouraged to validate their child's feelings, maintain an honest and open dialog, and model healthy coping mechanisms.

» It is important to remember that what is grief- or anxiety-inducing for one individual may not be for another. Various factors such as age, developmental level, and culture influence how someone may exhibit their grief or anxiety. There is no "right way" to grieve.

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KEY QUESTIONS

What are typical signs of grief and/or anxiety?

Grief and anxiety—just like many other emotions—may present differently in children and adolescents than they do in adults. Some typical characteristics of grief and anxiety in children include regression (e.g., children acting younger than they are); eating or sleeping disturbances; difficulties with attention and concentration; somatic complaints (e.g. frequent headaches or stomach aches); crying, wailing, or throwing tantrums; withdrawal; irritability and aggression; repetitive or compensatory behaviors; and hyper-fixation on the stressor or event.

There are many factors that may influence how an individual expresses feelings such as grief or anxiety, including cultural norms and religious beliefs, developmental level, and overexcitabilities.

What can I do at home to ease my child's grief/anxiety?

- **Be honest.** Your child may have questions regarding the virus and what precautions the family is taking. They may also have questions about death and dying. Answer these questions honestly, avoid euphemisms, and maintain an open dialogue.
- **Limit media exposure.** It's important to balance staying informed about the virus with an over-saturation of media exposure. A barrage of death statistics and images may only serve to heighten anxiety or re-traumatize someone who is grieving the death of a loved one.
- **Model effective coping skills.** Children and adolescents learn by observing. Practice self-care and engage in coping strategies (e.g., journaling, baking, exercising) together as a family. Be mindful of your own behavior—does it model *hopelessness* or *resiliency*?
- **Label and validate feelings.** Anguish, fear, frustration, and melancholy are all feelings your child may be experiencing right now. However, it is often difficult to fully recognize and articulate what we are feeling in the moment. Younger children may especially have difficulty describing emotions beyond “sad” or “scared.” Parents can help by providing a feelings vocabulary to help children recognize and express more nuanced emotions. It is also helpful to remind children and adolescents that it is okay to feel more than one feeling at a time, and that they should not feel guilty or conflicted for finding moments of happiness during a stressful or sad time.
- **Set routines.** Establishing a new routine during this time can help bring a sense of normalcy and reduce stress. Incorporate time for fun and healthy activities as much as possible.

When should my child see a professional?

Parents are encouraged to seek help from a counselor or psychologist if they notice significant impacts on their child's day-to-day functioning (e.g., no longer eating or taking care of one's hygiene), if the child indicates a desire or wish for death (e.g., wishing to be dead so that they can see their loved one), or if typical signs of grief/anxiety persist for several weeks without getting better. See NAGC's *Finding a Mental Health Professional* TIP Sheet for additional guidance.



FOR MORE INFO

Addressing Grief: Brief Facts and Tips.
National Association of School Psychologists, www.nasponline.org

Children's List of Feeling Words.
University of California, Santa Barbara Children's Center.
www.bjcschooloutreach.org

5 Dos and Don'ts of Helping Kids Cope with Grief and Loss by Megan Zander. Scholastic, www.scholastic.com

Grief, Loss & Gifted by Heather Boorman, LICSW, LCSW.
educationaladvancement.org/blog

Helping Children with Traumatic Separation or Traumatic Grief Related to COVID-19. National Child Traumatic Stress Network, nctsn.org.

Supporting Children During Coronavirus (COVID-19). National Child Traumatic Stress Network, nctsn.org, 2020.



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