

# Caring for Grieving Adolescents

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# Grief: A Definition

- In light of a loss (e.g., death), grief can be an internal and external response.
  - Some professionals call external grief “mourning,” but for the purposes of our conversation, we will refer to grief as the internal *and* external response to a loss.
- There can also be complicating facets to a loss: unexpected, untimely, unnatural, compounding losses, etc. This can also affect a person’s grief response.

# Images of Grief



# Grief and Culture

- Our American culture places a great deal of emphasis on being “happy” and positive.”
- There can be pressure to return to normal as soon as possible.
- Grief is *normal* after a loss and it is not a linear-process. It is okay to grieve and to take time to grieve.



# Expressions of Grief

- How grief is expressed can vary. There are many factors in how an individual expresses their grief, including:
  - Culture
  - Gender
  - Religion
  - Family System
- It is important to remember that when someone is grieving differently than you are, it does *not* mean that they are not grieving.

Instrumental Grief	Intuitive Grief
A general reluctance to talk about feelings	Feelings are intensely experienced
Grief is more of an intellectual experience	Expressions such as crying and lamenting mirror inner experience
May experience grief physically through restlessness or nervousness	May experience grief physically through exhaustion and/or anxiety
May be uncomfortable with the strong expressed emotions of others	May feel that people do not allow adequate expression of their grief

# Grief and Parenting

# Grief Responses: Parents

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Guilt
- What if's
- Regret / Remorse
- Fear
- Hyper-vigilance
- Loss of concentration, easily distracted



# Grief Responses: Parents

- Physical symptoms:
  - Sleep too much, too little
  - Stomachache
  - Back pain
  - Nausea
  - Chest pain
  - Short of breath
  - Fatigue

# Grief Responses: Parents

- May sense judgment or shame that is self-directed or from others
  - “Why didn’t you...”
  - “If you had only...”
- Questions around meaning of life / religion
  - “Why would God allow this to happen?”
  - “Are there eternal consequences for this action?”
- May bring up previous losses and unresolved grief

# Grief and Self-Care

- Need for self-care
  - It's important to take time to care for yourself and your own grief. Like they say on an airplane, "You must put your own oxygen mask on first before helping others."
- Obstacles to self-care
  - "What do I have to grieve about? I wasn't directly involved / I didn't lose my child"
  - "Self-care seems selfish. Shouldn't I be worried about helping my child?"
- Examples of self-care
  - Go for a walk, journaling, going to bed early, bow out of a social commitment to have time at home, talk with a friend

# Grief and Adolescents

# Grief Responses: Adolescents

- Remember: everyone grieves in their own way and own time.
  - Adolescents may feel shame if they are not grieving in the same way as their peers or if they feel differently about the loss than others do.
- Adolescents may also experience *delayed grief* — a delay in expressing or processing their grief.
- Adolescents may experience *disenfranchised grief* — a sense that their grief is not acknowledged by the larger culture.
- Adolescents may also have a more limited emotional vocabulary than that of adults and may struggle to name and express their feelings.

# Grief Responses: Adolescents

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Guilt
- What if's
- Regret / Remorse
- Fear
- Loss of concentration, easily distracted
- Replaying the event or days leading up to the event

# Grief Responses: Adolescents

- Physical symptoms:
  - Sleep too much, too little
  - Stomachache
  - Back pain
  - Nausea
  - Chest pain
  - Short of breath
  - Fatigue

# Grief Responses: Adolescents

- May sense judgment or shame from others or that is self-directed
  - “Why didn’t you...”
  - “If you had only...”
- Isolation from peers / friends
  - Friends may not know what to say or may want to ignore the loss and grief
  - Isolation may come from grieving differently than others
- Questions around meaning of life / religion
- May bring up previous losses or unresolved grief



# Grief Responses: Adolescents

- Questions around meaning of life / religion
  - “Why did God allow this to happen? Why didn’t God stop them?”
  - “Is my friend being punished for their actions?”
- May bring up previous losses or unresolved grief
  - Grandparents
  - Pets
  - Other friends / acquaintances
  - Parents’ divorce
  - Moving / displacement

# Grief and Self-Care

- Adolescents need to practice self-care as they are grieving, just as adults do. However, they may need more guidance and/or permission to do so.
- Examples of self-care
  - Go for a walk, journal, use a punching bag, permission to miss a social event / after-school activity, go to bed early, watch cartoons / favorite childhood movies, look at pictures / create a photo album.

# Grief and Communication

# How to Talk about Grief

- If you have to break the news of a friend's / classmate's death, here is a model: SAFER\*
  - **S** Stabilize
  - **A** Acknowledgement
  - **F** Facilitation of understanding; normalization
  - **E** Encourage effective coping
  - **R** Recovery / Referral

# SAFER: In Practice

- **S** Stabilize
  - Choose a stable environment. Pick a place that is private and free from distractions. Avoid a place where your child cannot leave after the conversation (i.e., the car).
- **A** Acknowledgement
  - Acknowledge the event that has occurred. Be as factual as possible and don't speculate about causes or contributing factors. If there is still information that is not known, it is okay to say, "I don't know."
- **F** Facilitation of understanding; normalization
  - Ask if your child has any questions. Be honest about what is known or not known.
- **E** Encourage effective coping
  - Encourage your child to use good coping skills and to utilize self-care. Give your child permission to grieve and normalize grief.
- **R** Recovery / Referral
  - Reassure your child that there will be a time when they feel "normal" again. Let them know they will move through their grief process and if they need help, they can talk with you, another trusted adult, or that you will provide assistance with a counselor, mental health resources, etc.

# Grief and Social Media

- Encourage your child to be thoughtful in engaging social media.
  - Refrain from speculating or gossiping about the person and the events leading up to the loss.
  - Refrain from posting about the loss if it has just occurred and the person's family / extended family may not have been notified yet.
  - Report any concerns about other's posts if there is language of self-harm or harm to others.

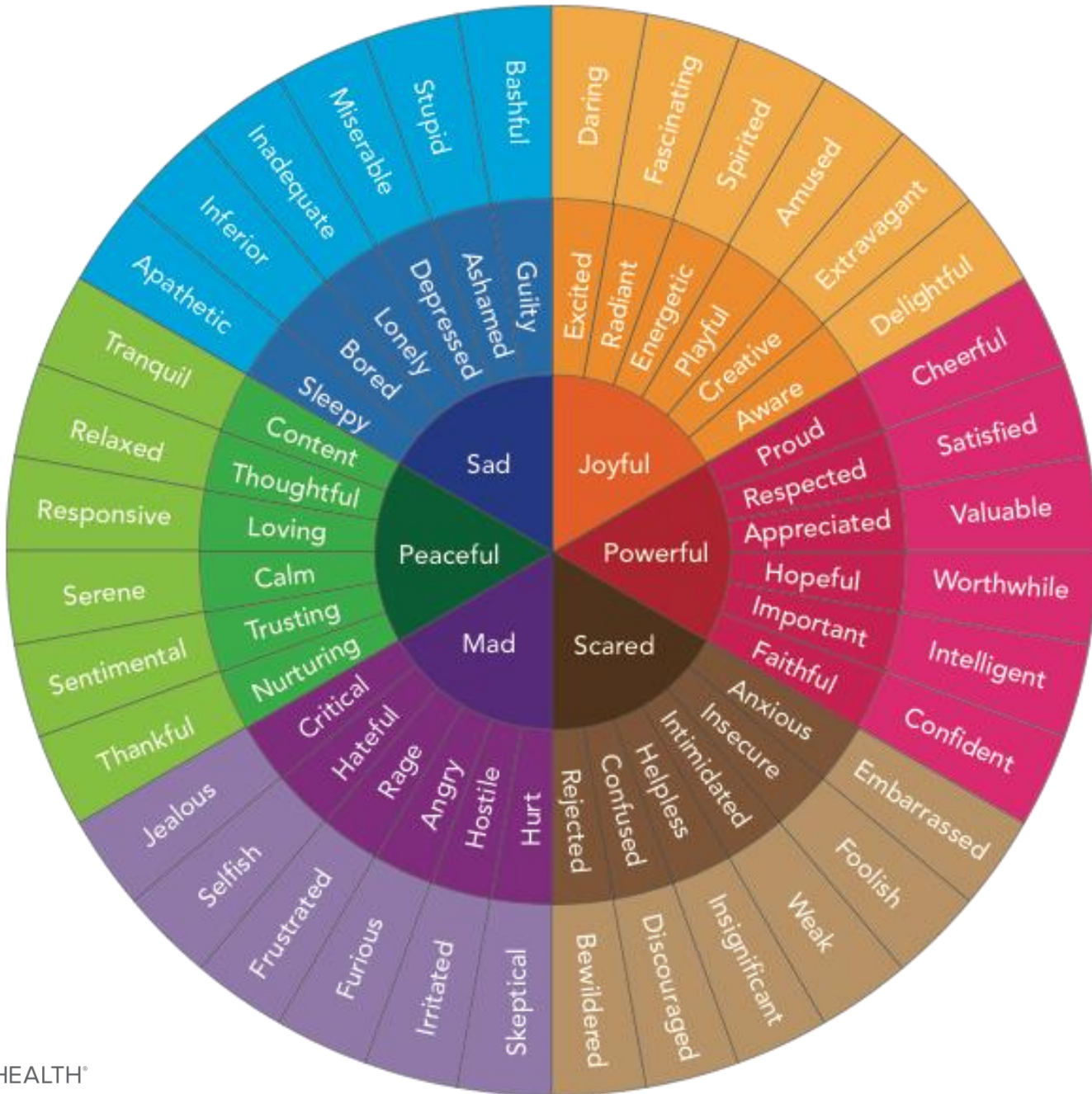
# Grief and Communication Skills

- Open body posture
  - Uncross arms, hands off of hips, lean in towards your child
- Eye contact
- Practice validating statements
  - “I hear you.”
  - “I can see why that would be hard.”
- Open-ended questions (more than a yes/no answer)
  - “How has your friend’s death affected you?”
  - “What do you miss about your friend / classmate?”

# Grief and Communication Skills

- Paraphrase
  - Child: “I can’t believe he/she is gone. I miss them so much.”
  - Parent: “You really miss your friend. It’s hard to believe that they aren’t here anymore.”
- Naming an emotion
  - Child: “Why did he/she do this? Didn’t he/she know that I was there for him/her?”
  - Parent: It sounds like you feel **confused** and maybe even **angry** about your friend’s actions.





# Grief and the Future

# Will I ever feel normal again?

- After a loss, your child may wonder if they will ever feel “normal” again or may wonder what “normal” is.
- After many years of using language like “closure” and “acceptance,” mental health professionals have begun to speak of “integration” or a new normal.
- Your child’s life will not “go back” to exactly how it was prior to the loss. But there will be a new sense of normalcy, a new way of incorporating the loss into their life.

# Grief and Rituals

- Rituals can be a way of facilitating integration and a way to hold the loss in the midst of everyday life.
- Examples include:
  - Creating a scrapbook / photo album, writing a letter to the deceased, creating a memorial walk, grief ornaments, prayers, etc.
  - *Goodbye Days* — Jeff Zentner
  - *Finding Dory*

# Blessing in a time of grief

As you grieve, may you do so  
with love and light

Questions?