

## Ask BYFS

### Serious Illness

***Parent Question: How do you talk with children about a serious illness in the family, especially if the illness affects a parent? How does that conversation change from elementary school-age kids to high school?***

Though certainly illness and the possibility of death are with us each day, it is not something we easily or readily discuss. When people we love and care about are affected, it hurts.

Sometimes it is hard to talk about emotions and strong feelings when we are sad and hurting.

Children often have the opportunity to learn about the transience of life through having pets and losing them, either through an accident or the natural aging process. They may see great grandparents and/or grandparents age, become seriously ill, and die, thus provoking questions about the connection between getting sick and death and increasing their fear of illness and loss. A parent needs to walk a fine line of explaining the difference between being sick and a serious illness while not sugar coating the fact that we all die, usually when we are older and have lived a full life. Occasionally tragedies happen and life is cut short way too soon. Your own family belief system and values are the best guides for you in explaining this to your children.

Sometimes learning more and understanding our own feelings is a good place to start before attempting to help our child. At the Will of the Body by Arthur W. Frank discusses what it means to be sick. Sherwin Nuland's How We Die is an important factual physiological accounting of what happens to the body. Elizabeth Kubler Ross's classic On Death and Dying has become famous for its discussion of the emotional stages of dealing with a loss. Leo Buscaglia's picture book The Fall of Freddie the Leaf was one of the first books my generation read to our kids to help them understand death in the natural context of life. Today many more such books are available, including The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst, When Someone Dies by Sharon Greenlea, Lifetimes by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen, and The Kids Book About Death and Dying - by and for kids ages 11 to 14 by Eric E. Rofes. Also worth looking at is How It Feels When a Parent Dies by Jill Krementz, a book of kids talking about a specific parental loss. Check out the Bedford Public Library for these and other options.

There is no right way or one easy answer any of these possibilities for children. Resources abound for all ages and situations, depending on the particular issue your family may be dealing with. I think Rabbi Earl A. Grollman has a particular wealth of wisdom to offer in the following:

- In Sickness and In Health: How to Cope When Your Loved One is Ill
- Explaining Death to Children
- Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child
- Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love
- Living When a Loved One Has Died
- What Helped Me When My Loved One Died
- Suicide - Prevention, Intervention, Postvention

At some point talking either with a professional or in a professional setting with others might be helpful. Parents should watch for signs of depression that might require that intervention, i.e., changes in eating or sleeping, lack of pleasure or participation in normal activities, persistent anxiety about illness or death, or sudden engagement in risky behaviors. If a child exhibits any sign of self-harm or aggression towards others, a parent should seek immediate help. BYFS can provide some support and/or help guide you to the most appropriate venue for assistance. We are fortunate to have support groups in the area as well as resources like the Children's Room in Arlington and Natick and *Good Grief* in Boston, both of whom work with bereavement issues. Parmenter Health Services in Wayland was also suggested by clinical staff as a local resource.

The attached "Grief Etiquette" was adapted from a recent presentation in Sudbury in the wake of the tragic death of a young high school student. While a loss of that type might be considered more traumatic, a child can experience any loss as traumatic, depending on their age and situation, and the message is transferable to other scenarios.

"Resources for Grief and Loss" follow at the end.

(Originally published April 2007)

For more detailed information related to a parent illness, check out the link [Conversations From the Heart: Resources for Talking With Children About a Parent's Serious Illness](#) by Janet D. Perloff and Victoria M. Rizzo.



# Grief Etiquette

The most important thing for one child to say to another who is grieving a loss is “I am sorry.” It means a lot to a kid to have their loss acknowledged. This is all you have to teach them.

People often avoid the grief-stricken because they can't tolerate the intensity of that person's grief.

People need to learn how to speak to a person who is grieving a loss. And it's never too late. You can always reach out to someone who is grieving a loss.

## **Things to say:**

1. “I am sorry for your sadness.”
2. “This may be pretty hard for you.”
3. “If you want to talk to someone else, let me know.”
4. “I can't imagine how you feel.”
5. “Tell me about her.”
6. “It's okay to... be angry, cry, be frightened.”

What you are doing is joining in with their feelings so you normalize it. But don't overdo it, be guided by your common sense. You know your kids best.

## **Things not to say:**

1. “Give it time.” Time alone doesn't heal your wounds, you have to work it out.
2. “We don't get more than we can handle.”
3. “God must have wanted him.” If God wanted him so much, the child may wonder, what's wrong with me? or think that death is better than life.
4. “She wouldn't want you to be sad.” Never say that. That puts so much pressure on the grieving person. I tell my kids all the time, when I die I want you to be wailing.
5. “Let's try to think of something else.” Not ‘Let's go out to the movies,’ but ‘Can I come over and just sit with you?’
6. “You don't even know (like) her.” These kids have lost a peer in their community in a place that they value and it is a loss that affects them profoundly.

by Diane Moran, grief and bereavement expert, Boston Critical Incident Stress Management Team, from “Guiding Our Children as They Grieve” presented 2/5/07 at Ephraim Curtis Middle School, Sudbury, MA

## Resources for Grief and Loss

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How It Feels When a Parent Dies by Jill Krentz, a book of kids talking about a specific parental loss

Tear Soup by Pat Schweibert and Chuck Deklyen

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