

What does
Grief
feel like?

Korie Leigh, Ph.D.
illustrated by
Mike Malbrough



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Edited by Cassie Sitzman

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9850 51st Avenue North, Suite 100

Minneapolis, MN 55442

(612) 338-2068

help4kids@freespirit.com

freespirit.com



Someone I love died.

Did someone you love die too?
Who was it? What was their name?

After my special person died,
I had a lot of big feelings.



Sometimes I had all these feelings
at the same time.



I didn't know I could have so many
mixed-up feelings at once.



What did you feel after your
special person died?

Helping Children Identify and Express Their Grief A Guide for Caring Adults

If you are reading this book, it means that you are supporting a child experiencing the death of a loved one. It also means that you are likely navigating new terrain—a land of new language, new culture, and so many unknowns. If you are also grieving the loss of the person, you have the added challenge of carrying your grief *and* your child's.

So, as you set out through uncharted territory, remember to give yourself some grace. Supporting children through grief is not easy. You will make mistakes, and it will feel messy. You cannot do the grieving for them, nor can you make them grieve. *But you do not have to do this alone.*

There is no guidebook for how to support children through grief. However, there is *this* book to help you find the words, colors, shapes, and sizes to describe its complex and pervasive nature. In addition to the ideas and activities described in the story, the following pages provide typical responses children may have after the death of someone they love, examples you may relate to, activities and breathing exercises to help manage big emotions, and concrete and simple ways to help children express their grief.

Using the D Word

It's crucial when talking with children about death that you use the actual words. Yes, that means *death*, *dying*, and *dead*.

It's understandable to want to protect children and shield them from any more pain or discomfort. To this end, many people try to use the softer language of euphemism: "We lost them," "They're in a better place," or "They're living in heaven now." However, children hear these words through a very different lens.

A child's world is filled with fantasy and symbolism. The broom in your kitchen can turn into a rocket ship. A pile of sticks outside can transform into a unicorn squad or may become a heap of magic wands that grant wishes. Young children have the ability to believe that what they think and imagine can come true—even that bad things can happen to people they love because of something they said or did.

Heard through the ears of a child, euphemisms can evoke a sense of urgency, fear, and confusion. Here are a few examples of common euphemisms adults use to talk about death, and how they can confuse children.

- One four-year-old was told, "We lost your baby sister." This child then said matter-of-factly, "Well, let's go find her. Where did you lose her?" The child began to search around the house and continued this search for many months until the family sought support.

- Siblings aged three and five were told, "Daddy is in a better place." The siblings replied, "When can we visit him? Is he on one of his trips for work?"
- A five-year-old overheard a conversation between adults, "At least she's in heaven now, watching down on us." A week later, the family sought support after the child developed an intense fear of being alone. During a session, the child said, "I don't want grandma watching me when I'm in the bathroom."
- An eight-year-old was told, "The angels came to take mommy." Moments later, the child began to hyperventilate and burst into tears. He was inconsolable. When he could finally talk, he replied through sobs, "I don't want the angels to come and take me."

Be sure to provide a simple and concrete explanation of death: "When someone dies, their body stops working forever. They don't eat or drink. Their body doesn't sleep or play. Their heart stops beating, and they stop breathing forever."

During these conversations, watch and listen to children's cues. Turning away, losing interest, or beginning to play may be a child's way of telling you they've heard enough. When this happens, stop and return to the conversation at a later time. Often children will change the subject very quickly. For example, one four-year-old asked, "How did mommy die?" When provided a direct and simple answer, this child sat in silence for a

moment, then said, "Can we get ice cream now?" Know that responses such as this are healthy and normal, and they don't mean that a child doesn't care or isn't grieving. They do mean that the child needs a break. This break may last hours, days, or even months or years, but eventually the child will be ready to revisit the conversation and add on a new layer of understanding.

You can follow up at another time, asking questions to identify misconceptions:

- "What do you think happens when someone dies?"
- "What do you think happens to a person's body when they die?"
- "Why do you think (insert the person's name) died?"

You may need to revisit these conversations with children many times, which can be hard if you are also grieving. But it is important to keep talking and answering their questions to help them understand the death.

How Children Respond to Grief

"If a child is old enough to love, they are old enough to grieve."—Alan Wolfelt

The following chart offers an age-by-age reference guide of common grief behaviors and reactions in children. Keep in mind that each child's grief is unique; no two children will experience it in the same way. The chart can help you recognize ways your child may be grieving, but it does not represent all the ways grief might manifest in children.