

## **REACTIONS TO DEATH BY AGE GROUP:**

**Preschool (age 2-6)** Generally around age 4 children have a limited and vague understanding of death. Children of this age generally do not think of death as permanent. They may believe it is reversible and talk of doing things with the person in the future. Preschoolers frequently engage in magical thought and play. They may believe if they pray or wish hard enough, they can bring the dead person to life. A teacher may overhear a child tell a friend, "My mommy is not dead. She is visiting Grandma." Young children may connect events or things together that do not belong together. A child may tell his brother he hates him, and a short time later the brother is struck and killed by a car. The child may not only have guilt for what he said, but feel responsible for causing the death. As teachers and caregivers, we must disconnect these events in children's thinking by reassuring them that the events are not in any way related.

**Elementary Primary grade (age 6-9)** Children at this age have begun to grasp the finality of death, but very often they still engage in magical thinking and maintain the belief that their thoughts and wishes may have the power to undo death. This belief in their power may lead to the idea that they could have prevented the death or they should have been there to protect the person who died. This thinking also is likely to lead to feelings of guilt and responsibility for the person's death.

**Elementary Intermediate grade (age 9-12)** Developmentally, at this age, children are reading adventure books, telling ghost stories, and becoming preoccupied with super heroes. They often look on death as some supernatural being that comes and gets you. Even though they think of death as something that happens primarily to old people, they realize it can happen to the young, to their parents, to their loved ones. Children of this age may develop fears of their parents dying or have nightmares about the death of a friend or loved one. They may also think people die because of some wrongdoing of the dead person or someone around them; that is, death is punishment for bad behavior. Again, this type of thinking can lead to feelings of guilt and remorse.

**Middle and high school (age 12-18)** By the time children reach middle school, they probably understand death as well as adults. They understand it is permanent and it happens to everyone eventually. They may spend time thinking, daydreaming, and philosophizing about death. They are often fascinated with death and fantasize about their own death to the dismay of their parents. They imagine their own funeral, for example: who will come, how badly people will feel, and how people will wish they had been nicer to them when they were alive. Even with this preoccupation with death, they can feel immune to it and engage in death-challenging behaviors such as reckless driving, drinking, or taking drugs.

**PRACTICAL INTERVENTIONS FOLLOWING A CRISIS:** Students respond to crises in a variety of ways. Staff members who have worked directly or indirectly with affected children are excellent sources for reporting behavioral information. Some reported symptoms are external and appear to be easily identifiable, while internalized symptoms present more subtly. Consequently, mental health interventions in the school setting must address the atypical behaviors exhibited from students within broad developmental stages. The following are practical interventions to be tried with students in the aftermath of experiencing a crisis event. These interventions may overlap age groups.

**Preschool Students:** Preschool students generally do not comprehend the event. Safety and security are the primary needs of this age group. Students oftentimes “pick up” their emotional cues from the adults around them. The following suggestions are provided for your consideration:

- Project a sense of stability and preserve routine events
- Provide and maintain nurturance, support, and comfort to affected students
- Reassure students that they are physically safe in the school building
- Encourage students to express thoughts and feelings via drawings, coloring, puppet play, or other play therapy modalities
- Correct (in simple terms) any misinterpretations of the event reported by students

**Elementary School Students:** Elementary students try to make sense of the event in concrete terms. Common cognitive distortions include “magical thinking” regarding the permanence of death, unrealistic expectations of their role in causing the event, and intense fears of dying or losing loved ones. The following suggestions are provided for your consideration:

- Emphasize their safety within the school environment
- Encourage students to verbally express their perceptions of the event, as well as express their reactions or fears

- Help them to sort out fact from fantasy or hearsay
- Validate their feelings by highlighting the normalcy of general feelings and actions
- Reassure students regarding self-adequacy, assist in realistically assigning responsibility for the origin of the crisis, and reassure and help students to anticipate what might happen in the future
- Allow students to draw, chronicle events in a personal journal, and read books
- Offer stress relief activities and physical outlets
- Utilize memory books, cards, and memorial drawings

**Middle School Students:** Middle school students are seeking peer acceptance, yet trying to maintain a measure of unique self-expression. The experience of a crisis event may compromise notions of self-adequacy, identity, and the meaning of life, resulting in intense emotions and major confusion. The following suggestions are provided for your consideration:

- Emphasize their safety within the school environment
- Assist students in differentiating facts from rumors or hearsay
- Validate the confusion that they are presently experiencing
- Normalize their feelings and actions and help them anticipate future experiences
- Help facilitate self-expression and memorializing (drawings, paintings, poems, journaling, and discussions)
- Assist in exploring the meaning of death
- Discuss previous experiences with similar crises
- Explore religious/spiritual beliefs and morals

- Review stress management techniques and coping skills

**High School Students:** High school students tend to think more abstractly about death/dying in the aftermath of a crisis. Some struggle with questioning their own mortality, whereas others consider themselves invulnerable to injury or death. Others try to assign a moral connection to the suffering and death of certain individuals. The following suggestions are provided for your consideration:

- Emphasize their safety within the school environment
- Assist students in differentiating facts from rumors or hearsay
- Validate the confusion that they are presently experiencing
- Normalize their feelings and actions, and help to anticipate future experiences
- Help facilitate self-expression and memorializing (drawings, paintings, poems, journaling, and discussions)
- Discuss the topic of mortality
- Discuss previous encounters with loss and coping strategies used
- Discuss the commonality of shared experiences with crises
- Review coping strategies to use in this event
- Review steps in sound decision making

(NIMH, 2007; Mental Health America, 2009; & University of Michigan-Counseling and Psychological Services)