



GriefCare for Families
Module 4: Caregiving after a loss
Topic 3: Helping grieving children live with reminders of loss

The way children adapt to loss is different from adults. Adults need to accept the finality of the loss, understand what it means to them and accept a changed relationship to the person who died. They need to envision a future that holds promise and possibilities for happiness. Children also need to understand the finality of the loss and what it means to them, however the meaning of the loss to a child is different from an adult. Most importantly, loss of a family member is likely to increase feelings of insecurity for a child. Children often worry about losing parents or others who take care of them. Your child needs to know that they are still safe and will be taken care of. They need to know that there are a lot of things that won't change for them.

Tell your child that when someone special dies things change but that doesn't mean it's not ok. In the beginning the changes can feel strange and confusing, but they can get used to their feelings and find ways to be happy. Your family is still ok and there are a lot of things that will remain normal.

You might ask if your child can think of things that will be different without the deceased friend or family member. Talk about these changes and help your child verbalize their feelings. They may be sad, angry, scared, disappointed or have a range of different feelings. Talk about those feelings and remind them that you're still here and you are going to take care of them. You might help them see that there can be some positive changes, too.

One way to help children see that things are still ok is to help them manage reminders of their loss. Living with reminders helps children understand what it means that a loved one died. Doing things that remind them of the special person who died is one way to keep them alive in their heart and mind. However, reminders can cause strong, painful emotions that might be difficult for your child. You may think it's better if you don't do things that remind your child of their loss. Others may also think you should avoid things that upset your family. However, the advice to stay away from painful reminders is not always helpful. It may hold your family back. You need to find ways to move forward in your life, free of restrictions on what you can do.

It will help your child to do things that hold memories they might treasure. You can approach the project of learning to live with reminders gradually. We suggest you give some thought to how you will help your child engage with memories of their loved one. By doing this you'll gradually become freer to explore rewarding activities. You'll become better able to help your child manage their emotions. You'll find you have better access to positive, bittersweet memories and a stronger ongoing sense of connection to your deceased loved one.

Balancing painful experiences with pleasant ones

It's important for parents to show their children that just because they are sad and they miss the person who died terribly, it does not mean they cannot have fun. You and/or your children may experience waves of sadness when you are doing fun activities, and that's ok. It does not mean that you can't experience joy.

You may recall from Module 3 about using a grief chart that one of the ways for you to regulate strong emotions is to alternate between confronting them and setting them aside. Provide times when you and your family can set aside your grief emotions and focus on things that you can do that are meaningful or fun.

You might plan these activities to be a regular part of the moments when you are sharing feelings, memories or thoughts about the death. It's helpful to balance times of emotional pain with periods of positive emotions. This fosters the natural process of adaptation to loss.

Remember to practice self-compassion

As parents and caregivers, we have goals and values we want to promote and ways we want to interact with our children. We try our best to do this, yet there are times when we fall short. This can happen especially when we are feeling intense grief.

When things are not going well, remember to focus first on self-compassion. If it does not seem easy to be self-compassionate, you are not alone. Studies have found that Women are less self-compassionate than men and often people who are very good caregivers and very compassionate to others are the ones who have the most difficulty being self-compassionate. Take some time to review this and to work on increasing your self-compassion. It can be especially difficult to stem the tide of self-blame when you see your child suffering or you think you are not doing well as a caregiver. This is a time when it is especially important to remember and practice self-compassion.