

# PATHWAYS CENTER *for* GRIEF & LOSS

## HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH SUDDEN ILLNESS

You are never prepared when a loved one receives an unexpected diagnosis/illness. The first reaction is often is a feeling of shock and unreality. You might feel unable to cope. As an adult, you may be unsure how you should respond, much less how to help affected children.

It is important to understand there is a natural process that follows any diagnosis. The event is abnormal. Both adult and children need to know their feelings are probably normal. Your reactions may be intense and unpredictable. The situation is unusual, and you, and the children around you, are stressed and feel vulnerable. Adult reactions around children will have great influence on the children's adjustment to the illness. The intensity and duration of their reaction will decrease quicker if they feel heard, understood, and reassured.

### ADULTS

#### Common Early Responses

Fear  
Disbelief – “life a bad dream”  
Numbness  
Difficulty focusing/concentrating  
Need for details, for information

#### Possible Later Responses (No specific time frame)

Sleeping or eating disruptions  
Headaches  
Apathy or depression  
Crying easily  
Irritability, anger  
Lack of interest  
Anxiety about the future  
Feeling guilty or overwhelmed  
Increased colds, flu, allergy

### CHILDREN

#### Common Reactions With Ages 5-12

Fear or apprehension of repeat occurrence  
Regression to earlier stage of development  
Constant conversation and questioning  
Excessive clinging  
Bedtime problems – can't sleep, nightmares, fear of sleeping alone, fear of dark, bed-wetting  
Cries easily  
Fear of abandonment

#### Common Reactions With Ages 13-17

Physical reactions such as headaches, stomachaches, lack of appetite  
Extreme sadness  
School problems: avoidance, behavior problems, poor grades  
Behavior problems could include acting out and increased aggressiveness  
Changes in sleeping patterns: difficulty sleeping, nightmares, excessive sleep  
Feeling of confusion  
Withdrawal and isolation  
Lack of interest in previously enjoyable activities

Children feel overwhelmed with the intensity of their emotions. Younger children may not know how to identify, much less verbalize their feelings. Play, and fantasies expressed in play, can often give clues about concerns the child may have. Let the children make their own interpretations and express their feelings. You can do this by getting down to the child's level to play, draw, or read with them.

Teens may feel unable to discuss their feelings with family members. Often their peer group or school personnel may be a safer place for the teen to work through what they are feeling. Most of the common reactions listed for teens are transitory and resolve within a period of time. Teens who withdraw from their peers as well from family members may need close attention. They may be experiencing fears they are afraid to express because they do not want to appear "different from the crowd". Provide reassurance that *whatever* they are feeling is normal and give an avenue to express their feelings.

### **HOW CAN YOU HELP?**

- \* Recognize your own feelings and talk to others about them.
- \* Provide information - accurately, completely, but simply.
- \* Create opportunities for children to talk with you and with each other. Listen carefully and patiently even if the same questions are asked repeatedly. Model your true feelings and inquire about theirs.
- \* Predict and discuss the range of feelings that may be experienced - this legitimizes, normalizes, and prepares them for theirs.
- \* Listen to what they say.
- \* Look for the questions behind the questions.
- \* Encourage stories and drawings, and then ask them to explain and/or interpret their works.
- \* Reassure the children of their safety - remember they feel vulnerable.
- \* Relax the rules to allow opportunities for expression of feelings but continue to maintain a sense of structure and routine.
- \* Talk with other adults who are close to the affected children to assure consistency of information given, reactions seen, interventions planned.
- \* Offer praise for positive behaviors, even if you must look for them between times of misbehavior.
- \* If you are the parent, spend extra time with your children, especially at bedtime. Hug and touch your children more - it's a physical way of providing the reassurance that you are there for them.
- \* Use words or phrases that are accurate. Using sleep for death, for example, or saying that God chooses the best can instill fear.