

**TALKING TO
YOUR KIDS
ABOUT GRIEF:**

When Challenge and Change Overwhelm

Jeannie Ewing

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TALKING TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT GRIEF: WHEN CHALLENGE AND CHANGE OVERWHELM

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INTRODUCTION

Handling loss at any stage of life is awkward at best, difficult and painful at worst. Children in various stages of development will likely deal with significant changes in divergent ways, so as a parent, you need to respond to them accordingly. It's never an easy task to tackle how to discuss sad or negative emotions related to loss, but kids will often send signals of distress to you when they are really struggling.

Young children may act out their negative feelings through hitting, kicking, or other similar behavior. They may become sassy or mouthy with you when they weren't before. Because they are so young and their feelings are complex, they cannot yet adequately express what they are feeling. They may not really understand really intense emotions, especially if they are painful. Emotional pain is one of the most difficult aspects of parenting you may face.

As kids grow older, your method of addressing loss and change will match the needs of your child. Some children experience death or loss early on in their lives, while others do not encounter it until they are preteenagers or adolescents. How you respond to their experience of loss will determine how well they can navigate the murky and tumultuous waters of grief. While it may be tempting to ignore or trivialize death or loss, it's detrimental to your child to neglect a very raw and real experience for them.

It's best to start with your child - at any age - by observing how they initially respond to loss and change for the first few days or weeks after it occurs. If your jovial child begins withdrawing, be attuned to that. Watch carefully how your child interacts with his or her siblings or peers. Notice behavioral changes or drastic differences in eating or sleeping habits. Physical manifestations of grief are common, especially since emotional pain is much more difficult to understand and resolve.

Once you notice the changes in your child following a drastic hardship or crisis, take some time to pray, discuss with a trusted advisor or friend, and journal some ways you think you can address his grief without pressuring him into something he isn't prepared to handle. You'll also want to ensure that your children have access to proper resources that can help them process their emotions.

This e-booklet will offer several options for addressing grief at three developmental stages of your child's life. The end goal is always to help him or her work through the frustrations and confusion in a healthy manner so that complicated grief does not result. In order to get to that place, explain to your child early and (fairly) often that death and loss is a part of life. Use analogies in nature to substantiate your claim, and allow the conversations that are born from those examples to naturally unfurl.

As in any case where red flags and severe panic or a decline in mental or physical health are apparent (and when suicide or harm to others is imminent), immediately call 9-1-1 or your health care provider. Your child and/or your family may need counseling, medication, or a combination of both. Don't be too proud to get this help, especially if your child is showing signs of complicated grief.

Complicated grief mimics depression, in that the typical sorrow lingering from a recent loss becomes normalized over time, usually lasting longer than two consecutive weeks. The sadness may permeate your child's every thought, question, and motivate his or her behavior. Violent and volatile outbursts may follow. Comments, such as "I hate everything about my life" or "My life is never going to get better" are sure signs that you need to seek professional help. If your child is isolating herself from positive influences, secluding herself in the bedroom for hours or days on end, it's time to intervene.

Remember that your child may become upset or even enraged at your interference, but as a parent, you must always keep your child's safety and emotional wellbeing at the forefront of your actions. Kids don't usually appreciate our attempts to divert them from self-destruction, only because their feelings are so raw and confusing to them. Don't allow their negative responses or initial resistance to deter you from doing what's in their best interest.

Parents, you are in for a daunting but rewarding task. If you do it well, your child will become more resilient, confident, and eventually happy. Modeling the type of behavior you want your child to exhibit is often the most powerful motivating factor for your child to incorporate positive change into her life.

All of life is a journey, and death and loss are part of that journey. The struggle may seem long, but it will not last forever, and in the end, all will be well if you struggle valiantly and persevere through the setbacks and travails. Don't quit, don't give up, and stay strong.

THE YOUNG YEARS: AGES 3 – 7

Infants will not grasp the significance of life and death, so it's best to start educating your children about difficult changes resulting from loss when they're around three years old. Because young children learn mainly through playing and dramatic interacting, focus on reading books with metaphors and making crafts that display transformation, such as a caterpillar to a butterfly.

In fact, this metaphor alone is very powerful for children of all ages but especially helps younger kids make the connection that sometimes the life we always knew may vanish completely or take on a new form of existence. Exploring feelings through play therapy may also help if you choose to take your child to counseling.

Here are some ideas on how you can start the conversation early about life and death with your kids:

Allow them to ask hard questions, and answer them honestly.

Be prepared for your child to ask you things, like "Why do good people have to suffer?" or "If God loves us, then why do bad things happen in the world?" or "Dying isn't fair!" Particularly sensitive children will deeply internalize these messages, so your response to them is critical.

There's no question that parenting is one of the most difficult vocations in life, and part of the reason for that is dealing with really tough issues, such as death or loss. No manual can adequately or comprehensively prepare us for those candid moments with our kids when we're surprised by their inquisitive nature that often catches us off guard.

I recall one such occasion when my oldest daughter, Felicity, was about three years old. I explained to her that Bubbies (my parents' dog) was getting old and might not be around for Christmas. I knew she was getting attached to him, much like she was to our own dog, and because of her sensitive nature, I wanted her to be prepared if he suddenly wasn't around.

She took my hand, and with a very concerned glance, asked, "Where Bubbies go?" I said that dying is when our hearts stop beating, and we stop breathing. Our bodies appear as if we're in a deep sleep, but we never wake up. Still, our souls live on in Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory. She scrunched up her nose thoughtfully and paused before responding, "Do dogs go Heaven?" Though I knew they didn't experience eternal life as humans do, I shrugged and replied truthfully, "I don't know where dogs go when they die."

This led to an explanation of what happens to someone's body when they die – the burial – and everything preceding it. Felicity even asked me about the casket, so I told her that it resembles a big box where the person is placed so that their body can be transported from the church and/or funeral home to the cemetery.

Your child may ask fewer or more questions than mine did when you begin this conversation. Just like adults, kids vary in their levels of curiosity, so many children may be satisfied with a simple

answer. Other kids who are more emotionally delicate or perceptive will probably want the most detailed explanation you can appropriately offer them at their age.

The key is to begin with simple, basic answers and wait for your child to respond. If he asks more questions, answer him, but allow your child to lead. That way you can be confident that you are not traumatizing or confusing him with information he is incapable of handling.

You may need to take some time in solitude to prepare yourself for this conversation, because it can bring to the surface many latent or repressed emotions revolving around death that you haven't dealt with in a long time (or at all). Children so often act as mirrors to us, reflecting the parts about us we'd rather neglect, ignore, or forget. But this discussion is vital to your relationship with your child, mainly because it's an issue of trust.

Your child may quickly pick up your reticence and discomfort if you wait until tragedy or crisis strikes your family before opening the lines of communication about death and loss. While you ultimately must determine the right time to bring up the topic of death, it is best not to wait until it's too late, and your child is in shock or severely upset over something she wasn't expecting and didn't understand.

Take some time alone to write down anything unresolved within you, questions you may have, or why this discussion is uncomfortable for you, and then talk it over with someone you trust. This could be a spouse, parent, friend, neighbor, coworker, your pastor, or a counselor. Once you've worked through some of the more pressing issues and have received clarity and perhaps new insight, you can then plan the right time to discuss the inevitability of death to your child.

Make a butterfly craft and explain its significance.

When I was a child, I gravitated toward butterflies, but it wasn't because of their beauty or whimsy. While I did find them to be delicate and mysterious creatures, I was fascinated by the process of metamorphosis once I found out about it. It seemed impossible that a measly, crawling caterpillar would instinctively spin a chrysalis out of silk and snuggle inside of it for an undetermined amount of time.

Why would a caterpillar do this? What guarantee did it have that the chrysalis would protect it or that it would emerge from the dark cocoon? These, and many other questions, flooded my young mind, but I always looked to the end result - a beautiful winged creature that soared to the sky.

There's a message of hope captured in this little segment of nature, and it's one that is not lost on most children. I think that's because children are more naturally open than adults are, and they tend to listen more attentively with their hearts than their minds. You can use the story of metamorphosis to explain death to your children as you create a craft of your choice with them.

Something simple would be to download a copyright-free template of a butterfly outline, print it, color and cut it out, and then roll it up in an empty toilet paper tube. As you tell the story of a caterpillar, show the tube and explain what's happening on the inside. Finally, the butterfly can emerge triumphant.

Likewise, we live our earthly lives as caterpillars, but we know there is more for us than mere existence on Earth. At some point, we must enter our own cocoons, which is like a tomb when we die. But we also know it's not the finality of our life. Instead, we, like the butterfly, will one day enter into a new, glorified body as our souls are resurrected into eternal life.

Of course, there's the doctrine of Hell (and Purgatory for those of us who are Catholic Christians), but you don't have to terrify your children with a fire-and-brimstone speech if death of someone you love is imminent. There will always be other opportunities to explain these tenets of faith when they approach the age of reason and begin to comprehend right and wrong, sin and virtue.

Read a book about grief.

For the parent who isn't ready to broach the topic of death or has no idea how to begin the conversation, reading books on the subject can be an immense relief and provide the foundation for your children to start thinking about the cycle of life.

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf uses the season of autumn and the metaphor of leaves falling from a tree to teach children about the process of dying. Freddie meets Daniel, another leaf who wisely shares with him about peacefully letting go of the tree when his time has come to die. Through their conversation, Freddie begins to notice how beautiful and different all of the leaves are, as well as how each leaf deals differently with its impending fall, or death. Some cling tightly to the tree, while others gently resign themselves to death by surrendering their control.

The book also shows how the leaves live on through the tree, which mildly implies some sort of life-after-death ideology. While not explicitly religious in nature, young children will learn about the beautiful cycles of nature, which can then become the impetus for discussion later.

One of my favorite books, which is not just for children, is called *Hope for the Flowers*. The story follows a male caterpillar that enjoys life crawling on the ground, munching green leaves and sleeping long hours. Then he meets another caterpillar named Stripe, whose beauty allures him to follow her. She leads him to a pillar of caterpillars. It seemed that hundreds of caterpillars were climbing high in the air, but no one knew where they were going or why.

Stripe and her companion climb the pillar together, but he gets ambitious and starts stepping on other caterpillars without regard for their feelings. Eventually, they both abandon their goal in favor of settling down together. Stripe, however, is restless and believes there's still more to life.

She encounters an older, more sagacious caterpillar as he is spinning his cocoon. He tells her that she's meant to become something more - a butterfly - but that she cannot experience this transformation without the risk of waiting in the darkness. Stripe takes that risk, and her companion follows after her once he sees her as a butterfly.

The point of the book, which can be interpreted in several ways, is the same as the butterfly craft: *Resurrection*. Use the book to point out how living as caterpillars (or living in a selfish way) leads nowhere and can hurt others. But when we believe in Someone beyond ourselves and search for

Him, we are willing to risk the certainty of earthly living in favor of hoping for Heaven. When we reach Heaven, we have received our wings and can fly among the angels.

There are plenty of other similar books that you can use to teach your children about the beauty of death, so that we can view the end of our life with a sense of gratitude and peace if we live for God and love others. (See resource appendix at the end of this book for additional book ideas.)

Give them choices in how they grieve.

My first encounter with death involved losing my beloved pet, Swizzle, when she was seventeen years old. Swizzle was the family dog that had always been around, even before I was born. I grew up with her chasing me in the backyard and pulling down my diaper on sunny summer days.

My younger brother and I loved Swizzle. We cuddled with her, took her for walks, played with her, and fed her. Sometimes she was just hanging around in the background, but when she died unexpectedly, her absence was duly noted. At that time, I noticed how differently my brother and I dealt with her passing. While I wanted to talk about Swizzle and reminisce on the fond memories, my brother was nowhere to be found. He had run off to be alone and grieve in silence.

It's important to recognize that our children will deal with death in their own ways. Some will be like I was and want to remember all of the good times with laughter and a good cry. They may talk ad infinitum about the person (or pet) who is gone. While this may become irritating, let them do this. Give them an outlet to express their feelings and thoughts.

Other kids may retreat in seclusion for a time, because sadness is something they may not be familiar with or do not feel comfortable expressing in front of others. Give them space to do this, but make sure you keep watch so that their silent grieving doesn't turn into prolonged isolation from others.

Younger children need options so they know how to appropriately process their difficult and convoluted feelings. Tell them they can go outside and run, punch a pillow, scream in the garage, or cry over some music. Show them how to channel their frustration, anger, and sadness into something constructive so that the catharsis that follows will give them a sense of balance and relief.

Have a memorial service with rituals.

My parents suggested we hold a small memorial service for Swizzle after she died. My dad dug a hole in the backyard, and my brother and I got to select a family photo with her in it that we placed on top of her lifeless body in the ground. Because I was in eighth grade at the time, I wrote a poem and read it aloud as we all wiped tears away and sniffled into handkerchiefs together. Once we had all spoken one good memory about our beloved family pet, my dad buried her body, along with the items we placed on top of her, and we planted a tree to signify new life.

I watched that tree grow taller over the years, and I pondered the fact that Swizzle's body provided food for that tree. When someone or something dies, a part of them lives on, whether it is in the legacy they left behind or literally by giving someone else new life (organ donation, etc.).

Children thrive on rituals. Symbols provide a rhythm of comfort to memorialize someone who or something that has died. Even if the loss is moving to a new house, changing schools, or parents getting divorced, holding a memorial service together is a safe way for them to transition from the old and into the new.

Ask your children what they want to contribute. Planting a tree was perfect for our family, because it was a tangible reminder of our dog, and it symbolically represented what we already believed about life continuing on after death occurs. You may choose to do this, or something similar, but make sure the entire family participates in whatever way you feel most comfortable.

Let them draw a picture of how they feel or use puppets to enact their emotions.

Play therapy is very effective with children. Many child counselors use sand, drawings, and acting when they are trying to reach the depth of a child's feelings. Because really young kids aren't capable of articulating their emotions (or even understanding them completely), playing and acting can be very healing for them when they have endured a significant loss in their lives.

You can make puppets or find them at thrift stores very affordably. You may even dig in your closets or attics and find some old puppets that haven't been used in years. Talk to your kids about what kind of story they may want to tell through the puppets, and make sure that one of them represents the person who or pet that has died. Let your kids take the lead as the story unfolds, and interject with messages of hope and peace if it seems as if the tale is getting too dismal.

Another option of creative play involves drawing, which is very simple and also powerful. Simply set aside some quiet time with your child, and give him a blank piece of paper with some crayons or markers. As you are talking to him about death or the loss, have him draw his feelings. Tell your child that he doesn't have to say anything, just draw whatever he wants to. If he chooses to talk, that's fine, too.

Once the picture is complete, say, "Tell me about your picture," and listen carefully to how your child responds. You will likely glean much insight about how he is handling grief from this activity.

The best way to guide your children through any difficulty is by being sincere, honest, and authentic in the way you live your life, how you approach their natural curiosity, and your direct and indirect ways of parenting. Above all, we must remember to call upon God's grace when we are completely baffled or paralyzed with fear. There are so many tragedies we cannot fathom, but when they afflict us personally, we are often gripped with terror to the core. Prayer and consultation with trusted, respected people can aid us in owning our feelings, as well as understanding how to help our kids learn about theirs.

THE MIDDLE YEARS: AGES 8 – 12

As children grow older, their brains begin to compartmentalize more complex thoughts, reasoning, and even deeper spiritual insights. They move beyond mere black-and-white, concrete thinking toward abstract analysis. Take advantage of this stage of development, because you can meet their new way of thinking by taking the conversation about death and the afterlife to a new, deeper level.

The manner in which you approach your kids really depends on their readiness, emotional maturity, and availability. Many children in this age bracket begin to separate from their families in favor of peer relationships, so you'll want to capture their attention at the right moments. Otherwise, they're likely to tune you out and become distracted by where they'd rather be.

I think overall we, as parents, need to tap into our intuition, especially when it comes to discerning how to discuss those taboo topics, like death, sex, drugs, peer pressure, modesty, religion, etc. Timing, openness, and trust are all critical components to a fruitful conversation with our children. Even if our relationship with our children turns rocky or has been turbulent for some time, we can begin anew any time and begin building trust and communication.

Because kids in the preteen age group may be dealing with the onset of hormonal changes, you'll have to factor those emotional fluctuations into the dynamic of your discussion. Many times we become defensive with our children's reactions to what we are teaching them, but it's helpful if we take a step back on a daily basis and evaluate – perhaps through a spiritual examen – our behavior and what we could do differently.

Instead of preaching, nagging, or talking down to your child, pray that you will be able to speak words of love and listen with an open heart to whatever results from opening Pandora's Box, so to speak. We always take a risk when we choose to be vulnerable, especially with our children, but vulnerability – regardless of the outcome – is always a necessary risk to take if we wish to deepen our relationships. Children benefit the most from vulnerable and honest communication. If you are afraid of death, tell them. If you are uncomfortable discussing it, be honest about that, too. Lay your cards on the table first and foremost, and your kids will likely be more attentive to the conversation overall.

Here are some suggestions to help you get started talking to your kids in the middle years about loss and grief:

Make a memorial album.

Crafts continue to be incredible teaching tools for kids in the middle years, but instead of basic drawings, you can make a complete photo album or scrap book that memorializes and pays tribute to the person or circumstance that is now gone. Most of us think that grief is exclusive to death, but be creative when you have a particularly sensitive child who struggles with any sort of change in life.

Moving, changing schools, a divorce, change in lifestyle – all of these contribute to a child's sense of grief. Change always indicates loss, which is especially challenging for the sensitive child. Be aware of this, and you may find that a memorial album with photographs, drawings, memorabilia, and other ephemera will help your child with any difficult transition.

Simply ask your child what he or she would like to include in the album, and begin collecting your materials. As you both create pages, have a conversation about what you're pasting or coloring. This is a very therapeutic exercise, and your children will probably find it to be a natural opportunity to talk about their feelings.

Once the album is complete, your child can keep it in his or her room to look at whenever the need arises.

Let them talk and cry and laugh.

Chances are your child will want to talk about the loss at inconvenient times for you. If you stifle the conversation because of your frustration, exhaustion, or distraction, you may be shutting your child out altogether. The key here is to take the opportunity when it emerges, regardless of how convenient the timing is for you.

Kids at this age appreciate friendships that involve a lot of conversation and emotion, so their openness to you in these areas is a good indicator that they trust you enough to open up about their negative thoughts and feelings. They may be hesitant to do this at first, simply because you, as the parent, represent authority and responsibility.

I'm not suggesting that you become best pals with your child, because there must always be a clear delineation between you as the parent and your child. This isn't about forming a peer-to-peer relationship, only about being receptive to the times when your child most needs to express his or her grief.

Because grief is complex, multi-faceted, and manifests itself differently for every person, it's important to be cognizant of the ways that your child may be signaling that she wants to talk, laugh, or cry. Sometimes, because of her emotional limitations, she may actually start acting out behaviorally when the underlying cause is unresolved or unexpressed grief.

If a normally complacent child starts hitting or engaging in screaming fits seemingly out of nowhere, it could be that she is crying for help in a desperate and nonconstructive manner. Instead of reprimanding your child for the outburst, ask if she wants to talk about the divorce, move, death, etc. Even if you are met with the cold shoulder or a slammed door, don't stop asking.

We must persevere with our children, especially when pain and suffering is involved. Perseverance in this case involves not becoming discouraged when your attempts at loving communication are met with discord and anger. Allow your child to be angry, give him space, and when he is ready (with your gentle persistence), listen.

Listen attentively and empathically. Listen with your heart.

Reminisce together.

Make sure you carve special, quality time with each of your children, especially revolving around a raw, fresh wound of grief. Nature walks, dinner dates (without phones or technology), and even short weekend trips to zoos, state parks, or renting a hotel room with a pool are nonthreatening environments that may produce an unlikely conversation about the loss and how your child is dealing with it.

Reminiscing, or tripping down memory lane, can be helpful and harmful. Be careful not to allow your child to dwell too much in the past with a heart-wrenching longing that turns into despondency or depression. Model healthy living by being present and attentive to the here-and-now rather than regrets over the past or fretting about the future.

Still, allowing your child to express guilt about a tragedy can be helpful if it is nurtured and processed properly. Many children carry a horrible onus of guilt revolving around “what ifs” and “if onlys” when someone has died, an accident has occurred, or a divorce is underway. Be sure that you don’t judge or criticize your child when he or she says things like, “I wish I had been there when dad died. If I hadn’t been at school, maybe he would still be alive.”

Irrational thinking is common following a loss, because we imagine all of the ways we might have prevented a travesty from occurring. Allow your child to speak freely by validating his feelings. Listen reflectively by repeating his emotions. For instance, if your child is sobbing about how he misses his grandpa, say, “You’re really sad about Grandpa’s death.”

Reminiscing can be a lighthearted and warm activity to share, as well. Bring up some funny memories so that you can laugh together. Laughter is very healing on a physiological, as well as psychological level. A good belly laugh may be the medicine you both need to break tension and bring levity to your otherwise sullen and heavy experience of bereavement.

Write a letter to the one who died.

This is a beautiful activity for any age group, including adults. In fact, you may want to participate along with your child. If you need some help getting started, consider these prompts:

What I miss most about you is...

I wish I had...

I wish I hadn’t...

I’m sorry I...

Thank you for...

I’ll always remember...

My favorite memory of us is...

I’d love to tell you...

Be intentional and clear in this activity. Let your child know that the letter can be as long or short as she wants. In fact, if your child struggles with writing, making a special drawing suffices just fine. To complete the activity, you may want to sign and date, fold, and place it in an envelope. You can

choose to keep it or place it at a person's gravesite or even mail it if the person is still alive but estranged from you and your child.

Listen to their feelings.

This may seem redundant, but it cannot be overstated. Preteens are very emotional beings. They thrive on drama and extreme expressions of feelings. Kids don't want parents to be apathetic or distant, but they also don't want you to exaggerate your feelings only to placate them.

Feelings come in many colors and varieties. Grief draws many negative emotions that we are not used to or comfortable with. Kids especially may be frightened by the intensity of their emotions. Explain that anger, sadness, heartbreak, and other feelings are normal and should be handled with mercy and compassion.

You might want to brainstorm some common negative emotions beyond the ones listed above. Anger certainly comes in many shades of red, including rage, sarcasm, irritation, frustration, and fear. Sorrow may mask repressed anger in the form of depression and despondency, while wrath can be a cover-up for deeper, more painful feelings of emptiness or sadness from loss.

Allow your child to express negative emotions within appropriate parameters (which you determine), and realize that anger expressed is much healthier than repressing it, which is often due to our reactions to negative emotions. Some common roadblocks to communication in this area include, "Everything will be fine," "Don't worry about it," "Stop yelling," "Why are you always so angry?" "There's nothing to be upset about."

These will instantly send the message to your child that negative emotions are to be shunned and avoided. In turn, they may internalize a deep sense of shame for feeling the way they do. Feelings are neither right nor wrong; they simply *are*. If you remember that emotions in and of themselves are neutral, you may be more comfortable allowing your son or daughter to express their anger. The key is permitting them appropriate options for channeling their intense feelings so that they don't get out of hand.

Obviously children should never transfer their anger onto another person through hitting, kicking, or any physical aggression. In addition, verbal attacks are off limits. Encourage your child to use different forms of exercise to transfer their aggressive feelings, such as a hard jog or long game of basketball with a friend. Their bodies will physically calm down, and their minds will follow suit with a more balanced and homeostatic level of harmony.

All-in-all, extend mercy on your child when her emotions are fragile and raw. Keep your own reactions in check so that she feels safe talking to you about what's on her mind and deep within her heart.

The preteen years are a tough age group, because kids are constantly pulling away from you and then wanting to draw closer to you at unexpected times. This can be incredibly frustrating for you as a parent, but remain vigilant in your pursuit of their hearts, and you will eventually win them over with love. It may seem soft to practice active and empathic listening, but grief often triggers certain

insecurities kids have suppressed for many years. Because of this, kindness and gentle persuasion to talk when anger is being inappropriately expressed can draw them closer to you at precisely the time when they need you the most.

As parents, we are constantly battling the culture and our children's peer groups that seem to be luring them away from the values we've attempted to instill in them since birth. But grief, though tragic, presents many opportunities for us to bring our kids back to wholesome nurturing that they truly long for but seldom verbalize. If we view grief as an *opportunity* rather than an *imposition*, we can tap into the ways we can reclaim our kids' hearts and minds in spiritually and emotionally healthy ways. Ultimately, this is the goal of empathy and reflective listening. Practice it frequently, and it will become second nature to you.

THE ADOLESCENT YEARS: AGES 13 – 19

Most parents dread the teen years, perhaps recalling their own high school experiences of experimentation, angst, and rebellion. It's important to point out that not all teenagers rebel, so we shouldn't expect our own children to grow into mouthy, obstinate, and egocentric young adults. I think the reason parents groan at the thought of their kids becoming adolescents is mainly due to exaggerated expectations of behavior. If we give our children a bit of wiggle room, so to speak, where *some* pushing back is anticipated and even viewed as normal, we may discover that they're generally well-behaved and kind-hearted young people.

Adolescence is a time of independence and discovery about the self. Much like in infancy and toddlerhood, the teen years involve establishing one's own identity apart from the family of origin. We see this in the three-year-old whose favorite word is "No!" In the teenager, however, the drive for autonomy may be subtler and expressed through rejection of the family's traditions, values, or even religious beliefs. This is why we, as parents, label their rejection as rebellion.

I'll share with you a story of my own teen years as an example of why it's critical for parents to keep their perspective about this developmental stage of their child's life. When I was in high school, I became slightly disillusioned with my Catholic upbringing. Somewhere around the age of sixteen, I attended Mass out of obligation rather than from love of God. It was a boring, "same old" type of activity that I didn't "get anything out of." These were my thoughts, which obviously shaped my attitude.

At some point, the denominational services my friends attended appeared far more exciting than the Mass. I had a few friends who were fairly devout Protestants, and their enthusiasm for youth group and Sunday service was infectious. After a while, I begged my parents to allow me to join my friends in their worship services and youth activities, including a summer youth camp. My parents, in their infinite wisdom, permitted me to go under the sole condition that I maintain my attendance at Sunday Mass with the family. The compromise, in my mind, was well worth it, so I accepted.

During that time, I flourished as a teen in many ways, because I was surrounded by other young people who seemed genuinely enthralled with learning more about their faith and loving Jesus. Because I had always been a spiritually-minded child, I felt more at home with these teenagers than I did with the non-practicing or religiously apathetic peers who attended high school with me. What I didn't know, however, was that my parents were deeply worried that I would lose my Catholic faith, which would have been a terrible travesty. They fretted and prayed but never spoke a word of their distress to me.

Looking in retrospect, I am grateful that my parents consulted our parish priest while I was more interested in Protestantism than Catholicism. Many people at my home church were praying for me, unbeknownst to me at the time. Because I was unaware that any of this was happening, I am certain that my choice to stay solidly rooted in Catholicism was one I made out of authentic freedom. I never felt coerced into staying Catholic, and no one guilt tripped or manipulated me.

Fear was never used, either. If my parents had expressed their worry about my leaving the Church, I may have stayed without finding out what I truly believed, all out of a sense of obedience.

My parents modeled good judgment during this brief stint of my teen years. While they disagreed with my decision to “shop around” for other churches and explore my own beliefs, they let me do it. Certainly there are times when teens want to do something that may be harmful for them, in which case parents must be strict with boundaries and say “no.” But in my case, and in many cases involving youth, I was able to establish my own identity as a Catholic rather than maintaining the faith of my family out of a begrudging sense of moral duty.

Grief can be tricky to teens, because many will withdraw from their families and hide within their music or books. Some turn to friends, but many do not, because they don't want to appear weak or awkward during a time of their lives when they (falsely) assume they should be confident and capable in order to be liked and respected.

Here are a few suggestions on how to draw your teen out of his world and into exploring his pain in a healthy manner:

Encourage them to keep a feelings journal.

Journaling is therapeutic at any age, providing your child can read, write, and comprehend reading, of course. But it is especially helpful for the teen who feels a greater need for privacy as she begins to build a stronger sense of self, aside from her family, yet including her love for them. For the adolescent, journaling specifically about grief will become more emotionally complex, so begin by offering ideas on how to get started. Then you must leave the rest up to her.

If journaling is unfamiliar to your child, suggest that he start by writing his story, in his own words. It can include the date he was born, his family members, pets, and friendships. He may want to write about memorable milestones from his childhood to the present day. The point is that this exercise is to get your child thinking about his life and what has made it valuable. It also helps him practice writing so that it becomes a more natural skill for him.

Once he completes his story, he can create his own coat of arms. This is a more artistic, visual representation of where he came from and who he is today. He can include any family values, mottos, or crests, but he must make the coat of arms his *own* journey and identity.

Another activity would be for your child to write a list of her support system. This is more of a brainstorming session that she can access later on when her grief becomes too overwhelming or all-consuming. Tell her that her support system can extend beyond immediate family into cousins, uncles and aunts, grandparents, neighbors, friends at school, teachers or counselors, coaches, scout leaders, etc. These are people she trusts and with whom she would feel comfortable sharing her strife and struggles when grief strikes particularly hard.

Finally, have your teen create a gratitude list. Being thankful is one of the quickest and surest ways we can overcome the downward spiral of self-pity. Like the support system list, this can begin as a brainstorm, where anything and everything is recorded. Your child may initially resist this or retort

that “there’s nothing to be thankful for,” especially if she is hurting over a recent loss that is still fresh on her heart. Encourage her to write down small things, like the sunrise or her favorite cup of tea for breakfast – even the fact that she has a home, parents who love her, and her basic needs met.

While this may seem trite, it truly does open a place in one’s heart to begin to see life differently. The lens is no longer clouded with mud but becomes clearer as to how much of life is beautiful and fulfilling. Teens especially can benefit from this activity, when so much of the universal message surrounding their age group involves ingratitude and selfishness. A gratitude journaling activity on a daily basis can start the healing process by helping her change her perspective on life.

Find a teen grief support group and attend a meeting with them.

Many cities have teen grief groups that are led by credentialed counselors or therapists who are trained to safely facilitate a teen’s fragile journey in navigating suffering and sorrow following a loss. Group therapy might seem to be an intimidating suggestion to your teen, but if she is really struggling and on the verge of depression, offer to attend a meeting with her. If that is a no-go, because it’s embarrassing to be seen with her parents, mention a friend who might be willing to attend with her. In any case, trying one meeting is an option, especially since teens thrive on peer connections.

I once ran a grief group within a high school setting, and it was a bit awkward *at first* for the teens who chose to attend, only because opening up about the pain of grief isn’t something they were used to doing. At the high school where I interned at the time, loss was a perpetual theme that year. When I first arrived, one of the swim coaches had unexpectedly committed suicide. A week later, another swim coach did the same. I discovered that both deaths were related to a bizarre love triangle, but in the wake of this double tragedy, the entire swim team was left in shock. Moreover, the entire student body was stirred to ask the age-old question, “Why?”

Once the guidance department set up a crisis counseling center, I experienced this ethereal moment where I asked God internally, “Why am I here?” I wasn’t prepared for this type of counseling. It was as if I had been thrust into the world of grief management for teens, but I had no experience and considered myself a counseling novice. I was still very much learning.

When the initial hubbub died down, my on-site supervisor suggested I lead a grief group as part of my internship experience. I didn’t want to do this, mainly because it led me to the crevices of discomfort about the subject that I hadn’t fully processed in my own life. But I acquiesced out of duty to his authority, yet I had no idea what to do or how to handle the raw emotions from the kids I would be seeing.

After careful planning, I started the group during study hall. There were between six and eight kids, all of whom I met with individually for a thorough interview and full disclosure of consent. One young man had lost a son to SIDS. A younger teenage girl lost her dad suddenly to a heart attack. (She was also on the swim team and very close to the coaches.) Each time we met, we all shared just a little bit about our stories – and only what was comfortable for everyone.

Grief is a difficult journey to share, but it's a necessary one, because we are meant to live within the context of community. Teenagers know this above all, and they crave that peer approval and camaraderie that can often lead either to their demise or to their tenacity. Facilitating this small group of courageous and resilient teens humbled me, but it also left me with a newfound appreciation of the immense *value* of such a group. The kids shared with each other some pretty dark and intense emotions, but they felt safe to do so among other kids their age who had undergone similar situations.

This is why I believe so strongly in the power of group counseling for teenagers. Leading such a group showed me the benefit of teens getting together and opening up about a very painful aspect of their lives that they could not otherwise express. There's safety and freedom in knowing you are not alone in your grief journey, which is precisely why teen grief groups are so powerful.

Visit the gravesite of a departed loved one.

Some people need to visit a deceased loved one's grave, while others accept closure at the funeral service and burial. Ask your child if he'd like to visit Grandpa's grave or pick out Mom's favorite flowers to place on her gravestone. Some teens may want to bring along a favorite photograph or even write a letter. Tidying up the gravesite somehow conveys a sense of respect for the faithful departed, too.

It's always beneficial to at least ask your kids if they want to visit the gravesite on holidays, the birthday of the one who has died, and other special or important dates that trigger memories of grief surrounding the loss. A quick visit and moment of silence can ease the tension surrounding those once-warm memories that included the person who is now gone.

Offer healthy opportunities to relieve stress.

Managing stress is something we hear about all the time in our modern society, but we seldom apply the principles we know will help us cope more peacefully with life's challenges and changes. Self-care, while commonly identified and understood among health care professionals, is not often practiced. We hear from everyone about lowering our stress levels by taking walks, eating the right foods, sleeping and resting well, and discovering other channels that give us a sense of balance and serenity, but we somehow get wrapped up in the busyness of today.

For teens, pent-up anger will either become depression if repressed, or it will become explosive and volatile verbal or physical attacks if expressed poorly. Anger is one of the easiest manifestations of grief, especially in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, because it is the *surface* emotion. Anger conceals the deep-rooted sadness, the void, the emptiness, and the loneliness often lingering in the latent subconscious. Reducing stress can significantly lessen the frequency and intensity of such angry bouts.

Give your child options on how to manage the stress in her life. If she has a full academic load, including dual credit or advanced placement courses, see if there's a possibility to meet with her counselor and teachers to temporarily alter her schedule at school. Consider the other activities that fill your child's time, including academic and extracurricular clubs, sports, dance and music, or part-

time jobs and volunteering. Discuss with your teen what can be eliminated or drastically reduced, and then encourage her to talk to her coaches, teachers, boss, etc. about what's going on.

Most adults outside of your family will display empathy when they know your family has incurred a loss - of a loved one, a home, a marriage, etc. Make a point to communicate clearly with everyone involved in your child's life so that all are on the same page about how much time is needed for a respite in order to allow you and your child to adequately and responsibly grieve.

Give your child specific, concrete ideas on how to reduce stress or manage it if it becomes too overwhelming. There are many excellent resources available online if you search for "ways to reduce stress" or "tips to manage stress." Most will include some form of exercise, meditation and relaxation, hobbies, healthy snacks, coffee or dessert with a friend, movie night, etc. The point is to do something recreational and spiritual on a daily basis so that the schedule for school and activities doesn't override your child's need to rest and heal.

Attend family counseling together.

If a grief group for your teen doesn't suit him, you may need family counseling. Families differ on when they decide to "succumb" to this option, because many use counseling only as a last resort to help someone in dire emotional need or in a time of severe crisis. Most of us think of the person who is depressed to the point of suicidal ideations, becoming reclusive and defensive, displaying poor hygiene or eating habits, and withdrawing from society altogether. Some accompanying warning signs include a macabre and morose worldview, surrounding oneself with music, movies, and books that are dark in nature, and an obsession with death.

Some families, however, may opt for counseling at the onset of a death or crisis rather than waiting until things become so desperate that counseling is the last ditch effort to salvage one's mental health. Take some time to discuss this as a family, maybe presenting it first to your spouse, and then ask for referrals from trusted neighbors or friends in your area who may know of a reputable therapist who can help you all work together as a family in processing the complicated facets of grief.

Explore the spiritual dimensions of loss together.

If you haven't already, it's time to start talking about supernatural truth. Grief often catapults us into a place where we question God (or perhaps our image of God), become angry at the existence of suffering, and wonder about life after death. Few of us ponder these before we are personally affected by a deep loss. The wounds of grief necessarily get us thinking about what we cannot see and how to make sense of the senseless.

Suffering and tragedy, though aspects of the human condition, must take on a dimension of meaning if we are to transcend them. The term "overcoming adversity" doesn't mean much if we haven't come to a place of acceptance and peace. Even if you are a religious family, don't expect your child to maintain a fluffy image of the God she was raised to believe in. The best thing you can do is to allow her to be angry with God, question Him, and ask you tough questions about His benevolence.

You don't have to have all of the answers right away. In fact, many life lessons cannot be explained, and it's perfectly fine to tell your child, "I don't know the answer to that." If she really wants answers, you can discuss her feelings in light of what you *do* know about faith. Faith is meant to be our beacon and guidepost, but there's too much mystery for us to comprehend everything there is to know about spiritual matters.

If you're not sure where to find poignant spiritual questions to ask yourself or your teen, start by looking at the journaling questions in my meditation journal, [*Navigating Deep Waters*](#). Each chapter has three to five questions that most of us ask following a tragedy or when we have been living in the thick of chronic crisis.

Though adolescence is prime time for establishing one's separate identity, it doesn't have to be a dreaded stage of life for you and your child. Grief complicates everyone's life, no matter what age, and it may be that teens feel grief more deeply than we give them credit for. If they are battling other problems when an unexpected tragedy strikes, be proactive and address the emotive and spiritual aspects of grief right away.

Before you directly approach your teen, it's wise to seek the advice of your pastor or a professional who understands the psychological and physiological dimensions of adolescence, as well as the complexity of grief. Once you equip yourself with several resources available to your family and specifically to your teen, you can tackle the challenge of approaching your child with the options and clearly reiterating your support of her journey in whatever direction she needs.

CONCLUSION

Living in a culture that does not value suffering can make the topic a frustrating one, but parents must overlook the cultural underpinnings that have negatively influenced how we view death and loss. All taboo subjects, because they have remained hidden and shunned, create discomfort within us, mainly because of shame and guilt – two sides of the same coin. If we take an honest look at ourselves, we may find that we grew up in an environment where crying wasn't allowed, shouting was quickly shushed or used as a reason for a consequence, and any other negative feeling was swept under the proverbial rug until it was forever silenced.

It's time for us to change that in our homes. Kids today are hurting more than ever, and evidence of this can be seen in their unhealthy coping mechanisms – promiscuity, self-injury, deviant behavior, substance abuse, bullying and relational aggression, violent outbursts, and other harmful manifestations of repressed anger and painful emotions. We simply cannot stand idly by as the pattern of self-destruction continues for our children. Intervening early with empathy and faith provides our children appropriate coping mechanisms that they can refer to when life gets too difficult to manage alone.

We also need to see grief and loss differently than the majority of people around us do. Instead of adopting the societal viewpoint that all suffering is inherently bad or some form of punishment that should be avoided at all costs, we can look at it as simply *change*. All change involves the loss *and* the gain of something. Why not look at every loss as an opportunity for growth? Life is constantly evolving, and if we find a sliver of hope nestled somewhere in the heart of loss, we may be able to teach our own children that the rhythm of life and death – *change* – can be refreshing and promising. Change ultimately challenges us to face what we'd rather ignore or deny. Change invites us to live more fully instead of retreating into a shell of hollowness and meaninglessness.

Find your purpose and meaning in the midst of suffering. Instead of looking for something new that can replace your loss, create beauty *while* you are weeping and mourning. Creativity taps into the part of our minds and hearts that can open a wellspring of unique masterpieces that speak of hope, light, and beauty resonating and radiating from loss, death, and darkness. Focus on the light, and the darkness will recede. Enter into the darkness *with* your light, and it cannot overshadow you. Most of all, teach your children to do the same, no matter what method you use. Sometimes the best teaching moments are presented to us spontaneously. Take advantage of those moments, and be grateful when you are able to connect with your child on a deeper level.

When all else fails, remember one thing: *God's grace compensates for our lack*. At the end of the day, when you feel as if you completely blew it as a parent, rely upon the hope in that prayer, and really, in prayer itself. Lament and cry to God, and ask Him – even in desperation – for strength and wisdom. These are virtues we need the most as we traverse with our kids through the murky waters of grief.

APPENDIX A: WARNING SIGNS OF COMPLICATED GRIEF

Complicated grief mimics diagnosable depression in many ways. If you familiarize yourself with the criteria related to Major Depressive Disorder¹, you might see some of the same signs in your child if complicated grief sets in. The symptoms of depression include:

- Exhaustion or lack of energy;
- Insomnia or hypersomnia;
- Expressed emotions related to guilt, shame, hopelessness, or despondency;
- "Brain fog," or inability to concentrate and focus;
- Loss of interest in daily activities;
- Over- or undereating;
- Poor hygiene;
- Anxiety or restlessness;
- Suicidal ideations.

Complicated grief, or Complex Bereavement Disorder, is present when the typical patterns of healthy grieving become stuck or worsen. For instance, a person who may be experiencing complicated grief might exhibit some of these behaviors:²

- Obsession about the loss;
- Extreme longing for what once was, before the loss occurred;
- Inability accepting the loss;
- Emotional detachment;
- Bitterness, resentment, or feeling sorrowful most of the time;
- Depression (see symptoms above);
- Skepticism or lack of trust in others;
- Seeing no meaning or purpose in one's life.

Complicated grievers struggle with tranquil resolution and acceptance of loss and ultimately change. Children may talk about the loss all the time and show an unhealthy preoccupation with tragedy, death, or what happened that triggered the grief. It may be that children need more support in learning how to grieve in healthy ways, but if no progress is made, be sure to call a health care professional specializing in pediatric mental health.

¹ Information retrieved from "An Overview of Clinical Depression" on WebMD, March 27, 2016 at <http://www.webmd.com/depression/guide/major-depression>.

² Information retrieved from "About Complicated Bereavement Disorder" by Dr. Deborah Khoshaba on Psychology Today, March 27, 2016 at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/get-hardy/201309/about-complicated-bereavement-disorder-0>.

APPENDIX B: GRIEF RESOURCES

BOOKS

THE YOUNG YEARS

- [Bergren, Lisa Tawn. *God Gave Us Heaven* \(WaterBrook: 2008\).](#)
- [Buscaglia, Leo. *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages* \(Slack Incorporated: 1982\).](#)
- [Mundy, Linus. *Being Sad When Someone Dies* \(Abbey Press: 2014\), e-book.](#)
- [Mundy, Michaelene. *Sad Isn't Bad* \(Abbey Press: 2014\), e-book.](#)
- [Paulus, Trina. *Hope for the Flowers* \(Paulist Press: 1973\).](#)
- [Thomas, Pat. *I Miss You: A First Look At Death* \(Barron's Educational Series: 2001\).](#)
- [Tidwell, Sherri. *The Daffodils Still Grow: A Book for Grieving Daughters* \(Mascot Books: 2015\).](#)

THE MIDDLE YEARS

- [Grahame, Kenneth. *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children* \(Bantam: 1983\).](#)
- [Karst, Patrice. *The Invisible String* \(Devorss & Co: 2000\).](#)
- [Lewis, Alaric. *When Someone You Love Has Cancer* \(Abbey Press: 2005\).](#)
- [Ryan, Victoria. *When Your Grandparent Dies* \(Abbey Press: 2002\).](#)
- [Ryan, Victoria. *When Your Pet Dies* \(Abbey Press: 2013\).](#)
- [Shriver, Maria. *What's Heaven?* \(Golden Books: 2007\).](#)
- [Temes, Roberta. *The Empty Place: A Child's Guide Through Grief* \(New Horizon Press: 1992\).](#)

THE ADOLESCENT YEARS

- [Fitzgerald, Helen. *The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and their Friends* \(Touchstone: 2000\).](#)
- [Gootman, Marilyn E. *When A Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing* \(Free Spirit Publishing: 2005\).](#)
- [Hughes, Lynne. *You Are Not Alone: Teens Talk About Life After the Loss of a Parent* \(Scholastic: 2005\).](#)
- [Hyatt, Erica Goldblatt. *Grieving for the Sibling You Lost: A Teen's Guide to Coping with Grief and Finding Meaning After Loss* \(Instant Help: 2015\).](#)
- [Traisman, Enid Samuel. *Fire in my Heart, Ice in my Veins: A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing a Loss* \(Centering Corporation: 1992\).](#)
- [Wheeler, Jenny Lee. *Weird Is Normal When Teenagers Grieve* \(Quality of Life Publishing: 2010\).](#)
- [Wolfelt, Alan D. *The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens* \(Companion Press: 2002\).](#)

WEBSITES

FOR CHILDREN

- [artwithheart.org](#)
- [griefencounter.org](#)
- [rainbows.org](#)

FOR ADOLESCENTS

[Al-Ateen](#)

soulcareproject.org

teenlineonline.org

FOR PARENTS AND ADULTS

fromgrief2grace.com

grief.com

griefshare.org

hellogrief.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeannie Ewing believes the world focuses too much on superficial happiness and then crumbles when sorrow strikes. Because life is about more than what makes us feel fuzzy inside, she writes about the hidden value of suffering and even discovering joy in the midst of grief. Jeannie shares her heart as a mom of two girls with special needs in [*Navigating Deep Waters: Meditations for Caregivers*](#) and is the author of [*From Grief to Grace: The Journey from Tragedy to Triumph*](#). Jeannie was featured on National Public Radio's [*Weekend Edition*](#) and dozens of other [radio shows and podcasts](#). For more information, please visit her website fromgrief2grace.com.