

## Local and Regional Resources for Grief and Emotional Support

### **Los Alamos Mental Health Access Project** - <http://losalamosmentalhealth.org/>

Assists the community of Los Alamos in accessing mental health care and connecting to emotional well being. Includes list of local therapists as well as basic mental health screens.

### **Golden Willow Retreat Grief Support Group** - <https://goldenwillowretreat.com/>

Provided free to the community for healing from grief and loss for ages 15 and older. Confidential. Meets for 6 weeks at a time. Contact Lori Padilla, LMHC, at 505-795-5723 for information on the next session which begins January 9.

### **MISS Foundation Support Group** - <https://missfoundation.org/>

Peer facilitators offer grief support to adults for the loss of a child at any age for any reason. Contact Halo Golden at [halo.golden@missfoundation.org](mailto:halo.golden@missfoundation.org) 505-690-3277 or Lauren Coupland at [lauren.coupland@gmail.com](mailto:lauren.coupland@gmail.com) 734-417-3665 for information on monthly meetings.

### **Cancer Foundation for New Mexico** - <https://cffnm.org/patient-services/support-group-schedule/>

Support groups are led by experienced, licensed facilitators and offered free to participants, including cancer patients, caregivers, friends, and family. Local groups meet monthly in Los Alamos and White Rock facilitated by Lori Padilla, LMHC. Additional group support opportunities can be found on the website.

### **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Support Group at Family Strengths Network** - <https://www.lafsn.org/calendar/grandparents-raising-grandchildren/>

Kinship care group meets once a month to connect with others who are navigating the unexpected challenges of raising a grandchild and to learn about resources that can help meet those challenges. Childcare and dinner provided. RSVP at 505-662-4515.

### **Gerard's House for Grieving Children** - <https://gerardshouse.org/>

Gerard's House is a safe place for grieving children, teens and families, where healing happens through acceptance and peer support. Support groups, living with an illness, parenting support, crisis response and suicide prevention services. 505-424-1800.

### **The Sky Center: New Mexico Suicide Intervention Project** - <http://nmsip.org/>

Offers prevention and intervention services to decrease risk behaviors related to suicide and increase resiliency and family support. Services focus on offering pathways to wellness through the opportunity to develop life skills and social connections that help to navigate the many challenges faced by young people and their families. Free family counseling, skills-based groups, intensive outpatient services, training and crisis response services. 505-473-6191.

## **About Grief: For Grieving Children and Teenagers**

**Grief is normal.** Grief is all the feelings, thoughts, and ways people act after someone important to them dies, or after some other kind of loss, like parents divorcing or someone leaving. It's something that happens to everyone.

**There are usually ups and downs.** Grief comes in waves. For many people this means feeling fine or even happy one day and feeling horrible the next.

**Grief means going through a lot of different feelings.** Most people think of grief as being sad and missing the person. Many times, grief is much more than this. Sometimes it is like a rollercoaster of emotions: feeling numb, in shock, mad, scared, sad, confused, guilty, lonely and many more.

**Grief also affects the mind and the body:** Most people have problems thinking straight at some point in their grief process. Nightmares can happen, as well as problems sleeping or eating. Some people get sick, feel dizzy, have headaches, or get panic attacks.

**Grief is different for everyone.** Even within a family or group of friends who are all grieving at the same time, grief is different for each person. Some people cry a lot and some don't cry at all. Some want to talk about how they feel and others don't. Some keep extra busy and others don't want to do anything anymore. This is natural.

**Grief can last for a long time.** It is normal to go through times of intense grief many months, or even years, after the death. If the person who died was a very close family member or friend, the grieving person may feel that loss for the rest of his or her life.

**There is no right or wrong way to feel; all feelings are okay.** If you feel it, then it belongs as part of your grief process.

*By Katrina Koehler, Executive Director at **Gerard's House**, a grief support center providing free services for children, teenagers and their families in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Feel free to make copies of this handout with an acknowledgment of the source. For more information, please contact us at (505) 424-1800 or go to [gerardshouse.org](http://gerardshouse.org).*

# **How Do I Talk to a Child about Death?**

**Compiled by Suzy Bienvenu**

**At Gerard's House**

When a death occurs in a family or to someone close, it can be a tragic experience. Children, however, can often be overlooked during times of bereavement. It may be that adults think that children are too young to understand or will get over it quickly because they are young. It may be that the adults are grieving and do not have the ability emotionally to be with the grieving child. It may be that the adults are trying to protect the child from the facts of death. It may be that the adults think the facts will scare, confuse or shock the child. We have been told by the kids that it is more helpful for them to know the truth and that they want to know the truth.

Regardless of the reasons, there is no easy way to tell a child that someone has died or is going to die, just as there is no way to prevent the many feelings of grief from occurring.

We have found that the best way to tell a child the news is to be simple, gentle and truthful. Give your information in an age-appropriate way, just as you would any other information. Children may have many questions about the death. Try to answer them in a straightforward way so as not to confuse the child. Using phrases such as "grandma left us," "your father passed away," "she went to a better place," "we lost him," "she is only sleeping," etc., can be confusing and frightening to a child. These phrases might make the child think that if the person was lost, why can't we go find them? If they went to a better place, then I want to go there, too. Was I bad and that's why she left us? If I go to sleep will I die?

Children of different ages will be able to understand the death in different ways. With young children, you can begin by explaining what death means physically. For example, "When people die, their body does not work anymore. Their body doesn't feel or think or hurt or breathe or eat anymore. It is not like sleeping. They will not wake up and they will not come back. Usually people live a long time, but sometimes accidents happen or their bodies can't be fixed." Let them know that there will always be someone there to take care of them. There may be many questions they ask about the death or your beliefs that you don't have the answers to. It is okay to tell them that you don't know. If you don't have the answer, you and the child can explore the questions together. You don't have to give them more information than they ask for, but it is best not to lie about the cause of the death. It may only become more complicated for you and them later.

There are no easy answers or simple solutions for talking about death with children. It can be helpful to start talking about death with your child at an early age. Every child will experience the death of a pet, or see a dead dog, or see the cycles of nature, or see death shown in movies or cartoons. Because of this, they have already begun to develop their own thoughts, ideas, feelings and concerns at an early age. These are all important times to keep the lines of communication open by giving them clear information about death and dying and to listen to what they have to say. Listen to them, be patient, and expect questions.

After you have told them about the death, please listen and be available, or have someone available, to support them in their grief.

## How Grief Manifests for Children and Teenagers

**Although everyone grieves differently when a family member or close friend dies, here are some common grief experiences for children and teenagers:**

In shock	In a fog	Bouncing off the walls
Numb	Getting in trouble	Unable to get out of bed
Heartbroken	Low self-esteem	Unable to relax or sit still
All alone	Always tired	Not sure what's wrong with them
Depressed	Head swimming	Not sure how they feel
Scared	Stressed-out	Pent-up frustration
Angry	Keeping extra busy	Unable to think straight or concentrate
Confused	Anxious, worried	Out of control
Sick	Hopeless	Like they will never feel better
Sad	Unable to eat	On automatic pilot
Withdrawn	Guilty	Trying to be perfect
Powerless	Short-tempered	Drug and alcohol abuse

**Feeling different from other kids or teenagers:** Often, this feeling of alienation just comes over the child. She may not even associate it with the death or the grief, but just feels different. Other times a child or teenager is very clear that the death was a turning point that separated her from friends, peers or family members. She may say that no one understands how she feels, or that people don't know how to talk to her anymore. While some kids grow closer to surviving family members after the death, other children and teens feel alone with what they're going through.

**A rollercoaster of emotions:** Numbness, anger, fears, confusion, sadness, loneliness, happiness, fatigue, agitation, resentment, manic excitement, guilt, disappointment, worry, and so on. The feelings can come in quick succession, and be unpredictable, adding to the instability the child may already be feeling. The child may feel like a different person than he was before the death. Parents and caregivers often comment, "I don't know him anymore. He's not the same person he used to be."

**Shock and delayed reaction, or grief intensifying as time goes on:** Most children and teenagers look back on the time right after the death and say that they were in shock, and that it really hit them several months later. Many times, grieving children and teenagers are hitting the deepest part of their grief right when other people are expecting them to be "getting over it" or "moving on."

**Fears related to death and dying:** The fear that other people will die and that the child or teenager will be left alone often manifests as clinging to parents and caregivers, as anxious behavior or as nervousness. Fears that other people will die and questions about this are especially common among children who have experienced the death of a parent or caregiver.

**Anger, irritability, lashing out and getting in trouble:** Many grieving children and teens have sudden bursts of anger or a “short fuse.” Parents, caregivers and teachers may be startled by the child or teen acting out, defying adults or becoming more sullen and withdrawn. Some kids start to have trouble at school, or start to get in trouble at school or at home as a reaction to the death and to the death-related changes in their lives.

**Trying to be perfect:** Many grieving children and teens try to suppress their grief or hide it from other family members. They may also try to be “perfect” (get straight A’s, overachieve), both as a way to feel in control and to compensate for the pain and turmoil the family is experiencing. Kids with this pattern of response are typically emotional caretakers for their parents or for other grieving family members. Often these behaviors are subconscious, but sometimes the child or teenager is aware of doing these things.

**Adjusting to secondary losses:** Besides the death itself, there are usually other changes in a child’s life caused by the death, some of which will feel like losses. Family dynamics among surviving family members may shift—sometimes quite dramatically. In many cases the family feels unstable to the child. If the surviving parent(s) or caregivers are grieving, the child may feel that she has temporarily lost those people, too, or at least that they’ve changed. Routines and schedules, so important to children, are often disrupted. Family finances may change. The child’s identity and self-esteem undergo a significant shift when a key person is suddenly missing from her life. These are just a few examples of secondary losses.

**Can’t think straight, brain fog, preoccupied:** Periods of not being able to pay attention, focus or complete tasks often go on for a long time after the death, and may come in waves, just as grief does. This can affect grades and also relationships with teachers and adults.

**Guilt and regrets:** Regrets and guilt are part of the grief process for many people after someone dies. Children and teenagers especially harbor regrets about any times when they were mad at the person before they died, argued with them or did something that upset them. They may wish they could go back and change something--wishing they had been able to spend more time with the person is one example. Many also wish they had said “I love you” more, that they had had the chance to see the person one last time or to say goodbye. Regrets can also be about the circumstances surrounding the death. They may blame themselves for the death in ways that seem to make no logical sense to others, or, they may feel that if only they had done something different, they might have prevented the person from dying. “What if...” questions or “If only...” thoughts about what happened are often kept hidden inside, buried in shame and guilt, and therefore sometimes cause more pain than anyone close to the person realizes.

**Spiritual and existential questions, and changing beliefs:** A lot of grieving children and teenagers ruminate on the death, wondering why people die, and why it happened to this person, or in this way, or at this time. Teenagers and young adults often find themselves questioning their spiritual and religious beliefs—or changing their beliefs—as the result of any kind of loss. Those who had never thought much about these questions may be opened up to an unfamiliar realm of questions, thoughts and feelings.

**Processing grief through play, art, sports, tears and other non-verbal ways:** Children often have a hard time putting their feelings about the death into words. If they do not say much about their grief, they may be able to process it through play, art, sports or other physical activity, crying, or through nurturing and reassurance (being held by a person they love or snuggling with pets or stuffed animals). While this is normal, it can be challenging for parents and caregivers who wish their children would talk about it to let them know how their grief process is going.

**Keeping a connection with the person who died:** Many people find themselves talking to the person who died, and may or may not feel that the person is hearing or answering them. They may keep special things that remind them of the person, like a present from the person, a special photo, or a shirt the person wore.

**Crying and not crying:** Some children and teenagers cry a lot, and others very little or not at all. It's all normal. While crying is healing for children who are heartbroken over the death, judging a child for not crying is not helpful. Some children are very upset but may have a hard time expressing through tears. Other children are not especially sad after the death; they may be feeling other emotions more strongly. Or they may be numb with grief. Sometimes children are in shock for awhile and the tears come later.

**Cyclical grieving:** Many children and teenagers are still strongly affected by the death many, many years later. Their grief may come up unexpectedly sometimes and take them by surprise. Some people say that grief is a life-long process for them.

### **Other Common Manifestations of Grief**

- Re-grieving at life milestones
- Re-grieving at new developmental stages
- Physical symptoms like headaches, chest pains, stomachaches, dizziness, etc.
- Anxiety and worry, sometimes panic attacks
- Depression
- Numbness
- Nightmares
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns; not wanting to sleep alone
- Regressing to younger behaviors
- Having unanswered questions if they were not told the whole story of the death
- If very young, unable to comprehend the finality of death
- Mixed feelings about the death, including relief, sometimes causing guilt
- Questioning beliefs
- Lower self-esteem; identity loss
- Social changes: isolating and/or not wanting to be alone
- Keeping pictures or special things that remind them of the person
- Transformation
- Post traumatic growth

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## Letter to Parents of Grieving Children

I'm not a parent, so all of you who are parents know more about this than I do. But I believe parents when they say that there's nothing worse than seeing their children in pain and not being able to help them.

As a parent, you are wired to protect your child from danger. But grief is not a danger to your child. After a death, tragedy or other loss, the emotions and thoughts your child experiences are part of a healing process. And your child can handle it. Your son or daughter was made to handle it, emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. They can handle the pain, sadness, anger, the questions and fears. Whatever it is, they can handle it.

If you can let your child have this, and your child is able to grieve, the hardest parts of this won't go on forever. If you or others try to protect your son or daughter from the grief, and your child pushes the grief down trying never to visit it, your child will likely experience a different type of suffering. This is a suffering that many of us know very well as human beings in this world—the suffering of holding pain that's been bottled-up.

Even if this bottling-up has already happened, or it's happening for your child right now, it's okay. It's not too late. We can grieve at any time, even if it's been years since the death or loss happened. And please, if you can, have compassion for yourself. It can be hard to witness your child's pain without trying to change it or protect them from it, especially if no one has ever done this for you.

I can tell you that I've seen hundreds of children and teenagers go through all the ups and downs of grief and find relief from their suffering. But don't trust me and what I tell you from my experience. Instead, try whatever part of this feels right to you and see what happens. And if you want, you can call us at Gerard's House and tell us how it's going. Gerard's House is here to support you in this in whatever way you want or need. All our services are free of charge.

What does allowing children to grieve look like? Here's an example:

Child: *Mommy, I miss grandpa.*

Mother: *Yeah, honey. You miss him. I know. I miss him, too.*

With compassion for parents!

Katrina

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## How Trauma Affects Us

### Natural Immediate Responses to a Traumatic Experience also known as Trauma Discharge:

- sweating
- heat sensations
- flushing
- heart racing
- shaking/trembling
- blinking
- tingling sensations
- mind racing
- sighing
- yawning
- laughing
- crying

### Natural Responses to Holding Trauma over a Period of Time

- intrusive memories or flashbacks
- unwanted repetitive thoughts
- anger outbursts or short fuse
- mind stuck in a loop
- disorientation and fogginess
- easily stressed out
- exaggerated startle response
- nightmares
- abrupt mood swings
- anxiety and nervousness
- tense; can't relax, calm down, or sink in
- exhaustion
- spacing out or dissociation
- panic attacks
- avoidance behavior
- obsessing on how the traumatic event could have been prevented
- trying to make sense of the event
- thoughts of what might have been
- rage turned inward; guilt
- extreme sensitivity to light/sound
- memory loss
- diminished interest in life
- difficulty sleeping
- difficulty concentrating
- hyper vigilance
- difficulty listening to others
- relating to others becomes more uncomfortable, or more draining
- forgetfulness or memory loss
- feeling alienated, withdrawn
- re-stimulation of old trauma
- attraction to dangerous situations
- reenactments: subconscious attraction to traumatic situations

### First Aid for Trauma

- Connect with family and friends. Ask for support.
- Prioritize “down time” for yourself.
- Feel your feelings and give yourself space and ways to express them.
- Recognize and honor your body's trauma responses (see lists above). They are signs that you are healing. Try to remember that they are normal and that in most cases they will pass if you don't fight them. Give yourself time to heal.
- Seek out the medical care, counseling, bodywork, energy work and healing modalities that you need and that are appropriate for you.
- Allow yourself time each day to write down your feelings, thoughts and sensations.
- See [www.traumahealing.com](http://www.traumahealing.com) for grounding exercises and other suggestions

Sources: trauma presenter Lee Cartwright and from *Emotional First Aid* by Gina Ross and Peter Levine.



# Companioning Philosophy

By Dr. Alan Wolfelt

I continue to advocate in my writings and teachings that caregivers to the bereaved (i.e. “to be torn apart”, “to have special needs”) should “companion” not “treat” people in grief. I appreciate the support and enthusiasm many of you have given me as I teach this philosophy throughout North America. For those of you not familiar with “companioning”, I invite you to consider the philosophy that under girds my work with bereaved people as well as my writings. I believe in “companioning” the bereaved instead of “treating” them.

I have taken liberties with the noun “companion” and made it into the verb “companioning” because it so well captures the type of counseling relationship I support. Actually, the word companion, when broken down into its original Latin roots, means com for “with” and pan for “bread.” Someone you would share a meal with. A friend. An equal.

Companioning is about honoring the spirit;  
It is not about focusing on the intellect.

Companioning is about curiosity;  
It is not about expertise.

Companioning is about learning from others;  
It is not about teaching them.

Companioning is about walking alongside;  
It is not about leading or being led.

Companioning is about being still;  
It is not about frantic movement forward.

Companioning is about discovering the gifts of sacred silence;  
It is not about filling every painful moment with talk.

Companioning is about listening with the heart;  
It is not about analyzing with the head.

Companioning is about bearing witness to the struggles of others;  
It is not about judging or directing those struggles.

Companioning is about being present to another person’s pain;  
It is not about taking away or relieving the pain.

Companioning is about respecting disorder and confusion;  
It is not about imposing order or logic.

Companioning is about going to the wilderness of the soul with another human being;  
It is not about thinking you are responsible for finding the way out.