

Grief After the Loss of a Loved One

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Although dealing with grief and loss can be difficult for anyone, individuals with developmental disabilities are unfortunately more often unprepared to deal with their grief and usually receive little or no assistance through the mourning process.

They may be at risk for long-lasting behavioural and emotional problems as a result of the grief experience.

People with developmental disabilities are sometimes kept from dealing with their grief by well-intentioned care providers, guardians or family members who wish to protect them from “upsetting events.” While it is understandable to want to protect someone with a disability from the negative feelings related to grief, helping them through their feelings is a more helpful approach and is the emotionally healthy way to go. Grief and loss are inevitable in life and helping someone find their own way of dealing with these challenges is very important!

Things to keep in mind regarding the complexity of grief issues affecting individuals with FASD:

- ❖ Imagine dealing and coping with loss if you have an FASD-related issue such as:
 - ❖ Brain differences;
 - ❖ A sensitive nervous system (higher incidence of anxiety and depression);
- ❖ Poor abstract reasoning skills (difficulty understanding the concepts of time, permanence, etc.);
 - ❖ Poor organizational skills;
- ❖ Difficulty processing language (including receptive and expressive skills and difficulty with comprehension);
 - ❖ Difficulty with memory and impulse control;
 - ❖ Difficulty with attachment and social skills.

Don't Forget: Take Time to Nurture Your Other Relationships

Since children with FASD take up so much time and emotional energy, make sure you find the opportunity to spend quality time with your other kids and your partner. This is a must. As we know, spending quality time with your family will recharge your batteries and give you a chance to de-stress about issues occurring in your home. It's okay to spend some time with your family without the person living with fetal alcohol syndrome. It's respite and it's encouraged.

-Jeff Noble

Questions to consider when caring for someone with FASD who is going through the grief process:

- ❖ Have their sleeping patterns changed?
 - ❖ Have their eating habits changed?
 - ❖ Has their work productivity changed?
- ❖ Are they withdrawing from social activities?
- ❖ Are they complaining more of pain or illness?
 - ❖ Has their personality changed?

It's important to watch for signs of changes in daily activities and to address these as they arise rather than letting things reach a breaking point for that individual.

Inadequate or incomplete mourning can have several consequences, including denial of the reality of the loved one's death, idealization of the loved one, decreased self-esteem, and feelings of guilt.

If the individual does not progress through the task of mourning, these feelings of alienation, loneliness and depression may continue for years after the loved one's death.

Strategies for helping individuals with FASD through the grief process:

- ❖ Keep in mind that each person with FASD is unique and has a unique set of skills and abilities;
 - ❖ Just spending time with someone on a regular basis is valuable;
- ❖ Let the person know that the pain will not have the same intensity over time;
- ❖ If they ask for help, even in a small way, provide it! Even if it seems small to you, it may be more significant to them than you are aware!
- ❖ Don't try to quickly erase the memory or smell of the deceased. Smell can be very comforting, and a person with FASD may need to experience that for awhile before they are ready to move on;
 - ❖ Do what works for the individual, not what would work for you;
- ❖ Write in a journal. Encourage the person you are helping to do so as well and consider assisting with this process if they are unable to do so alone;
- ❖ Combine photos into one album and make copies for safekeeping. You can also recreate a child's memories of important events through drawings or perhaps by referring them to an art therapist.
 - ❖ **Follow the individual: Do not lead**

Here's a helpful workbook resource on FASD and grief:

http://fasd.typepad.com/resources/GRIEF_WORKBOOK_WEB.pdf

References:

- ❖ http://fasd.alberta.ca/documents/Mar_19_2010.pdf
- ❖ Grief among Individuals with Developmental Disabilities – Alejandro Moralez, LISW www.hsc.unm.edu/som.coc
 - ❖ Practical Strategies for Managing Children/Adolescents with Neurodevelopmental Disorders Including FAS or ARND – Kieran D. O'Malley MB, BAO, BCh, DABPN & Michele Savage BA, DipCh, Psychiatry
- ❖ Grief and Loss: Strategic Support for Clients – Brenda M. Knieght, R.Psych Government of Alberta Learning Series
 - ❖ Making Sense of the Madness – Jeff Noble and Tara Soucie