



## Grief and Loss Coping Strategies for Foster Parents

You may experience grief when a foster child leaves your home. Certainly, parents are grieving when their children have been placed in out of home care. Children being placed in your home are experiencing grief related to their removal, changing schools, losing contact with friends, worrying about their parents, missing their pets—the list is a long one!

Grief is a natural response to a loss. It is the emotional suffering that you feel when something or someone you love is taken away. Any loss can cause grief including:

- The end of a relationship
- Loss of health
- Changes in a role or job
- Loss of financial stability
- A miscarriage or still birth
- Death of a family member
- Death of a pet
- Loss of a cherished dream
- A loved one's serious illness
- Loss of a friendship
- Loss of safety after a traumatic experience



Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross introduced the world to the theory of five stages of grief in 1969.

- Denial: "This cannot be happening to me!"
- Anger: "Why is this happening? Who is to blame?"
- Bargaining: "Make this not happen and in return, I will \_\_\_\_\_"
- Depression: "I am too sad to do anything."
- Acceptance: "I am at peace with what happened."

If you experience any of these emotions following a loss, or observe these emotions in others, it may help to know that the reaction is natural and that healing will come in time.

**Grief is a roller coaster, not a series of stages. People often do not experience the stages in the same order:**

It is best not to think of grief as a series of stages, rather, we might think of the grieving process as a roller coaster, full of ups and downs, highs and lows. Like many roller coasters the ride tends to be rougher in the beginning, the lows deeper and longer. The difficult periods should become less intense and shorter as time goes by but it takes time to work through a loss. Even years after a loss, especially at special events such as a family wedding or the birth of a child, we may still experience a strong sense of grief.

For more help in addressing your own or a child's feelings of loss and grief, go to:

<http://www.helpstartshere.org/mind-and-spirit/grief-and-loss>. For more training and information about foster parenting, go to: [http://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/fosterparents/be\\_FosterIntro.asp](http://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/fosterparents/be_FosterIntro.asp).

## Common symptoms of grief:

While loss affects people in different ways, many people experience the following symptoms when they are grieving. Just remember almost anything you experience in early states of grief is normal.

- Shock and disbelief—Right after a loss, it can be hard to accept what happened. You may feel numb and have trouble believing that the loss really happened, even deny the truth.
- Sadness—Profound sadness is probably the most universally experienced symptoms of grief. You may have feelings of emptiness, despair, yearning or deep loneliness. You may also cry a lot or feel emotionally unstable.
- Guilt—You may regret or feel guilty about things you did or did not say or do. You may also feel guilty about certain feelings. Sometimes, children will blame themselves for causing the loss, even though they did nothing wrong.
- Anger—Even if the loss was nobody's fault, you may feel angry and resentful. You may feel the need to blame someone for the injustice that was done to you.
- Fear—A significant loss can trigger a host of worries and fears. You may feel anxious, helpless or insecure. You may even have panic attacks.
- Physical symptoms— We often think of grief as a strictly emotional process, but grief often involves physical problems, including fatigue, nausea, lowered immunity weight loss or weight gain, aches and pains and insomnia.

## Practicing Self-care during periods of grief:

- The single most important factor in healing from grief and loss is having supportive people around you. You can help the children in your care heal by asking about their feelings, spending time just being with them and listening when they want to talk.
- Remember that being a caregiver may sometimes lead to your own feelings of loss. When you are grieving, it is more important than ever to take care of yourself. The stress of a major loss can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time.
- Face your feelings. You can try to suppress your grief but you cannot avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and health problems.
- Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way. Write about your loss in a journal or write a letter to the one who is gone...even if you can't mail it. It can make you feel better.
- Look after your physical health. The mind and body are connected. When you feel good physically, you also can feel better emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right and exercising. Don't use alcohol in excess. See your medical provider if needed.
- Don't let anyone tell you how to feel and don't tell yourself how to feel. Your grief is personal. Let yourself and the children in your home feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It is ok to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It is also ok to laugh to find moments of joy and to let go when you are ready.
- Plan ahead for "Grief Triggers". Anniversaries, holidays and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional hit and know that it is completely normal.
- Feelings of grief and loss can be uncomfortable and overwhelming, especially for children whose coping skills are not fully developed. But the feelings are common, maybe even inevitable.
- Keep a lookout for signs of grieving in children you serve, in the families you work with and yes, even in yourself.
- Having a plan and knowing where to look for support will help you get through it.