

**Fostering Emotional Well-Being In
Children Whilst Talking About The Hard Stuff**



**CONVERSATIONS
THAT
MATTER**

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Notion Press

No. 8, 3rd Cross Street,
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First Published by Notion Press 2021
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ISBN 978-1-63633-674-9

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CONTENTS

<i>Reviews</i>	7
<i>Introduction</i>	11
1. Death	17
2. Divorce	27
3. Sexuality	36
4. Bullying	44
5. Screen Time and Virtual Reality	53
6. Adoption	62
7. Suicide	69
8. Disability	78
9. Entitlement	88
10. Drugs	98

Contents

11. Body Image	108
12. Relationships	118
13. Abuse	127
<i>Epilogue</i>	137
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	147
<i>About the Author</i>	149

DEATH

*Like the butterfly has its life cycle,
Like our plant on the balcony that will wither away
in time one day,
Like that insect lying on its back – still moving but
slowly going to stop,
Like our neighbour's dog when he grows old,
...all life – animal, plant or human – comes to an
end one day.*

Death itself is part of life and the only thing which is inevitable and irreversible. Life comes to an end sometimes naturally – like when we grow old – or unnaturally when we get unwell or sick.

However, the most beautiful part of science is that when the person has made that passage, they always leave behind their genes. Genes are ingredients that exist inside the cells that make up all living things. How we look, feel, smile or cry; how tall or short we are; the colour of our eyes and skin or the texture of our hair, all these are carried through genes from one generation to another. So scientifically, our grandparents and parents live on in us through their genes! It should make us feel happy that our loved ones continue to live in us and through us, in our body through these genes. Explore your thoughts to recollect and remember all the happy memories and the funny moments you shared with someone whom you have lost.

Also, it is okay to feel very sad, empty, lost, angry, fearful or guilty if you may have lost someone you love because you miss them. These are all normal feelings and big emotions that you need to go through. We shall one day all go through them at some point in our lives.

It is natural to be in denial at first and not want to accept this loss.

You may feel angry because you may feel that the time you had with your loved one was too short. There would have been so many things that you may have wanted to say or do which you cannot anymore.

You may feel guilty. After all, you may feel that you did not spend enough time with your loved one because you may have been busy with your studies or college or friends.

You may also feel guilty for secretly wishing that another person should have been the one to die instead of your loved one.

You may regret that you shared a few harsh words or had a few fights with your loved one recently or in the past.

You may feel anxious and fearful thinking about the future especially if the person you lost was your primary caregiver and took charge of your day-to-day aspects like homework, projects, studies or assignments, preparing meals or putting you to bed. Or if you lost your father you would be worried about the continuity of financial stability for the family.

You may also feel fearful or anxious with thoughts of losing your other parent and be worried sick about them falling unwell or getting hospitalized.

You may feel very low and depressed and you may not want to go out, socialize, meet your friends and maybe even lose interest in everything you once enjoyed doing. You may not even be able to sleep well or have an appetite during meals.

You may feel like crying all the time and even imagine joining your loved one.

All of these are normal thoughts, feelings and emotions that you could experience in different intensities, stages and at different times. It will all pass.

Never feel that you should be tough or strong and not cry in front of people. Crying is good. It will let out all your pain and feelings. In fact, it may also help others to cry, especially if they have been controlling or bottling up their feelings too.

Never feel like that loved one in your life has left you and gone away. They have completed their journey, meaning and purpose in this lifetime and now they have

moved on, as you must. Moving on does not mean you are letting them down, forgetting them or being selfish and enjoying your life. It means you are celebrating their memory and carrying forward what they would have expected you to do. Moving on means loving them even more and believing that you have their strength within you to do the same.

OVERVIEW

Talking to a child about someone close to them dying can be difficult. You may worry that you will frighten them or say the wrong thing that may make them feel worse. But it is important to be open and to answer any questions they have as honestly as you can. What children imagine can be far worse than reality.

Losing a parent, family member, sibling or loved one to death can be one of the most emotionally and psychologically devastating experiences for a child or adolescent. As parents/caregivers, we are often confused as to what are the right things to say or not to say, what questions to ask or what might get the child to feel more upset or overwhelmed.

Making death a part of normal conversations is vital for children of all ages, but young ones especially benefit the most from this because the concept of life being over is confusing for them. They usually do not have the vocabulary to fully express how they are feeling.

As parents, we need to understand that it is absolutely normal for the child to go through a range of emotions and behaviours. Some of these emotions could be very challenging to address, such as:

- The child wanting to die to be with their loved one who has passed away.
- The child feeling responsible for their parent's death and blaming themselves for it or emotions around feelings of relief even when their loved one is no more.

To comprehend these feelings and reactions or behaviours, the *Kubler-Ross model* is an effective way to postulate a series of emotions that a child or adult goes through when they have lost a loved one. These five stages are Denial, Anger, Depression, Bargaining and Acceptance.

When children first hear of the news of the death of a loved one, or if they have witnessed their loved one dying, they may appear to be okay and may have a confused look about them. This is perhaps because they are in shock or denial and appear numb or emotionally blunted. Research indicates that shock and denial of the reality of the loss at some level may shield the child from pain and provide emotional protection at this initial stage. This may last for a few weeks.

Once this stage wears off, there might come a period of immense, unbearable pain and guilt. With this, there might be copious bouts of crying and it is very important to vent and not suppress these emotions. It is natural at this point for children to feel remorse and wish that they had done or not done, said or not said, behaved or not behaved in a particular way with their loved ones when they reflect on the past. There might also be the prominent emotion of fear. Fear of losing the other parent, older grandparent or other loved ones at this point. Fear of the future – if it is an earning member of the family, or an office, business

or property issues that need to be taken care of. Children and teenagers can feel extremely overwhelmed and anxious during these times and these given situations.

It is very important to reassure them at this point and focus on healthy coping mechanisms and their own physical health. Basics like eating right, sleeping well and mentally occupying them are important.

After this phase may come a lot of rage or anger, acting out behaviours or tantrums. There might be anger and blame towards the attending doctor or the hospital, especially if the loved one was sick or unwell in their last days. There might be misplaced anger for the surviving parent or family members who've not perhaps had the best of relationships with the loved one that passed away. Some children, in anger, may also resentfully express their wish for the surviving parent to have passed away instead of the parent that was lost to death. This can be extremely upsetting to hear but the feeling needs to be vented nonetheless. At this stage, counselling and guidance from a mental health professional may be the best option for the child or other family members in need of it.

Some children also start bargaining within themselves. There are instances of children in therapy who express and wish bad things upon themselves or wish to have conversations with a higher power to trade places with the loved one who is passed away, only to have them come back.

This then progresses into a phase of depression, loneliness and despair. At this stage, most friends or relatives may go back and resume their normal lives and functioning. This is when the true emptiness sets in and the reality of the loss begins to come to life. There might be

social isolation, a lack of and loss in interest to do anything, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, negative thoughts and suicidal ideations. There could be changes in eating and sleeping patterns, difficulty with focus and concentration and inability to carry out day-to-day basic functions. There might also be a few physical symptoms such as headaches, back pains, nausea, dizziness or fatigue.

After this comes an upward turn, where the difficult memories may slowly fade and there is more mental focus on moving forward, regaining a sense of routine, getting back in touch with friends or setting into the routine at school or college. The overwhelming feelings, pain and depressive symptoms lessen in intensity and frequency; there is now acceptance of the reality and a more practical outlook on how to move forward for the child. There is less guilt and there will be some better moods and days. The child will be able to think and talk about the loved one who is passed with less of that heart wrenching, numbing pain and sadness.

At this stage, it is important to encourage conversations and thoughts of the past. Happy, funny and crazy memories must be shared in conversation and celebrated so that the environment is normalized and the concept of life moving on is understood, appreciated and established healthily.

GUIDELINES

Talk to your child about the funeral, last rights or memorial services before they attend them. Talk to them about what to expect before, during and after the services and the significance of saying ‘goodbye.’ This may include

discussions about things like the person's body, rituals, religious beliefs, burial and cremation, what types of emotions they may witness and what types of emotions they expect to feel. Allowing a child to go through this process may help them find their own 'closure.'

When discussing death, children may ask a parent/primary caregiver, "Will you die?" When children ask this question, they are usually too young to comprehend that death is permanent. What they are seeking at this stage is reassurance and safety. Ask the child if they are worried or scared that you will not be able to take care of them. If that is their concern, you can reassure them by saying that you will be there for them as long as they need you and in your absence, there will always be somebody from the family – like grandparents, an uncle, an aunt, older sibling or cousin, who will take care of them.

Finding ways to commemorate the loved one who died can be healing for children. In the short term, this may include planting a tree in the parent's honour, visiting one of their favourite places, celebrating the parent's birthday, framing photos to hang in their bedroom or around the house, writing letters or notes for them, drawing or painting for them and just regularly talking and sharing memories about the person.

It is okay for your child to see that you are sad or to see you cry when someone important to you and your child dies. Do not feel pressured to disguise your feelings and 'be strong' for your children all the time. You are also going through an intensely stressful and emotional period so it is only natural that you would be upset. But it is also a good idea to explain your feelings to your child. For example,

saying “I am crying because grandma died and I feel very sad that I will never see her again” is a good way to help the child appreciate how you are grieving

Always remember, no matter how children cope with death or express their feelings, they need sensitive and non-judgemental responses from adults. Careful listening and observing are important ways to learn how to respond intuitively and appropriately to a child’s needs depending on their growth stage.

And after all, that, if your child’s feelings are making it hard for them to do everyday things or you see drastic shifts in their behaviour, even after some time has passed, you might need to get some professional support for them by having them visit a psychologist or child psychiatrist.

“

*“We all die. The goal isn’t to
live forever, the goal is to create
something that will.”*

Chuck Palahniuk

”

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