



# Loss and Grief in Children and Adolescents

Mary-Ann Sontag Bowman, Ph.D. LCSW  
University of Montana



# Grief

The very normal response to loss



Change = Loss = Grief

One Loss = Many Losses



...grief fills all the spaces...



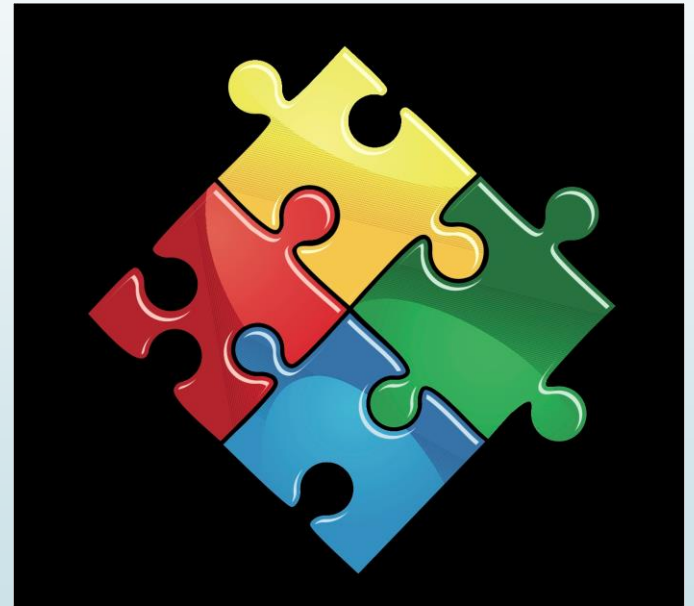
**GRIEF**

...it settles in like a bad storm...



...manifesting symptoms that are...

- Emotional
- Social
- Cognitive
- Spiritual
- Physical



Grieving is a series of starts and stops, periods of eruptions and calm



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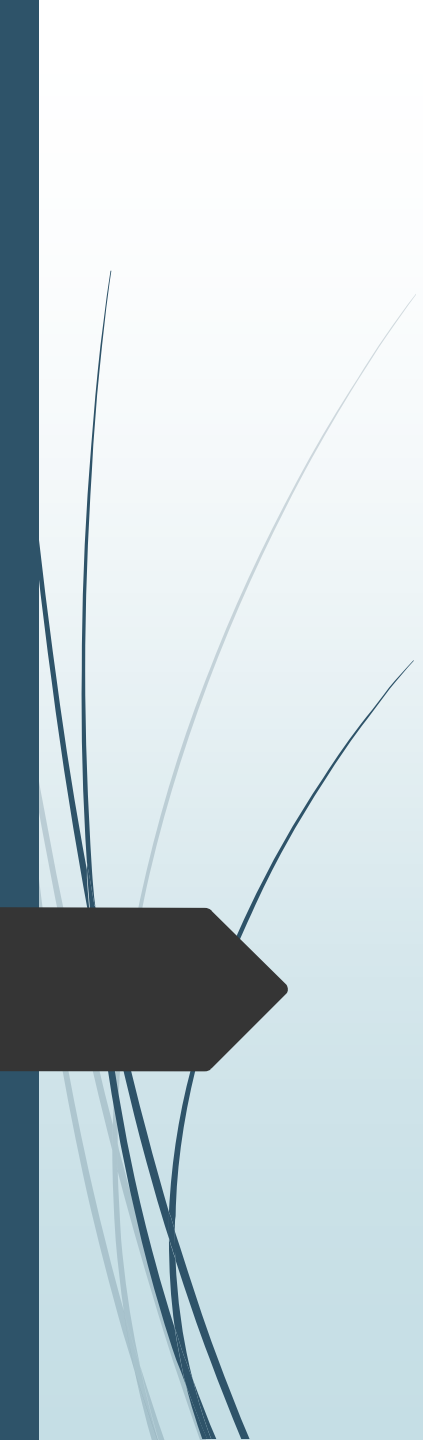


The work of grief is living with it.



Theaters have stages.  
Grief does not.





Grief is also transformative,  
an invitation to be different,  
to be better

“...sometimes I still cry with missing her, but I have embraced my life, I have become a better, kinder, more forgiving person.”

“I just live so that my life is a testament to that love and so they can be proud of the heritage that they left behind.”



There is no closure,  
no resolution...

Just a New Normal



# Grief in Children

- ▶ Children's grief may be hidden and/or behavioral symptoms of grief may not be attributed to the loss.
- ▶ Children do not typically have the words to articulate the emotions of grief, and this may make it difficult for caring adults to recognize grief in a child.
- ▶ It is normal for children to grieve in pieces (Sharkin, Knox, & Kenkel, 2003; Willis, 2002); grief as a pervasive and enduring state is consistent with adult grief, but not children's grief.

(This content is from a chapter authored by the presenter).



# Grief in Children

- The social support and emotional sharing that can mediate the impact of a loss may not be available to children, increasing the stress burden on the child.
- Children may unintentionally contribute to family silence around the death because they fear seeing adult grief.
- In an effort to protect adults – and themselves – from challenging emotions, children may avoid emoting.

# Education and Assessment Tool

## Color Your Grief

**Instructions:** Explain to the child that these are ways kids sometimes feel when someone they love dies. Ask the child to color in the squares that she has felt since the one she loved died. Tell her to select one color for *I feel this way A LOT* and another color for *I feel this way SOMETIMES*. Remind the child that she doesn't have to color every square because not everyone feels all these things when someone they love dies.

<b>Feeling very sad</b>	<b>Feeling nervous and anxious</b>	<b>Really wanting my dog</b>	<b>Feeling guilty</b>
<b>Feeling helpless</b>	<b>Feel like I can't breathe</b>	<b>Tired a lot</b>	<b>Feel confused</b>
<b>Sleep more or sleep less</b>	<b>Eat more or eat less</b>	<b>Crying</b>	<b>Can't believe it has happened</b>
<b>Forgetful</b>	<b>Feeling like everything is just too much</b>	<b>Do not want to be with other people as much anymore</b>	<b>Feel lonely</b>
<b>Don't feel like doing much of anything at times</b>	<b>Have questions about why God let this happen</b>	<b>Have a hard time understanding things and concentrating</b>	<b>Worry about my family</b>
<b>Feel kind of crazy sometimes</b>	<b>Thinking a lot about my dog who died</b>	<b>Being angry and crabby</b>	<b>Feeling mad</b>



# Adults may complicate grief in children

- ▶ Adults may not attend to the needs of bereaved children:
  - ▶ because of a desire to avoid discussing difficult topics;
  - ▶ their own grief issues;
  - ▶ lack of understanding about the meaning of the loss;
  - ▶ lack of awareness of normal (and transient) manifestations of grief in children.

(This content is from a chapter authored by the presenter).





# Adults: It's Complicated

- ▶ Adults may attribute children's emotional and behavioral responses to grief when what the child identifies as challenging is life with grieving adults.
- ▶ The very normal and appropriate emotional, social, and behavioral expressions of grief in adults can and does destabilize children who thrive on routine and look to adults to make the world feel safe (Bugge, Darbyshire, Røkholt, Sulheim Haugstvedt, & Helseth, 2013).

(This content is from a chapter authored by the presenter).

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# Adolescents

- Already struggling with changes that are:
  - Emotional
  - Social
  - Cognitive
  - Spiritual (and moral)
  - Physical
- Already stormy and chaotic
- Already trying to find a New Normal



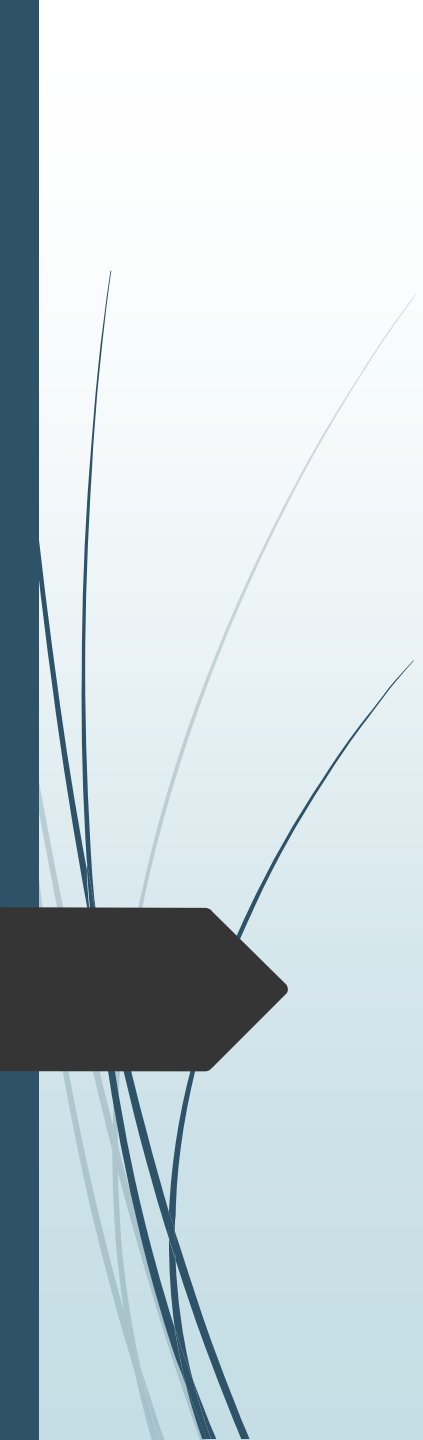
# Grieving teens...

- May have increased fear and anxiety (bad stuff DOES happen)
- May hide losses in order to fit in
- May socially isolate, feel “different”
- May have issues with control, be hyper responsible
- May have an enhanced (and understandable) awareness that life is not fair
- May be emotionally volatile
- May resist supportive efforts
- May experience past losses in new ways
- May use behavior – not words – to express emotions
- May feel extreme guilt and anger

# Jake, at losing his mother and grandmother in less than six weeks when he was 15...

"I felt guilty that I had not spent enough time with either of these mother figures, that I wasn't given the chance to say "I love you" and "goodbye"..."

On top of the guilt, I was angry at almost anyone I could think of: myself for not somehow preventing either death, my mother's doctor for taking away her life with prescribed zombie-inducing drugs, the driver of the train for not stopping sooner or the transit company for not installing train crossing gates, God for allowing the whole mess to occur, and the list went on."



# Grief is not a problem to be solved

...it is something we learn to live with...

...or something we help others learn to live  
with...



# Keep in mind: For the adults

- Avoid a “Fix-it” attitude or approach
- Understand normal grief (grief vs. behavioral problems)
- Be mindful of development (again, grief vs. behavioral problems)
- Avoid judgement of what is grief-worthy
- Reduce expectations/demands
- Avoid platitudes
- Say it out loud
- Listen
- Support (and keep trying)
- Normalcy/Routine

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# Strategies that can help children and adolescents

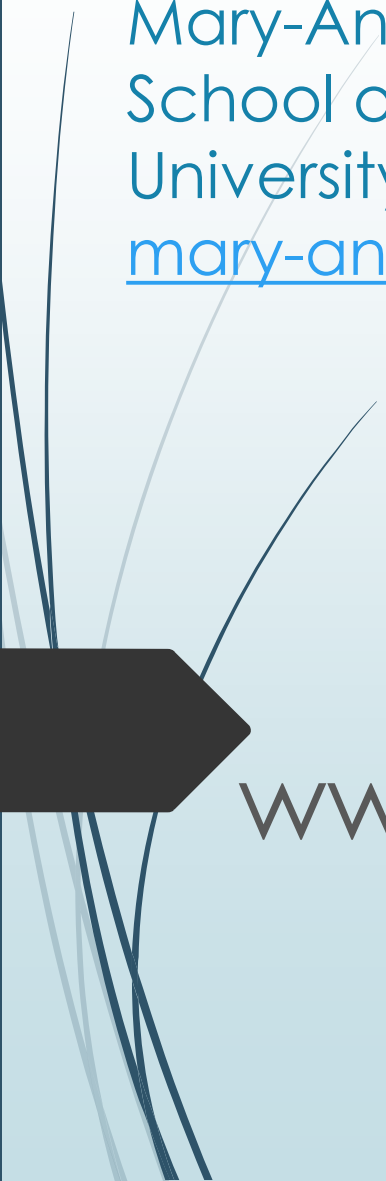

- ▶ Educate and normalize
- ▶ Work with the school – Big One
- ▶ Mindfulness/Awareness
- ▶ Identify and practice coping behaviors
- ▶ Rituals
- ▶ Capture memories
- ▶ Invite meaning-making
- ▶ Encourage conversation (and accept silence)
- ▶ Foster resilience
- ▶ Grief Breaks
- ▶ Groups – or not



# Helping: Last and important words

- ▶ Assumptions that responses are related to the specific loss may prevent effective interventions, substituting grief-related support for the child or adolescent instead of helping adults stabilize following their own loss(es).
- ▶ **Education and support of grieving adults is often the most effective grief intervention for children and adolescents.**





Mary-Ann Sontag Bowman, Ph.D. LCSW  
School of Social Work  
University of Montana  
[mary-ann.bowman@umontana.edu](mailto:mary-ann.bowman@umontana.edu)



[www.helpwithgrief.org](http://www.helpwithgrief.org)