

## Could this be Grief? Loss, Disappointment, and Cancellations

Written by Dr. Holly Hatton-Bowers and Dr. Amy Napoli

Many of us have experienced major changes in our daily routines and activities. We have experienced loss of social connections, normalcy of routine, and a sense that life is forever changed. For youth, they have experienced these changes and losses too. Abrupt school closures, not being able to participate in ceremonies and cancellations of summer camp or family vacations can bring feelings of sadness, disappointment, and frustration.

It's important to know that youth may be experiencing ***grief***. According to the National Institute of Health, grief is defined as a reaction to a major loss of someone or something. It is common for young people to feel ***grief*** during this time of great uncertainty. For some, this will be their first major encounter with grief; therefore, it can be helpful to understand the experience of grief: the emotions, behaviors, and/or reactions. Grief is universal and also personal.

Grief is normal and can be shown in different ways. Some youth may withdraw and become quiet, some will cry more easily, some will be more argumentative and irritable, push people away or become clingier. Sometimes feelings of grief will lead to physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach aches. Grief can be overwhelming, confusing, and particularly challenging during a pandemic. Furthermore, grief is cyclical in nature. Unfortunately, it is not something you experience once and then it is over.

What can caring adults do to help young people experiencing grief? Support them by helping them identify their experience as grief. Learning about grief can help youth understand their experience, name their experience, and give them some ideas to be in control of their feelings. It is important to remember that youth are resilient. Research finds that in difficult times and changes, having a caring and supportive adult can help young people.

Here are some ways adults can support youth:

- **Be available, present, and patient to talk about grief.** Youth may not be ready to talk about their grief, loss, and disappointments right away. Be available and patient when they are ready to talk. It may take time to go through the process of grief.
- **If youth are ready to talk, simply listen.** Empathize with them and actively listen through eye contact, limit interrupting, and demonstrate interests through verbal and nonverbal communication. A head nod, gentle pat on the shoulder, or saying "I appreciate you sharing this with me or I am here to listen to you, is there anything else?" are ways to show active listening.
- **Help youth understand that we all have times when we experience grief.** You can say, "I understand this is difficult. You seem disappointed. It is really hard to miss out on this. Do you want to talk about it?" When you see youth are upset, it is best to first acknowledge these feelings and offer some understanding. Listen and accept their thoughts and feelings unconditionally and refrain from judgement.
- **Try not to go into a "I need to fix this" mindset.** Seeing youth experience strong feelings, like disappointment and grief, can be difficult. Avoid minimizing or reassuring

them that “it will be ok” or “it is fine.” These types of statements can feel dismissive. Create a safe space for youth where they can be heard.

- **Acknowledge that everyone responds to grief in different ways.** Some youth may be angry, some will be stubborn, sad, or silent. These are all common ways of responding. Let youth express these strong feelings in safe ways.
- **Be a good role model.** Youth observe how adults handle disappointment, frustration, sadness, and anger. When you feel upset, model mindful breathing or share your feelings with others, this shows youth it is safe and okay to feel their feelings.
- **Help youth reflect to find meaning in these experiences.** It may be helpful to support them in helping others and finding gratitude. When they are ready, ask them what they are learning through this experience.
- **Find moments to laugh and express joy.** Help youth understand that it is common to experience different feelings and emotions at the same time.

These resources can provide additional support and help:

- Visit <https://griefsjourney.org> for workshops and support groups to help youth.
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255) provides free and confidential support 24/7.
- Crisis Text Line (text 741741) is free from anywhere in the U.S. and provides support for those in crisis 24/7.

These are difficult and painful times. Youth experiencing grief need a caring, available adult who is there to help them gain skills to be more resilient. Learning healthy ways to cope with these difficulties and strong feelings are important lifelong skills.

More information and resources about youth social-emotional development in difficult times can be found at <http://disaster.unl.edu/families> or by contacting your local county Nebraska Extension office.