

# HERITAGE

## HEAD, HEART & HANDS

*Helping Children Cope With Loss*

When the impact of tragedy or loss begins to ripple across a community, children and adolescents are among the most “at risk.” Many factors impact their vulnerability. Children do not always fully comprehend death, while teens often feel impervious to it. Concerned adults may hide or distort details in well-intentioned efforts to shield them from hurt and worry. Most of the initial attention is understandably placed on the safety and coping abilities of children. Even the most caring parents, skilled professionals and knowledgeable clergy can find it challenging to transition the focus to the possible psycho-spiritual opportunities that tragedy may present.

This guide, *Heritage – Head, Heart & Hands: Helping Children Cope With Loss*, provides a holistic approach to understanding and assisting children and teens following loss. It can be used to help children/teens cope (and even grow) in one-to-one, as well as classroom or group, interactions.

*SSTART, School & Synagogue Trauma And Resilience Training, is a not-for-profit organization dealing with crisis and trauma within the Jewish community. Since the impact of trauma can leave its mark regardless of age, gender or belief system, SSTART provides resilience and life-skills programs to help children and adults prepare for “nisyonot hachaim” – life challenges, before they arise. In the wake of actual tragedies, crisis interventions facilitate the healing process by reconnecting victims with their inner strengths and coping skills, as well as to family and community supports.*

*SSTART programs have been developed over decades of experience in the counseling and training of children and schools, families and synagogues, healthcare facilities and hospices, from across the broad spectrum of Jewish communities nationwide. They have been carefully designed to provide an innovative blend of classic Jewish sources and cutting-edge coping and resilience techniques.*

*For further information or materials, or to schedule a presentation, training or intervention, please contact SSTART’s Director, Moshe Borowski, LMSW, ACSW, at [HealTheHurt@gmail.com](mailto:HealTheHurt@gmail.com) or (646) 673-5909.*

## *Head ~ Education*

- Younger children often need some explanation regarding the general meaning of death, as well as a “light version” of the details surrounding a particular death.
- In an effort to protect children from painful realities, adults often employ euphemisms (“very deep sleep,” “long vacation,” “passed away”) to describe death. Unfortunately, such phrases are often counterproductive, leaving some children confused, pained and unnecessarily fearful of activities like sleep or family trips.
- Experience has shown that it is healthier for children to hear the basic realities of death than to ponder the unbridled fantasies which can ensue when the matter is ignored, denied or misstated.
- Keep in mind that your tone of voice and body language have a large impact on how children perceive the situation.
- When discussing the concept of death, first start by explaining the basics of life. Speak simply: a person is comprised of a body (*guf*) and a soul (*neshama*). The joining of these two entities is miraculous and what constitutes life.
- Death occurs when the soul has left the body: at any age (young or old), at any rate of time (gradual or sudden) and due to any reason (illness or injury).
- It is important to stress that, “The body no longer works and absolutely cannot be fixed. Since it has served its purpose, it is now going to be buried in the ground with great respect (*kavod*).”
- In age-appropriate terms, explain that the soul returns to Heaven and is eternal. This essential concept of Jewish tradition provides comfort and solace (*nechama*) for children.
- Younger children may ask questions that we would usually consider inappropriate: was there a lot of blood, what does the body look and feel like, is the deceased coming back soon, etc. This is not a breach in etiquette, upbringing or education, but rather a child’s way of trying to process the difficult information he/she has just heard.
- Answer questions gently and skillfully. Do not be afraid to say, “That’s a good question; I really don’t know the answer,” especially if difficult theological questions arise.
- Children may also ask the same question repeatedly in an effort to make some sense of what has happened. Have patience, and be careful not to become frustrated with this process.
- Hearing that the deceased is not in any (more) pain or distress can be very comforting for children.

## *Heart ~ Emotions*

- See “Common Grief Reactions of Children” for classic responses that children may have (physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive and spiritual) following a loss.
- It is vital to validate children’s reactions. Children often harbor inner fears that “I’m going crazy” or “I’m the only one going through this.” Hearing that these reactions are normal and common often helps calm them significantly.
- Sharing your own experiences may be helpful and reassuring to children. Through sharing and modeling for them, children will hopefully sense your sincerity and genuineness.
- Verbalize that you are not “falling apart.” Children need to sense your support and guidance at this critical time.
- Reactions often fade relatively quickly, which is usually a relief for children. However, the process is not always so simple.
- When painful feelings subside, teens and pre-teens may express, “How do I have the right to feel better so quickly? Why am I so cold and insensitive to my friend’s sorrows?”
- When a “positive” outcome follows a tragedy (for example, becoming more introspective or helpful), he/she may feel guilty and frustrated when such feelings/behaviors diminish. “Someone I cared for died and I became determined to take life more seriously. Now I find myself thinking and acting just like I used to. I can’t believe that I’m back to my ‘old self’ so quickly. What’s wrong with me?”
- As a concerned adult, you are trying to gauge whether children’s reactions are so severe, intense or longstanding that their everyday functioning has become impaired. Certainly, if a child poses any potential danger toward him/herself or others, immediate action should be taken.

## *Hands ~ Practical Applications*

- One of the scariest feelings that death triggers is a lack of control and autonomy. Children often cope better when they are able to “do something” during times of trauma. Some students may prefer to work on a project directly related to what has happened, while others may busy themselves with things that help them avoid facing the tragedy.
- It is important to recognize and respect each student’s style of coping. There are no specific “recipes,” “formulas” or “roadmaps” on how to handle grief.
- Some students will appreciate arts and crafts; others may prefer composing a letter or poem. Many students opt to record their feelings in a journal.
- Sharing memories and heartfelt wishes with the bereaved family (for example, through individual or group condolence cards, or short recollections) can be extremely cathartic and empowering for both friends/classmates as well as the parents or siblings who receive them.
- Creating special photo albums (“memory books”) often provide much solace for children. It gives them a project to focus on, and provides a keepsake that can be viewed privately or shared with friends and family.
- Prepare classmates for the nuances of visiting a “*shiva* home,” as well as for welcoming back their bereaved classmate.

## *Heritage ~ A Jewish Perspective*

- Judaism contains many concepts and traditions that promote healing, comfort and solace. *Tzeddakah* (charity) or projects that encourage *chessed* (acts of kindness) are extremely popular and fulfilling.
- There is a tradition to study *Mishna* (the body of Jewish law which forms the backbone of the *Talmud*) in memory of the deceased. The words *Mishna* and *neshama* (soul) share the same Hebrew letters, thereby uniquely linking this particular part of tradition to the spiritual enhancement of the deceased’s soul.
- *Shiva* (the traditional mourning period following the death of a close relative) allows mourners, and those who visit them, to take a “time out” from everyday life to concentrate on the loss at hand and recall memories of the deceased. It also provides an opportunity to glean important lessons from the character traits, actions and legacy of the deceased.
- The importance of “just being there” should be explained to students prior to a condolence call. Girls are often much more attuned to this concept.
- Teens in particular may be intellectually, emotionally and spiritually bothered by the death at hand. They may also expand their questioning to broader issues of why death (or any type of “bad,” evil or suffering) exists at all.
- Acknowledge the difficulty of fully answering such questions, as well as the added pain and frustration that this inadequacy sometimes triggers (see “Empathy, Not Answers” in *Lev V’Nefesh ~ Heart & Soul.*). Once he/she senses that you are answering sincerely and not being evasive, dismissive or challenging, you may have a chance to engage in a meaningful dialogue.
- Teens in particular often gauge whether adults are being genuine in their responses. They may be wary of being manipulated to think, feel or act in certain ways in the wake of a death.
- Judaism’s vision of a “cosmic tapestry” often provides some measure of comfort. “I know that I’m suffering, but I don’t know why. I have hope and faith that at some point it will become clear how all of this fits into the larger scheme of life and history.” (See “The Canvas of Life” in *Lev V’Nefesh ~ Heart & Soul.*)
- Introspection and growth in any aspect of one’s life (personal, interpersonal or in relation to God) often helps survivors find meaning in the life and death of the deceased.
- Identifying a positive character trait of the deceased that can be emulated, even for short periods of time, can be quite meaningful. This process helps maintain a connection/relationship with the deceased, and provides solace and meaning to survivors that their actions are helping the deceased in some spiritual sense.

# Common Grief Reactions of Children

## *Physical*

- headaches
- stomach aches or other gastro-intestinal disorders
- chest pains/breathing difficulties
- fatigue, exhaustion
- rapid heart rate/elevated blood pressure
- sudden bursts of energy
- heightened sensitivity to senses
- hives, rashes
- dizziness, fainting
- chills, nausea, weakness

## *Cognitive*

- problems focusing, concentrating, remembering
- difficulty making decisions
- daydreaming, fantasizing
- sudden moments of clarity and insight
- obsessive thoughts (*concerning personal life, home or school*)
- excessive safety worries (*for self or others*)
- disbelief, confusion
- disorientation
- dreams, nightmares

## *Behavioral*

- pattern changes for sleeping/eating
- isolation, withdrawal
- sudden outbursts (*screaming, crying*)
- declining grades at school
- shirking from physical contact
- pattern changes in talking (*significant increase or decrease*)
- avoiding reminders (*places, possessions*) of the deceased
- spending time at the deceased's home or with his/her possessions (*pictures, journals, jewelry*)
- regressive behaviors at home or school (*clinginess, whining, thumb-sucking, soiling clothes, bedwetting, sleeping in parents' room, leaving lights on at night*)
- extreme focus on self-improvement or helping others
- sudden focus on being spiritual or religious

## *Emotional*

- sadness or depression
- grief
- little or no affect (*"flat affect"*)
- shock or numbness
- guilt or regret
- fatigue
- feeling hopeless, lonely, lost, empty or abandoned
- confusion
- anxiety
- apathy or resignation
- relief
- anger
- irritability
- fear, anxiety, apprehension

## *Spiritual*

- spiritual confusion
- loss of meaning or purpose
- feeling lost, abandoned, ignored
- questioning of religious beliefs and practices (*rituals, holidays*)
- questioning or anger toward God, religious representatives (*clergy, teachers, parents*) or institutions (*synagogue, school, home*)
- introspection
- gratitude to God
- sudden feeling of clarity, mission or purpose
- increase in religious practice
- sudden desire for self improvement, helping others or enhancing one's relationship to God

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**SSTART**  
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**Preparing for life's expected, and unexpected, challenges.**