



How to Tell If A Grieving Child Needs Extra Help

From: Healing the Bereaved Child (1996) by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Many of the behaviors listed below are normal grief responses (with the exception of those that might harm the child or others). What makes these "red flags" is a matter of degree. Panic and fear, for example, are normal. Persistent panic and fear, on the other hand, are symptomatic of unmet mourning needs. Mourning behaviors should soften in intensity and duration over time if the child is making progress in his or her grief journey.

Signs of Complicated Mourning in Children:

- Total denial of the reality of the death
- Persistent panic, fear
- Prolonged physical complaints without organic findings
- Prolonged feelings of guilt or responsibility for the death when the child obviously isn't responsible. (Children who feel guilt because they are responsible for the death often benefit from individual counseling as well.)
- *Chronic* patterns of apathy and/or depression
- *Chronic* hostility, acting-out toward others or self
- Prolonged change in typical behavior patterns or personality (e.g., the amiable child who now gets in fights all the time or the normally outgoing child who becomes introverted and withdrawn).
- Consistent withdrawal from friends and family members
- Dramatic, ongoing changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Suicidal thoughts or actions

