

“Anticipatory Grief” is a grief response (or constellation of responses) that may occur when a death is impending. The following are some of the potential anticipatory grief responses that children or young people may experience when a loved one’s death is imminent:

- **Sadness** around the upcoming loss and around the losses that may have already occurred (change in the nature of the relationship with the dying person, loss of the role that the dying person may have had, loss of activities that they used to do with the dying person, possible loss of ability to communicate with the dying person, change in financial status)
- **Preoccupation** with the dying person and his/her needs or well-being.
- **Anger** about the changes that are occurring or that may occur.
- **Confusion** about why the death is occurring and about the changes that are happening to the dying person and to those around him/her.
- **Loneliness** around the imminent loss of the dying person.
- **Helplessness/hopelessness** that they, most likely, cannot change the fact that the person is dying.
- **Guilt** that they cannot do or say anything to stop the person from dying. Also guilt about having said or done something that may have upset or angered the dying person.
- **Fear** about the death and the changes that may accompany the death, and/or about others possibly dying or fear of dying themselves; also fear of who will take care of child/family after the person dies (if he/she is a care-provider).
- **Anxiety** about when the death may actually occur.
- **Isolation** because others may not be comfortable with addressing or talking about the impending death.
- **Irritability** or heightened sensitivity to noise, light, conflict, change, or others’ feelings.
- **Rehearsal of the death** as a way to prepare oneself mentally for what is approaching.
- **Physical issues** such as changes in sleeping/eating patterns, headaches, stomachaches, tightness in chest.
- **Difficulty** focusing, concentrating, or remembering things.
- **Frustration** about balancing hope with the reality that death is the most likely outcome.

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The following may help a child or young person to process their anticipatory grief:

- **Providing the child or young person with information** (at an age-appropriate level) about the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual condition of the dying person.
- **Allowing/inviting young people to ask questions** and answering honestly and age-appropriately. (See PDF handout entitled "Talking to Children About Death" also on this website).
- **Allowing the young person to express his/her emotions as necessary** and accepting all emotional responses as valid while still holding reasonable boundaries. E.g., "It is okay to bounce the ball outside when you are angry, but it is not okay to throw it at anyone" or "It is okay to talk about how confused you are, but it is not okay to hit other people when you feel this way." Emotional expression can also include drawing, painting, coloring, music and/or sports and exercise. Oftentimes children express themselves in non-verbal ways. Just because they are not "talking about their feelings" does not mean that they are not expressing them.
- **Allowing the child to be involved** in the care of the dying person at a level that is comfortable to him/her - that is also age-appropriate - and that is also comfortable for the dying person. E.g., helping with meal preparation for the person, turning on or off lights for the person, talking about memories, looking at pictures, sitting with the person, contacting the person by phone for conversation, etc. Some children may wish to be more involved, while others may desire little or no involvement. Allow the child to have as much choice around this as possible. So much may feel out of control that having the ability to make these decisions may provide a child with an appropriate sense of agency at a very confusing time. The needs and desires of the dying person must also be considered with regards to this.
- **Re-affirming for children that they will be cared for and not abandoned** after the death.
- **Assuring children and young people** that - just because they may be grieving before the death of the person - it does not mean that they have lost hope, or that they are abandoning the dying person, or that they do not still care about the dying person.
- **Providing an opportunity to say good-bye** in a way that is helpful to the child or young person.