

Grief & Loss Support Groups for Youth

How can we best meet the needs of youth who are experiencing grief and loss in our own community?



WHY THIS MATTERS

Support groups are often a first line of treatment for youth seeking grief-related support services.

KEY POINTS

- ❑ There are **many types of losses** that may pose challenges for youth.
- ❑ Loss through death affects most individuals by their teens. Over **70% of adolescents** report that they lost *at least* one of their first or second-degree relatives or close friends to death (“The Untold Burden,” 2015).
- ❑ In the U.S., 1 in 7 children will lose a *parent or sibling* to death **before the age of 20** (“The Untold Burden, 2015).
- ❑ More and more youth are faced with loss due to **parental divorce**: In 2011 alone, 1.2 million Canadians divorced or ended a common-law relationship with their child’s mother or father (Statistics Canada, 2014).

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ❑ From a **developmental perspective**, children and adolescents experience loss differently than adults.
- ❑ There are several **emotional, cognitive and behavioural symptoms** typically associated with loss in youth. For example, *guilt* is a prominent emotion for youth, especially if this loss is due to death or divorce (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006).
- ❑ Similar to adults, grief in youth is conceptualized as a **process** that occurs over a series of stages or tasks.
- ❑ Youth are often **unable to name** their grief-related emotions, or to **express their need** for support.
- ❑ Youth frequently **require assistance** in communicating their grief in a way that is developmentally appropriate (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006).

“Given the propensity of children for peer-group involvement, group therapy has emerged...as a clinically-valued intervention modality...” (Lomanoco et al., 2007)

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ❑ According to youth and their families, there is an **increasing need** for grief-related support groups for youth (Pidcock, 2015).
- ❑ Peer support groups help adolescents **engage in dialogue** regarding otherwise difficult and sensitive issues, such as grief and loss (De Lucia-Waack et al., 2004).
- ❑ Peer support **group size** is typically about 10-15 for adolescents, and 6-8 for younger children.
- ❑ Parents and youth hold the belief that such peer-support groups **reduce stigma** (Piccock, 2015).
- ❑ Research shows that parents and youth would benefit from more support upon completion of a program, such as an **after-care follow-up** group (Metel & Barnes, 2010; Davies et al., 2007; Pidcock, 2015).

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- ❑ Research highlights the importance of considering each of these factors when working with youth: **development stage; gender; cause and type of death; and time lapsed since death** (Haine et al., 2008).
- ❑ There are two major evidence-based programs: **Family Bereavement Program** (FBP) and **Grief & Trauma Intervention(GTI)**.
- ❑ FBP is a **12 session, skill-focused group** that offers peer support groups for children (8-12 years), adolescents (12-16 years), and parents (Sandler, 2013).
- ❑ GTI is a **10 session, CBT and narrative-focused program** for youth (parents attend one session). GTI is activity-based, and involves art, drama, and play therapy (Salloum, 2015).
- ❑ Research also supports the efficacy of support groups that **specialize in certain types of loss or therapy**, such as groups for the death of a peer, divorce groups, or music therapy support groups (Malone, 2012; O’Grady et al., 2010; Christner et al., 2007).

“When assessing their group experiences, children and parents most appreciated the support...they received, the freedom to express themselves, a diminished sense of isolation, and the normalization of their emotions.” (Davies et al., 2007, p. 14)