

Coping with Grief

The sudden death of Steve Irwin has shocked us all. In dying, the Crocodile Hunter has had an impact on us in a way we couldn't have possibly imagined when he was alive. The outpouring of grief has been extraordinary, from within Australia and abroad, from the very young through to the very old.

Psychologist Meredith Fuller says the loss of a public figure hits hard because it reminds us of our mortality. The many different stages of grief include shock, anger, denial and finally acceptance, Meredith says. The order and length of time each will affect us depends on the individual. But she says most research suggests people need two to three years to work through these emotions. However, children grieve differently and their reaction depends on their age and temperament.

"Some children are very perceptive and appreciate the concept of what it all means, and others are just not ready to understand it at all", she says.

For Terri Irwin, explaining their father's death to her young children will be difficult. In the early years kids don't really have an understanding of the permanence of death. They can still feel the loss, but they're too little to understand what's real and what's not. They don't have the words to describe their feelings, so their behaviour might be an indicator of their stress and sadness.

In the early years of school a child begins to understand that death is forever. At this age, they might feel responsible or attribute the loss to their own behaviour. Likewise, watching their parents in distress might cause children to blame themselves. Kids need to be reassured that the sadness everyone feels is in no way linked to them.

"It's perfectly acceptable for a child to see a parent crying" Meredith says. "explain to them that you're sad because of your loss, not because they were naughty.

'It's OK for them to see you display a range of emotions, but if you're really struggling six months down the track then it might be worthwhile to seek some counselling'.

Parents know their child best, so if they see significant behavioural changes, it's time to seek professional help. Look for extreme reactions, such as disrupted sleep, changed schoolwork and aggressive behaviour.

The older children get, the better they can understand the concept of death, its permanence and causes. 'There are certain ages when losing a parent can be incredibly traumatic', she says. 'During adolescence particularly-age 14, 15 and 16- the repercussions can be devastating.

Adolescents may withdraw, become moody and angry, prefer the company of friends over family and act dangerously. You should let them know you're there for them.

Meredith says honesty is the best approach, no matter what the age.

"Sharing your grief and sadness will help children feel more comfortable with their own feelings".

To help children cope with grief

1. Keep routines the same. A good way to provide reassurance is to maintain the regular pattern of their daily lives
2. Stay close to your child. When they're upset, children like to be near people with whom they're familiar and comfortable.
3. Listen to them. Children need to be allowed to express their fears and anxieties. Often, if a child is directly involved in a crisis they'll close up, but it's important you be there for them and keep the lines of communication open.
4. Be honest. Answer questions in a truthful and age – appropriate way.

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