

Mini-Articles: Guilt and Shame

Guilt, Shame and Grief: Understand Common Reactions in Students

When a child experiences the death of a family member or other loved one, feelings of guilt and shame are common. School professionals who understand why these reactions occur can take steps to support students. Often, speaking directly to children and normalizing these feelings are important first steps in helping children adjust to a loss.

Children sometimes feel responsible for bad things that happen to people around them. They feel guilty because they assume their thoughts, feelings and actions are influencing larger events.

Children may believe an argument or conflict, a moment of anger or a negative thought had the real consequence of bringing about someone's death. This is even more likely when a relationship was ambivalent or conflicted—with an absent or abusive parent, for example.

After a death, such thoughts are common even for adolescents.

Children may also get the impression it is wrong to ask questions about a death. They see the discomfort it causes adults. They may observe feelings of unease in their family especially when a death involves stigma in some way—for example, a death related to drug overdose, criminal behavior, suicide or HIV. These experiences can bring up shame for children—about their own curiosity, “naughty” behaviors they think might have contributed in some way to the death, or something “bad” done by the person who died.

It is helpful to discuss guilt and shame explicitly with grieving children and teens. Ask about thoughts, feelings or questions they have been having. Describe the kinds of reactions related to guilt and shame others often have. Offer reassurance, and consider referrals to counseling for students who continue to be troubled by guilt and shame over time.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

These 2 Steps Can Help Grieving Children Deal with Guilt and Shame

When a child or teen experiences the death of a family member or other loved one, shame and guilt are common reactions. After a death, they may worry that their own thoughts, feelings and actions helped caused it. This can bring up feelings of guilt.

Children may also sense there is something wrong in wishing to discuss or having questions about a death. They see the pain and discomfort their questions cause the adults around them. They may feel ashamed about their own curiosity or worry that “naughty” behaviors might have contributed in some way to the death. They may feel shame about something “bad” they hear about the person who died.

Education professionals can take two important steps to help grieving children deal with guilt and shame.

First, create a safe environment for children to honestly disclose the thoughts and feelings they are having. Ask directly if they ever worry that the death might have been their fault in some way.

Second, normalize these reactions. Let them know that it is very common for children and even adults to worry about these things after someone they care about has died. Encourage them to talk with you about these thoughts and ideas over time.

Often, being able to speak about these things helps children adjust to the loss. If, over time, the guilt and shame do not seem to improve or appear to worsen, a referral to counseling may be appropriate.

This is especially true when there might be some logical reason for a child to feel he or she has contributed to a death. For example, a teen might have had a big fight with a parent, who then drove away in a distracted frame of mind and was involved in a fatal car crash. A child might have dared a friend or younger sibling to take some risky action that resulted in death.

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Grieving Students: Why Children Feel Guilty After a Death

When a child or teen experiences the death of a family member or other loved one, they may worry that their own thoughts, feelings and actions helped cause it.

Children may say such things as:

- I forgot to check in with my mom after school and then she died. If I'd checked on her, she would have been okay.
- I kind of cheated on a test. That was bad. And then my classmate died. I think it's my fault.
- My dad and I had a big fight and he stormed out of the house. Then he was in a car crash. I think it's because he was so mad at me.
- My grandma was sick for a long time. I kept thinking, "It will just be easier for everyone when she dies." I shouldn't have thought that. Because then she did die.

Even adults have these kinds of thoughts. We have the sense that if we can just identify how we contributed to a loved one's death, we can take steps to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else we care about. Of course, part of adjusting to a death is recognizing that we have limited influence over such events.

When education professionals talk to grieving students, it's important to create a safe environment where they can disclose these kinds of troubling thoughts and feelings. It's often helpful to ask directly, "Do you ever worry that something you thought, said or did contributed to this death?"

Provide information that normalizes such reactions. Let students know that children and adults alike often struggle with what they might have done differently to protect someone who died. The ability to speak honestly about such reactions helps children take first steps in adjusting to a loss.

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The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create [grievingstudents.org](#), a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America's classrooms.