



Well@Work Podcast Season 2, Episode 23: Helping Children Manage Their Grief Over COVID Losses

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Dr Stephanie Gusler discusses how health care providers can support children in COVID related grief and loss.

Hello, I'm Dr Stephanie Gusler, a clinical child psychologist at the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. Welcome to this edition of the Well@Work podcast, where I will be discussing grief and loss related to COVID-19 and how health care providers can support children to help them manage and cope with these experiences. Globally, there have been over 6 million deaths that have been attributed to COVID-19 and it's estimated that across the world, over a million children have lost a parent or custodial grandparent over the course of the pandemic. Further, in the United States, the death of a caregiver due to COVID-19 has disproportionately affected children from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds. As such, mental and physical health care providers are now tasked with helping children and families manage grief related to COVID-19 while also coping with their own losses.

Grief is the emotional, cognitive, functional, and behavioral reactions that we experience as a result of loss, whether that be the death of someone close to us or due to significant changes or losses in our lives. Although grief is a natural and universal experience, we all grieve in different ways and the pandemic itself has impacted the process of grief for adults and children alike. Specifically, due to COVID-19, many of us have experienced greater than normal losses, which have compounded. In addition to pandemic-related deaths and losses of social activities and support, many of us have lost our pre-pandemic sense of safety, and have experienced increased worry and stress related to fears of illness or death for ourselves or loved ones.

Let's consider the impact of COVID-19 related grief and loss through the example of Laura, who's a social worker providing mental health services to children in middle and high school settings. Over the past two years, Laura has experienced multiple personal losses and has struggled to help her clients cope with and manage their grief. Laura's mother, who she was very close to, died due to COVID-19 in early 2021. Since her mother died, Laura has found herself feeling constantly fatigued and hopeless, she often has difficulty sleeping, fully concentrating, and being mentally present at work and at home. She has multiple clients who have had loved ones die over the course of the pandemic and more who have struggled with the loss of their normal activities and feelings of safety. Many of her clients are expressing high levels of worry and sadness, feelings that Laura herself is also experiencing. Laura has begun to notice that she avoids directly discussing grief and loss with her clients, due to her own difficulties and concerns about how to best help her clients manage grief in this very uncertain time.

With Laura in mind, let's discuss tips for health care providers to help children manage grief related to COVID-19 death and loss.

Tip number one: it's important for providers to acknowledge and address their own grief. This is a unique time, in which we as providers are likely experiencing similar difficulties related to COVID-19 grief and loss, as are the children or clients that we serve. As such, to best help our clients, we must first make sure to manage our own grief. This may mean taking time to reflect on losses, it's also important to name and acknowledge the feelings that we have, and the impact losses have had on us. So for Laura, she may acknowledge her feelings and the loss of her mother in a pre-pandemic social and physical activity through self-reflection, journaling, or a commemorative activity such as the creation of a memorial garden or photo album with special memories of her mother. It's necessary for Laura to address and cope with her own grief to help her stop avoiding these topics and working with her clients.

Tip number two: it's important for health care providers to assess for a child's experience of grief or loss and consider how this may be impacting their emotional, behavioral, functional, and physical health. Assessment tools such as the UCLA/BYU Expanded Grief Inventory and the Characteristics, Attributions, and Response to Exposure to Death, Youth Version can be used to formally assess for grief-related difficulties. Even if not using formal assessment tools, it's important to keep in mind the many different ways that grief can present in children and to ask about the experience of loss when these difficulties are present. Laura may consider giving an assessment measure to the clients she knows have experienced the death of a loved one and be more direct in asking other clients about their losses over the last two years. Simply asking can go a long way, as avoiding talking about grief and loss may lead a child to feel that this is not an acceptable topic to discuss. It would be recommended for Laura to ask open-ended questions and follow the child's lead in these conversations, never forcing a child to discuss their grief. If you're interested in more specific tips related to talking with children about death and dying, please see our latest podcast episode on this topic.

Tip number three: as a healthcare provider, it can also be helpful to provide families with recommendations on establishing consistent routines which reinforce healthy sleep habits, such as routine bed and wake times, as well as eating habits, such as trying to facilitate healthy family meal time in the evenings as often as possible. This is a great recommendation for us as providers as well. For everyone, our routines and activities have at least temporarily, if not permanently, changed or ceased. Establishing routine times or days for individual as well as family activities, such as a family movie or game night every Friday, can help increase social support and decrease withdrawal. These routines can be especially important for children, by helping them regain a sense of safety and security.

Tip number four: although for many children and adults, grief reactions decline over time and become less intense, about 7 to 10% of people experience complicated or prolonged grief following the death of a loved one. Complicated or prolonged grief is usually present six months or more following the loss and can present as continued



difficulties accepting the loss, prolonged and intense yearning, persistent intrusive thoughts about death, avoidance of lost reminders, and strong persistent feelings of disbelief and anger. If Laura were to be experiencing this, it would be important for her to reach out for additional therapeutic support and consider evidence-based treatments, such as cognitive behavioral therapy for grief. Additionally, for her clients that may be experiencing complicated or prolonged grief, Laura can consider referrals for therapists providing treatment approaches such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy for children and adolescents, if this is an intervention she herself has not trained in. I hope that these four tips can help you feel more prepared in helping children manage grief over COVID-19 losses. For more ideas, check out our website in the video description. And we hope you continue to stay Well@Work.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.