

## HOW CAN I TELL IF A CHILD NEEDS COUNSELING

First of all, trust your instincts. If your gut feeling tells you a child needs additional support, work to get that help for him. Many of the signs and symptoms of complicated grief are the same responses we see in normal grief. What makes these “red flags” is a matter of degree. Fear or anger, for example, are normal grief reactions. *Persistent* or *prolonged* fear or anger, however, is symptomatic of unmet mourning needs. If the child is progressing in his or her grief journey, reactions should soften in intensity and duration over time.

Signs of Normal Grief	Signs of Complicated Grief or Clinical Depression
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually connect depressed feelings to the death.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often do not relate depressed feelings to any life event.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disbelief, denial, shock.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total denial of the reality of the death.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often openly angry.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May suppress anger. May complain and be irritable, but may not directly express anger. May be persistently angry and hostile.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of unreality, withdrawal from others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent withdrawal from family and friends.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disruption of typical behavior patterns or personality.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prolonged change in behavior or personality.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children respond to comfort and support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children often reject support.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can still experience moments of enjoyment in life.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often project a pervasive sense of doom.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adults can sense sadness and emptiness in child.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often projects a sense of hopelessness and chronic emptiness.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often has transient physical complaints.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May have chronic physical complaints or actual medical illness.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May express guilt over some aspect of the loss.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often have prolonged feelings of guilt over the death or generalized feelings of guilt.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-esteem temporarily impacted, but is intact.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Typically a deep loss of esteem. May use drugs and alcohol.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suicidal thoughts or actions.</li> </ul>

So once you determine a grieving child could benefit from counseling, how do you tell them? Talk to them with compassion and understanding. Many children and adults associate counseling as something for people who have something “wrong” with them. Assure the child that they are not crazy or abnormal. Explain that just as there are people like doctors and nurses who can help with physical pain, such as a broken arm, there are people that can help with the pain of grief.

References: Wolfelt, Alan, *Healing the Bereaved Child*, Companion Press, Fort Collins, Colorado  
 Simons, R.C., *Understanding Human Behavior in Health and Illness*, Williams and Wilkins, Baltimore, Maryland.

## Reactions Common Among Suicide Survivors

Sudden tragedies, especially those caused by suicide, suicide attempts, or violence, can leave survivors with some extremely complicated grief reactions. The following lists should not be considered comprehensive, but commonly observed reactions among survivors include:

- Feelings of rejection and abandonment
- Feelings of shame, humiliation, and dishonor
- Lowered self-esteem, shattered self-worth, feelings of inadequacy and failure
- Emotional withdrawal and acting-out associated with fears of intimacy/closeness with others
- Intense anger/rage
- Need to place blame (e.e., doctors, therapists, parents, etc.)
- Intense guilt because of perceived preventability (What if I would have...?)
- Concern for one's own suicidality (fear of generic transmission of predisposition toward suicide)
- The search for understanding. Not only "why" but "why did they do this to me?"

Reference: Rando, Therese (1993). *Treatment of Complicated Mourning*.

Notes: