



Helping Individuals With Developmental Disabilities Cope with Grief

Despite their cognitive limitations, the majority of individuals who have been diagnosed with a developmental disability will experience a variety of emotions about death and loss. Here are several recommendations that can help prepare these individuals with their process:

- ❖ What are their cultural/spiritual beliefs? This is important to know before discussing concepts associated with life after death, heaven, God, etc.
- ❖ Find a quiet, private place to tell them what has happened as soon as possible.
- ❖ Use words that are simple and avoid words that have more than one meaning. Using words that have more than one meaning can be frightening and confusing.
- ❖ Use real world examples, such as death of animals, plants, famous people, etc. Sharing about your own personal experience with loss can be very helpful.

Suggestions for after the loss has occurred:

- ❖ Allow them to experience their emotions.
- ❖ Encourage their questions and answer them honestly.
- ❖ Provide them with the opportunity to attend the funeral or memorial service. Explore ways in which they can be a part of this ritual.
- ❖ Allowing them an opportunity to choose some mementoes that they can keep may provide comfort and connection with their loved one
- ❖ Minimize change. Consistency and predictability can help provide security in a world that has become fragile and uncertain.
- ❖ Allow them to share their fears and remind them they are not alone.
- ❖ Talk about the future. Help them identify ways to stay connected with their loved one while they continue to move forward in their life.
- ❖ Be patient. It is common for bereaved individuals to tell and retell stories about their loved one. It is a part of adjusting to the reality of the loss.

Some individuals with developmental disabilities are not able to verbally express their emotions. Here are some behavioral indicators that may provide information about how the individual is adapting.

- ❖ Have their habits changed significantly?
- ❖ Has there been decreased work productivity?
- ❖ Does the person appear to be withdrawing?
- ❖ Have there been increased physical complaints?
- ❖ Have there been personality changes?

If you have questions about these changes, it may be helpful to seek professional assistance. Here are some resources:

San Diego Regional Center for Developmental Disabilities, Inc.
858-576-2996
www.sdrc.org

Exceptional Family Resource Center
1-800-281-8252

The ARC
817-261-6003
www.thearc.org

San Diego Hospice & Palliative Care
619-278-6371
www.sdhospice.org