

Grief and Loss

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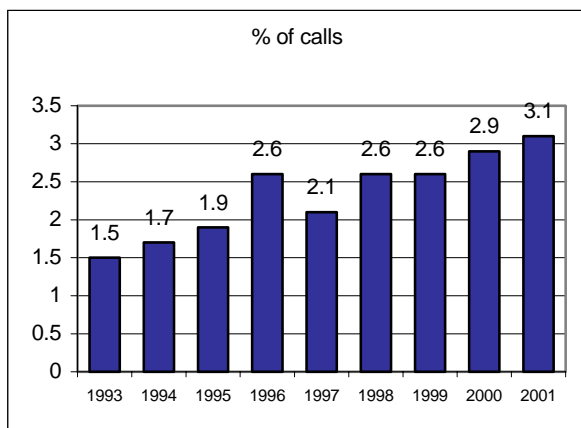
Definition

Any kind of grief response to death or loss regardless of intensity, for example, death of a relative, friend, pet, loss of significant possession, relationship, lifestyle, etc.

Change is pervasive in the lives of young people. Friends shift neighbourhoods, families move, relationships end and loved ones die. Grief is a universal reaction to the events of change and loss in the lives of children and adolescents. Young people confronted by loss often experience feelings of overwhelming sadness, helplessness, anxiety and sometimes confusion or anger. The intensity of these reactions varies depending on the nature of the loss - whether it is losing a favourite teddy bear, moving house, or the death of a parent.

Caller Information

Since KHL became a national service in May 1993, the proportion of counselling calls relating to grief and loss have steadily risen. The graph below details this trend. Around 2,500 calls about loss and grief are responded to each year.



Age and Gender

The majority of calls about grief and loss are from females (78%) and young people aged 10 to 14 years (48%). Males aged under 14 years make a greater proportion of calls about grief and loss than their female counterparts. (see following table). Anecdotal data suggests that many males become increasingly reluctant to talk about the losses in their lives as they move into adolescence and early adulthood. Preliminary research by KHL indicates that many young men have difficulty discussing and expressing their emotions, and are the group least likely to seek help.

AGE	FEMALE N=5,660	MALE N=1,596
5-9	12%	14%
10-14	45%	55%
15-18	43%	31%
Total	100%	100%

Young people living in rural and remote communities make a higher proportion of calls about loss and grief (40%) compared to all other concerns (35%). This may be due to the experience of loss being felt more broadly within smaller communities.

Grief is a significant issue for young Indigenous callers, who are responsible for 9% of grief-related calls - almost double the proportion of calls they make about all other concerns combined. Eighty percent of calls are from young people of Anglo-Australian background, 8% are of non-English speaking background and 3% of another English speaking background.

Nature of Calls

The death of a parent, pet, friend or grandparent are the most common themes in calls about grief. However, family separation or divorce, changing neighbourhoods, relationship break-ups and exposure to traumatic events (such as those in America on September 11, 2001) are also significant causes of grief amongst young people.

The need for young people to find meaning in loss cannot be understated with 66% of callers either wanting to talk about their experiences of grief or seeking information to help make sense of their loss. A further 24% of young people call in acute distress following a recent loss. The remaining 10% of callers are experiencing long term distress or are unable to resume their normal lifestyle as a result of grief (see figure over).

While younger children tend to seek information or need to talk through their experiences, older adolescents call about more acute or long term grief responses.

Responding to Calls About Grief and Loss

Research suggests that adults need to gently encourage children to talk about their grief. Children usually cope more easily with their feelings of loss when they are allowed to participate in the unfolding experience of grief and mourning. Sharing the reality of what is happening allows a child to begin to understand and cope with the experience (Despelder & Strickland, 1996).

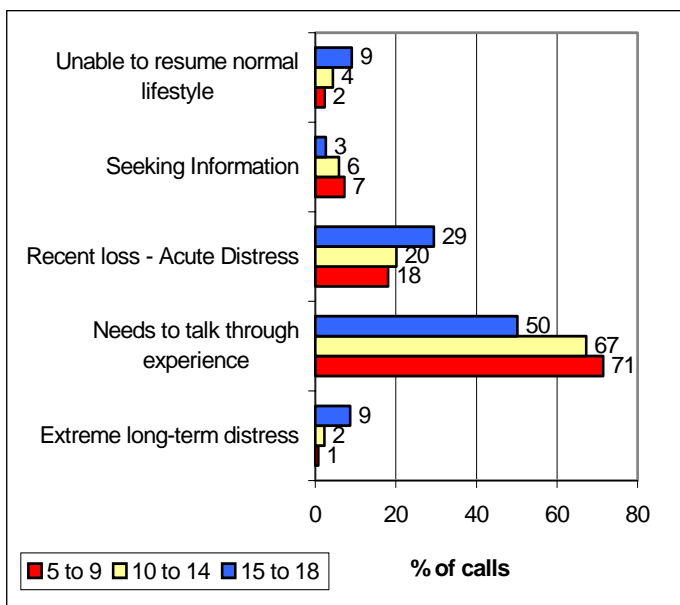
There is a growing appreciation of diversity in how children and adolescents respond to loss with an abandonment of the idea that there is a single grief process that fits everybody or that there is a single best way to grieve (Rosenblatt, 2001). However, helping young people to make meaning is important in rebuilding their world following loss (Neimeyer, 2001).

Supporting Young People Experiencing Loss

- Listen carefully.
- Show that you have heard what has been said.
- Give young people permission and space to express their feelings.
- Avoid dismissing or minimising their concerns.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Revisit issues as often as necessary.
- Do not avoid mentioning the person or pet that has died.
- Avoid overloading young people with too much information.
- Use words such as “died” or “dead” rather than “sleeping” or “gone away”.
- Be patient, give young people time to make their own meaning of the loss.
- Remember that there is no right or wrong way for young people to grieve.

References

- Despelder, L., & Strickland, A. (1996). *The last dance* (4th ed.). California: Mayfield.
- Neimeyer, R. (2001). *Meaning, reconstruction and the experience of loss*. Washington DC: APA.
- Rosenblatt, P. (2001). The future of grief research and practice. *Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement*, 4(2), 28-30.



Qualitative analysis reveals that long term or incapacitating grief is often precipitated by the loss of a parent indicating the centrality of parents in the lives of young people.

Outcome of Calls

A unique feature of KHL is that young people can reconnect with their counsellor for as long as they need to as they work through their concerns. This is particularly helpful for children and adolescents experiencing loss with 22% of these callers agreeing to talk with their counsellor again at a specific date and time.

Partly due to the number of young people who reconnect with their counsellor, the proportion of grief calls not requiring a referral is quite high (88%). However, approximately 4% of children and young people are referred to other support services with an additional 1% given non-specific referrals to a local doctor, teacher or school counsellor. The most common referrals are to organisations offering face to face grief counselling such as Lifeline, community health centres and Relationships Australia.

The remaining 7% of young people are unable to be referred due there being no appropriate services in their area or because they finish the call before a referral can be given. Unfortunately there are few services available that specifically work with young people in relation to grief and loss, particularly in regional areas.

Based on 1999 to 2001 data.

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For more information

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