

The Grief Rock

Guidance for parents, caregivers, or therapists

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HOW TO USE THE GRIEF ROCK TO TALK ABOUT GRIEF

The Grief Rock is meant to offer a simple framework for talking to children about grief. It can be difficult for children to articulate how they feel, regardless of age. The metaphor of the grief rock can simplify these discussions and provide a quick tool to gauge how a child is doing.

The child can use this metaphor to talk about grief as a pebble, a small rock, or a boulder. You can ask the child, “How big is your rock today?” Or, if they don’t want to verbally express how they are feeling, you can ask them, “Can you draw your grief rock today?”

The metaphor of the rock can also be used to talk about acceptance. You can discuss how they don’t control whether the rock shows up or not, or how big it is, but they do control what they do about it. Do they carry this heavy boulder and try to continue with their normal routine? Do they try to hide this heavy rock, so no one else can see it? Or do they honor the fact that the rock has shown up, and learn how to sit with their feelings?

You can prompt a child to make a list of things they can do when the rock is various sizes. Here is an example:

- Pebble: play with my friends, go to soccer practice, have family dinners.
- Rock: play with my best friend, skip practice, draw out my feelings, cry.
- Boulder: cuddle with someone, sit outside, listen to music, cry, shout.

Developing a plan gives the child permission to put the brakes on when grief suddenly shows up. It teaches them to honor the feelings they are experiencing as they experience them. It also teaches them to accept the waves of grief and let those feelings ride through them, without suppressing or denying them.

The book is also meant to acknowledge the non-linear stages of grief. Grief doesn't come in neatly packaged stages that children can work through, one at a time. It can be disorienting for a child to feel good one week and deeply saddened the next. It can be hard to understand why their mood suddenly shifts from happiness to anger. It is important to let a child know that there is no right or wrong way to grieve, and that all emotions are okay. We want a child to understand that the waves of grief, and the varied emotions that come with it, will move in and out like ocean waves, and will get easier to navigate over time.

CHECK FOR ERRONEOUS BELIEFS

With grief comes other complicated emotions, like blame and guilt. Often kids (and adults too) will find a reason to blame themselves for the death. This can be anything from, "If I had been home, I could have stopped it," to thoughts like, "They died because I wasn't good enough."

These beliefs can add another layer of depression, self-hate, and hopelessness. It can also impact ongoing relationships. It is helpful to fully explore the child's understanding of why the death happened, and reframe any cognitive distortions they might have that place the blame on their shoulders.

GETTING A CHILD HELP FOR GRIEF

It can be incredibly helpful for a child to be around other children who are experiencing grief. This can help normalize the experience. You can find a directory of children's grief support programs at <https://childrengrieve.org/find-support>. I recommend that, if possible, you find a support group that represents the theme of your child's loss. Some grief groups will specialize in losses related to a parent, sibling, suicide, overdose, or homicide.

Individual therapy can also aid in a child's processing of their loss. Therapy and support groups cater to two different needs. Individual therapy can help a child walk through their emotions and reframe any developing beliefs that are adding guilt or shame to the grief. Support groups are key in normalizing the experience and connecting kids with others who have had similar losses.

GRIEF EXERCISES TO DO AT HOME OR IN THERAPY SESSIONS

It is helpful to create an environment that allows discussion about the loss. As parents, carers, or therapists, we want to facilitate conversations, but not

force them. At home, we can do this by openly talking about our loved one, and by keeping pictures of them around. It is okay to cry together, and to let your child know that all emotions are welcomed.

Grief exercises can help encourage a more open discussion about the loss. Below are a couple of ideas:

GRIEF ROCK

Have the child draw a picture of a rock and then ask them to fill this in with things they loved about the one who died. These can be words or drawings.

GRIEF STUFFED ANIMALS

It can be helpful to have a tangible representation of the loved one. This can offer a concrete item for the child to hold, hug, and talk to. If you have belongings from the loved one, you can have a stuffed animal or bear wear them. When the child is upset, you can prompt them to cuddle this.

I hope this book has offered you another creative way to explain grief to a child. Grief can be a confusing and painful time, but behind deep grief is also deep love. My hope is that we can celebrate that love, even as we ride the waves of grief.

Natasha Daniels