Understanding Multidimensional Grief Theory

The model is multidimensional along the horizontal axis
- Grief is generally a natural response to the death of a loved one
- Unlike other psychological issues, there is such a thing as adaptive grief, which can make it challenging to identify bereaved youth who are in need of intervention

The model is multidimensional along the vertical axis
- Children's grief reactions typically fall within three conceptual domains
- After a death, children often grapple with a range of bereavement-related challenges.
- Grief reactions can vary in their helpfulness in facilitating adaptive adjustment to death

Multidimensional Grief Model

(Adapted with permission from Layne et al., 2019*)

Separation Distress

Existential/Identity Distress

Circumstance-Related Distress

Maladaptive/Not Helpful

Adaptive/Helpful

Separation Distress

“I miss my mom so much it hurts my heart.”
- Missing the person who died, longing for their return
- Most easily recognized grief reaction
- Common to all ages and all manners of death
- Can lead to clinically significant distress

Existential/Identity Distress

“I don't know how I'm going to get through life without my dad.”
- Diminished sense of life meaning, purpose, or identity
- More common among adolescents compared to children
- Less understood or recognized as Separation Distress
- Can appear as apathy, aimlessness, resignation, nihilism, or despair
- Can manifest as feeling isolated or “different” from other kids

Circumstance-Related Distress

“Every time I see a photo of my brother, all I can think about is the night he got killed and how I wish I could have stopped it.”
- Distress over how the person died
- More likely to arise after traumatic or tragic deaths
- Can also arise in response to anticipated deaths involving the slow, progressive deterioration of a loved one's physical health

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