



# Guilt and Shame

## Take-Home Message

Shame and guilt are common reactions among grieving children—and grieving adults as well. School professionals who understand why these reactions occur can take steps to create a safe environment for children that encourages them to express their thoughts and feelings. Speaking directly to children and normalizing these reactions are important first steps in helping children adjust to a loss.

## Magical Thinking

Young children see themselves as the center of their universe. In their view, things happen because of them. They often assume their thoughts, feelings, and actions can influence unrelated events. This is called magical thinking.

Adults sometimes encourage magical thinking in children. They may suggest children wish for something good to happen in the world, or urge them to behave well so something good follows.

Magical thinking is helpful at times. It allows children to feel less vulnerable in a world they do not actually control. But when tragedy occurs, this same type of thinking can cause children to feel profoundly responsible for something over which they had no influence. If they wish for a war to end and the war continues, is that their fault? If being good resulted in presents for Christmas, did their unkind thought lead to a neighbor's death?

Adolescents and adults engage in their own forms of magical thinking about death. People sometimes take some responsibility for a death because it helps them believe they can prevent other deaths. They only need to take a step they

failed to take before. For example, someone might think, “If I call home several times a day to check on my mom to be sure she is okay, she won’t die like my dad did when I forgot to check on him.”

The alternative to this kind of thinking is accepting that we have limited influence over these events. This can leave us feeling helpless. It is frightening to realize someone we care about could die at any time, no matter what we do.

However, guilt about a death makes it difficult to cope with the loss. The solutions that come from guilt (such as calling a parent every hour) generally do not solve problems. Rather, they create more difficulties.

## Children, Guilt, and Death

When something bad happens in children’s worlds, they often assume they have caused the problem by acting badly. They may worry about the possibility that they will repeat their bad behavior and cause the death of someone else close.

Guilt is more likely when the preexisting relationship with the person who died was ambivalent or conflicted. This would include when a parent was abusive, absent, mentally ill, drug involved, or incarcerated. It might also stem from developmentally common situations—for example, an adolescent who clashed with her father’s attempts to limit her independence.

When a death is preceded by a lengthy illness, children (and adults) may have had moments when they wondered whether it might not be best for the person to die and be relieved of the physical suffering. This would also end some of their own emotional suffering as they anticipate the death and adjust to the needs of the sick person. These children may feel guilty for wishing for the death of someone they loved.

Sometimes, children may express persistent guilt. In some instances, there may be some logical reason to experience guilt feelings—for example, if a child accidentally discharged a firearm, killing a sibling. It is important to involve mental health providers, either from the school or the community, to help such children address their feelings. Through counseling they may come to appreciate that their guilt is unwarranted, or be helped to forgive themselves if they contributed to an action that resulted in a death.

## Children, Shame, and Death

Another common reaction children have to a death is shame. They understand from an early age that questions about death



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make adults uncomfortable. They may see that their questions or comments about the deceased make a family member cry. Children may conclude that they have done something naughty in broaching the subject. They are likely to feel guilty or ashamed about their behavior, and then keep their questions and feelings to themselves. This may provide reassurance to the adults in their lives that they are fine even though they continue to have questions and feelings about the death.

Children may also conclude that the person who died did something wrong that resulted in his or her death. They may then feel ashamed of their relationship with the deceased. Deaths that carry an additional stigma, such as deaths involving suicide, drug overdose, or criminal activity, are therefore even more difficult to discuss.

Children and adults may choose not to even inform the school that a significant death has occurred, in part related to feelings of shame or embarrassment.

When children withhold information about a loss or expressions of grief out of shame, they will be even more isolated in their grief.

## Bring It Up Explicitly

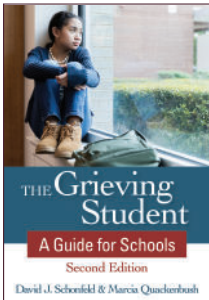
It's helpful to discuss guilt and shame explicitly with grieving children. Ask about the kinds of thoughts, questions, or feelings they have been having. Describe the kinds of reactions related to guilt and shame that people often have.



Normalize the experience of guilt and shame while creating a safe environment where children can speak honestly about their experiences.

## Use Guidance From Other Modules

Concepts of Death addresses children's understanding of death in more detail.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Guide for Schools* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

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