

# HOW TO SUPPORT AN AUTISTIC EXPERIENCING GRIEF

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Unfortunately, grief and loss are painful parts of life. All people grieve in their own unique ways. Grief can be complex or prolonged, and how we experience grief and loss may change over time. It is important to acknowledge that any type of loss can cause grief. Loss of a favorite toy or routine as well as the loss of a house, school, pet, or loved one (like a friend, family member, or favorite fictional character) can all feel significant. Loss can be caused by death but it can also be a result of change in the environment, like a move, graduation or changing grade levels, or even falling asleep and missing out on an anticipated event. All people need support and understanding when they are experiencing the challenges of grief. Autistic grief may outwardly look different than others, there may be anticipatory grief or a delayed experience of grief, and we may feel grief and loss around different things than others do. Connection and acknowledgement of the event can be helpful to an autistic who is experiencing grief and loss.

## AUTISTICS WHO ARE GRIEVING

- may have difficulty being able to connect with or identify their emotions.
- may or may not cry or show the emotions that you or others expect.
- might experience an increase in some autistic traits, like sensory differences, meltdowns and shutdowns.
- might engage in behaviors they haven't done in a while.
- might find it harder to organize, plan and concentrate on tasks.
- may have difficulty understanding what others expect of them in situations such as hospital visits and funerals.

## COMMUNICATING ABOUT THE EVENT

- Understand that autistics may not want to speak about their feelings and may express feelings instead through movement, sounds, art, music, and scripts.
- When talking about the event with an autistic use direct language and avoid euphemisms that might be taken literally, (don't say that someone has gone to a better place, or gone to sleep rather than telling them they have died.)
- Allow plenty of time for the autistic to process the information.
- Tailor information to their level of understanding.
- Explain that they may see family members acting unusually.

## THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT

- Autistic people need to be included in rituals and routines around bereavement.
- Acknowledge that autistics may have deep connections with objects, plants, animals, and characters. The loss of these things is significant and painful.
- Talk to the autistic person about what they are going through and help prepare them for what might happen. Books and movies of what to expect can be helpful.
- Engaging in an autistic's interests with them can help create familiarity and a sense of stabilization during this experience.
- Consistency with people, places, and routines can support regulation when we are experiencing grief or loss. However, it can also be helpful to decrease unnecessary expectations or activities that increase our levels of stress.
- While talk therapy can be helpful to some, expressive therapies like art therapy, music therapy, and sandtray therapy can help when we don't have the words to describe our pain.
- Support autistics with physical outlets, especially during surges of emotion.
- Connecting with other autistics can be comforting during these experiences.
- During these times we may need extra help taking care of the physical part (nutrition, sleep and exercise). Please help support these areas with patience and compassion.