



How to Support Individuals on the Autism Spectrum Suffering Through Grief and Loss

Understanding how to offer support in response to loss and grief is a critical part of the provision of effective [autism therapy](#).

Grief and loss are inevitable parts of life, and everyone goes through the grieving process in their own way, at their own pace. Importantly, this process can be made somewhat easier when we have access to the right support. After all, grief is often incredibly complex and has numerous layers and facets that make themselves known at different times.

Importantly, the loss comes in many forms, all of which can cause grief. For example, losing a home or a favourite toy can be just as significant as losing a routine, education centre, friend, or family member. Crucially, everyone needs both understanding and support when feelings of grief and loss are being felt.

Even though research into how those on the autism spectrum experience loss and grief is ongoing, autistic individuals are likely to show significant behavioural changes and, in many cases, will behave in ways that are unlike what you might expect.

How might loss and grief affect people with autism?

When individuals on the autistic spectrum experience loss, they may demonstrate feelings of anger and lose many of the skills they once displayed. People with autism who have experienced loss and grief have noted that their executive functioning skills were affected, making it more difficult for them to concentrate on specific tasks and organize their time.

Other people with autism may experience a reduction in their overall levels of self-confidence, and their eating and/or sleeping patterns may change significantly. Additionally, they may display an increased sense of restlessness and become increasingly dependent on one or more people.

Some people with autism may display aggressive and/or exciting behaviors, or find it extremely difficult to grieve at all. People on the autism spectrum can sometimes find the concept of loss difficult to understand and may need help or encouragement to display their feelings. It is vital to acknowledge that while a person may not appear to be affected, this should never be assumed to be the case.

Autism Therapy for those experiencing loss

For individuals who find loss to be an overwhelming feeling, affording them both space and time to express those thoughts and feelings is essential. Some people with autism may experience feelings of guilt or extreme concern, alongside an array of other cognitive responses.

Identifying these responses is critical to the delivery of the correct support. For example, if a person is unsure of what is expected of them, it may be difficult for them to seek out the appropriate assistance or information to help them manage events, thoughts, and feelings. Vitally, outward displays of emotion may not be indicative of a person's true feelings. This is because people with autism may experience a scrambling of emotions, whereby they may respond with laughter when others may be tearful.

This certainly doesn't mean they are experiencing feelings of happiness, and support workers must never make assumptions. Instead, seeking to understand and encourage the person to explore their emotions is vital.

It is also important to acknowledge the potential for delayed reactions to occur. Several behavioural responses can occur, including acting out physically, increasing self-stimulating or repetitive behaviours, and irritability. As many of these behaviours are common responses to loss, they are almost expected in the immediate aftermath of events. However, as people with autism can experience processing delays, these behaviours may only become apparent several months after the event. As a result, attributing a precise explanation to these changes can be challenging, which is why understanding each individual's experiences is critical.

Some of the most effective strategies include:

— Reassuring and affirming

Validating thoughts and feelings, offering consistency and displaying patience.

— Routine and Information

The provision of information and/or routine can provide a level of comfort that cannot be achieved in other ways.

— Social Narratives

Personalized narratives can help to explain complex situations and specific details of expected actions and events.

Although loss and grief can be difficult to talk about, understanding how to offer the most [beneficial autism therapy and support](#) can be life changing.