

## How to help a child live through losses caused by the war

Advice from psychologists for parents

*Today there is not a Ukrainian child that wouldn't live through the trauma of loss. Even a "minor" loss from adults' point of view could leave a deep trace in a child's soul. Healing is possible, though special conditions are needed. Ukrainian and world psychologists that specialize in working with trauma tell how exactly the closed one can help their child.*

[According to the data](#) of UN Refugee Agency of August 23rd, more than 11.5 mln of Ukrainians had to leave their homes, most of them are children and women. There are [more than](#) 6.6 mln internally displaced people in Ukraine and out of them 66% are families with children. Forced evacuation or living in danger (no place in Ukraine can be called safe) caused that every child had some kind of loss. Someone lost their usual life and environment, the others – their homes, some lost a close one because of the war.

On the one hand, such non-childish challenges can leave a trauma that would affect the rest of the child's life. On the other hand, [recent psychological research shows](#) that children are emotionally flexible, and it increases their vitality and healing ability. The key role is to have a close relationship with the surrounding world, in particular, with a family. At the same time parents themselves live through a huge stress during the war, and hence might not always have a resource for support. In this case it is worth asking for professional psychological help. Even if a child doesn't have clear indicators of trauma working with an expert can become a "psychological vitamin", prevention of disorders in the future. Among other organizations, "The Voices of Children" Charitable Foundation provides psychosocial support for the children of war and their parents. More than 30 psychologists collaborate with the Fund that conduct art therapy sessions, individual and group sessions at six locations in Ukraine. Check, if there is a Fund [location](#) next to you, and if not, you can ask for help [online](#). Also we asked experts to share their working tools that will help parents support their child in hard times.

### Normal reaction for not normal events

The psyche of any person, especially a child usually doesn't have an experience of overcoming war traumas. That's why children and their parents now deal with emotions that they never had. Reaction to death of a closed person or loss of an important part of their life is individual, and overall for each of us, children in particular, is going through five stages of living through the grief according to Kübler-Ross which change each other one by one. They are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance.

"Usually, an intense grieving stage of a child lasts for a month or a month and a half; a calmer period of longing is around three months" - explains Liudmyla Romanenko, a psychologist that collaborates with the fund "The voices of children", a supervisor of the Center of psychosocial rehabilitation of National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. "A child can cry, constantly talk about one's loss, or vice versa, can become silent, reserved. Children of younger age might often have regressive behaviour, when a kid has a "rollback" in development: they ask to stay at mother's hands, start pronouncing the words in a wrong, childish way. A child can become disorganized, some might have enuresis and nightmares. All of these are mostly norm variations".

### Psychological vitamin for a child

What should parents be concerned about? From the psychologists' point of view, there are three most concerning symptoms:

1. **Unusual behavior of the child.** For example, if a child that is calm in general becomes aggressive, nervous. Or vice versa an energetic child becomes weak, refuses to take part in activities that liked before.
2. **“Freezing”.** It seems like a child doesn’t live through the loss: they don’t cry, don’t talk about it. At this state they “hang”, numb: they can stare at one point, not react when addressing them.
3. **Aggression and auto aggression.** If a child shows unusual physical or verbal aggression for the environment or themselves (inflicts self-harm, bites nails to blood). It might be a sign of a deep compression of the trauma.

Liudmyla Romanenko continues: “According to my experience and observations of my colleagues, there are around 20-25% of children with really concerning symptoms. They need complex and deep help from specialists. The rest of 75-80% will cope with the trauma by themselves if beneficial conditions are created. It means to give a child an opportunity to live through their grief, give time to cry. Art therapy and spontaneous drawing sessions are extremely help, that’s what I call a “psychological vitamin”. In my opinion, it is needed for every child nowadays. Therefore, don’t neglect an opportunity to join a group of psychological support, don’t wait for concerning symptoms to come up”.

### **Each grief is unique**

When they talk about losses at war, usually they mean death. Though it’s important to understand that for a child a loss of a pet, separation with friends and family might be a grief as great as death of a closed person. “Things that parents consider not really important might be a true catastrophe for a child, - says Liudmyla Romanenko. - For example, I had a girl in my therapy practice that was so worried about the death of her pet, a golden fish, that she started to have depression indicators and fear of death. At the same time, the child didn’t share her feelings with any of her family members because she thought that they wouldn’t be interested in that. During therapy we had a farewell ritual and a symbolic burial of the goldfish, and gradually the girl’s state improved. It is very important to speak up about the pain and legitimize feelings. It is the first step for healing. No one can deprecate child’s feelings, tell something like: “Stop, it’s just a goldfish”. Such words, especially from a closed person, can wound not less as the loss itself”.

### **The secrets traumatize**

Sometimes adults believe that it is better not to tell a child about the death of someone close to them or relatives, as it would only traumatize a child. “In fact, the things we hide traumatize and destroy us from inside. Children of any age feel the atmosphere of grief in a family. When they don’t understand the reason behind it (no one told them about grandmother’s or father’s death), they start to blame themselves, - explains Liudmyla Romanenko. - On the contrary, when we talk about the loss, we live it through together, then the grief doesn’t have such power over us. And relationships in the family become genuine and warm”.

That is why it is extremely important to tell a child honestly that there is grief in the family. Of course, it is crucial to act according to the age of the child. Preschool children might not understand what death is, so it is essential to explain this to them according to the family’s spiritual traditions. Also, it is important to involve a child in a farewell ritual, and again it’s important to take into account their age and circumstances. If a child

wants to go to the funeral, it's important to explain to them how everything is going to happen. If the topic of a funeral frightens a child, they can be involved in a farewell ritual in other ways (memorial dinner, common prayer, etc.)

Even if you haven't told children about the death of a close person or a pet at once for some reason, one can and should do it later.

## Healing rituals

Close trust relationships have extraordinary healing power. Simple daily things can help a child go through a grieving stage, let go of pain, and finally become stronger. [Linda Goldman](#) is an author of many books about therapy of the children's trauma of loss, she has a Fellow of Thanatology degree. During the last 35 years Linda Goldman had been working as a consultant and therapist of grief. She emphasizes: "Very often adults rely on the myth that children are too little to feel grief. It is an extremely harmful myth. If a child can love, they can grieve as well". Linda Goldman offered our readers the following simple and effective support methods that can be applied by parents or other close adults.

- **Let the child speak.** We can cope with the things we are able to talk about. Even more, children have better self-awareness and are able to better recognize their own feelings when they talk them through. A child can remember and share about a person that died or their lost house again and again. Allow them to tell their story as much as they need to.
- **Don't be shy with your feelings.** The process of living through and sharing grief by an adult allows that adult to become a role model for a child. In fact, if a child has never seen how the mother is crying over father's death, it may traumatise them and "freeze" their feelings. Allow yourself and a child to grieve together.
- **Create a memory box.** It can be even a simple shoe box that children can decorate. A child can put valuable things inside that are left from a close person, or photos or drawings of memories about peaceful life. Also, one can create a book of memories - it is a collection of drawings or written thoughts and feelings. This memory box allows children to live through their memories safely.
- **Be attentive to memorable dates** connected with a dead person. A child that lost one's father might feel especially sensitive, for example, on Father's Day, when everyone in the class is preparing a postcard or gifts for their fathers. It is important to find a way to involve a child in these activities. For example, one can write a gratitude letter to a father and then light up a candle in the classroom to commemorate the father.
- **Engage in art therapy.** Painting, sculpting, sand therapy, and role play are tools for expression that allow children to live through and safely transform their feelings and thoughts about the loss.

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