

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

Grief, loss, and big changes: supporting processing and regulation

Grandma dies. The Saturday worker leaves. You move. Your autistic adult was silent at the funeral and is now, three months later, refusing broccoli and waking at 3 a.m. This is the post about the six-month window and what to do inside it.

BY JIM PALASTY · 12 MIN READ · FAMILY SUPPORT

6 mo

GRIEF WINDOW

Observable behavioral responses to bereavement in adults with IDD commonly persist six months or longer. Prepare accordingly.

How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 1

Name it in her language



STEP 2

Bridge the routine



STEP 3

Watch the six months

Types of loss and the supports they need

Death of loved one	Social story. Funeral prep. Memory object.
Staff or worker leaving	Farewell photo. Note. Gradual handoff.
Move to new home	Photo tour. Object continuity. Practice visits.
Case manager change	Introduction visit. Written history. Patience.
Pet death	Concrete language. Memorial. Burial when possible.
Routine change	Advance calendar. Rehearsal. Reason.
Diagnosis loss	Named at level she can process. Care team present.
Ambiguous loss	Distance, illness, decline. Name it repeatedly.

A STORY WE KNOW



Grace was 38 when her grandmother died. Grace had visited her grandmother every Sunday for twenty-two years. Grace did not cry at the funeral. Grace did not cry that week. Three months later Grace stopped sleeping through the night and started refusing broccoli, which was her grandmother's dish. Her mother printed the photo of Grace and her grandmother from the pantry doorway and taped it above Grace's plate. Grace ate the broccoli. She still does.

GRIEF KEEPS ITS OWN CALENDAR

What matters, at a glance

Language for grief

Sad. Miss. Not here. Never coming back. Concrete words. Not she went to sleep.

Visual supports

Photos. Timeline. Social story. Objects to hold. AAC device with the new vocabulary programmed.

Delayed response

Autistic adults often show grief weeks or months after the event, not in the hour after. Behavior change in month three is grief, not regression.

Routine anchors

Bedtime. Meal times. Favorite show. Weekly ritual. Do not remove them during grief. Add to them.

Watch window

Sleep, appetite, stimming, aggression, elopement. Track weekly for six months after any major loss.

Attend the ritual

Funerals, memorials, staff goodbyes. She belongs there. Prepare for it. Do not exclude her to protect her.

BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Social story on the change | ☐ Photo or memory object she can hold |
| ☐ AAC device with new grief vocabulary | ☐ Visual timeline of what happens next |
| ☐ Sensory grounding tools (weighted, noise, chewy) | ☐ Written history of the person or place lost |
| ☐ List of her people who know what happened | ☐ Log for behavior over the next six months |

YOUR MOVE

When something big changes, here is how you support her through it

- 1 Tell her, in her language, before she hears it from someone else.
- 2 Use concrete words. Died. Not here. Not coming back. Moved. Left.
- 3 Build the social story that day. Read it with her three times before the event.
- 4 Keep the routine anchors. Bedtime, meal, favorite show. Do not remove them.
- 5 Attend the ritual with her. Prepare her step by step. Give her exit permission.
- 6 Track for six months. Sleep, food, behavior. Address changes as grief, not regression.

Grief is not a problem to be fixed. It is a passage to walk beside her.

RESOURCES NAMED IN THIS POST

carolgraysocialstories.com · <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jim Palasty is the founder of OASIS for Autism and a single father of an adult autistic daughter in Michigan.