

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT



The death of someone close is extremely painful for everyone, and as a parent it can be difficult to know how to support your child.

If you are the parent or carer of a bereaved child or young person and you share the bereavement, it is important that whilst you are supporting your child or young person that you are being supported as well. In order to support your bereaved child or young person you need to safeguard your emotional, mental and physical well being.

Ensure that as you encourage your child or young person to talk about their feelings that you talk to them about how you are feeling too. Don't try to put on a brave face if this is not how you feel because your child or young person may try and emulate this. If you are not being honest with each other about your emotions and how you are coping and this can be problematic later on, you could struggle to progress together.

Bereavement and grief can begin before the death of a loved one and children and young people will be hugely affected by what is going on around them if someone they love has fallen ill or are older relatives. They will have picked up worries and fears about the possibility that someone they love and depend on may die. For children who have already been bereaved, anxiety may be worse.

How you can help a young person who is worried about someone dying

- Talk honestly with your children about both facts and emotions. Don't overload children and consider their age and understanding. With a younger child you may need to give information in small chunks. Talking about the situation and about the possibility of death and dying is an ongoing conversation.
- Ask what they know, and be reassuring. Be honest about the fact that, very sadly people do die, and this is natural. It's OK to let them know if you don't know the answers to some of their questions.
- Don't make promises ('Grandma will be fine') but reassure them that they are loved and supported. Let them know about any plans for what might happen if one of the family gets ill. Children feel empowered when they know what is happening.
- It can help to keep to a routine, especially when everything has been disrupted. Structured days with regular mealtimes, school work, breaks, playtime and bedtime can help younger children happy and healthy. Help them get some exercise even if they can't leave the house. Help them keep in contact with friends and relatives over the phone or internet.
- At the same time don't be hard on yourself or set unrealistic goals about what you can do under exceptional circumstances. Try to make sure you all get some time apart, and time to relax. Where possible, let children and young people make some choices about what they are doing, as this may help give them some sense of control over their lives.



Things to remember concerning children and grief.

- No bereaved child or young person will respond to the death of someone close in the same way.
- Keep the structure of the bereaved child or young person's day / night as routine as possible.
- Allow the bereaved child or young person to say how they feel and do not be offended if they are angry with you or do not want to talk.
- Give the bereaved child or young person the time to explore their grief and support them as they mourn.
- Do not feel that you have failed if you need to seek professional help for the bereaved child or young person. You are doing the right thing.
- Put in place appropriate boundaries if a grieving child or young person is hurting themselves or others and explain why such boundaries are necessary.
- Do not dismiss a bereaved child or young person's real or perceived illness.
- Talk things through with them in an open and honest way, remembering to listen.

Things to remember for older children and young people

- A bereaved young person may appear to be grieving like an adult but they are not an adult and should be treated as a young person
- The bereaved young person shouldn't be burdened with tasks that a responsible adult can undertake.
- Grieving young people may prefer to speak with their friends or people outside of the immediate family about the death. This should be encouraged.
- Due to the developmental changes that a young person will be undergoing, the emotions related to the death of someone close may be very intense.
- The young person needs to be encouraged to express how they are feeling and the emotions they are encountering.
- Regressive behaviour may occur within the bereaved young person.
- If a young person is self medicating or self harming as a response to their grief professional advice should be sought.

Reactions

Children and young people may react in a number of ways to the death of someone close. Not everyone will go through all stages, some may be skipped or some may progress and regress e.g. from guilt, back to anger etc. It's not linear and some go through processes quicker than others. There is no set time limit to grieving, but they may experience:

- Shock
- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Guilt
- Depression
- Acceptance



Shock

For many young people and children shock is the first response when learning that someone close has died. The way in which shock is demonstrated by a bereaved child or young person varies and they could show reactions such as carrying on as normal, laughing, dismissing as a joke, tidying up or displaying robotic behaviour.

How Can I Help?

- Try not to appear visibly alarmed if a child or young person's response seems inappropriate to you. Remember shock can manifest in many different ways.
- Reassure the child or young person that any feelings of numbness and disbelief that they are experiencing and the inability to accept that someone close has died is normal.
- When explaining to a child or young person that someone has died try to keep your language clear and simple. Tell them the truth in a way that they can understand and is appropriate to their level of comprehension.
- Reassure the child or young person that you are there for them and that you will listen to them and answer their questions.

Denial

Denial manifests so that the child or young person does not have to accept or believe that their loved one has died. Denial as a response to bereavement can be witnessed when a child or young person does not want to leave a certain place like home or a hospital ward for fear of leaving the person who has died behind.

Denial as a response to bereavement is useful to the child or young person as it gives them time to pursue quests to relocate the person who has died and puts off the inevitability of accepting that their loved one will not be coming back.

How can I help?

- Acknowledge that bereaved children and young people will need time to process the death of someone close and that they may not appear to accept that the person has died.
- Talk openly to the child or young person. Let them know that they can talk about what has happened and won't get in trouble for asking questions relating to the death.
- If your child or young person appears to be searching for the person who has died, gently explain to them, in language appropriate to their age and level of understanding that the person won't be coming back.
- Respect the child or young person's denial is a protective mechanism and should dissolve in time.



Anger

Bereaved children and young people, depending on their age and level of comprehension, can find it difficult to understand their emotions and articulate how they are feeling, which can lead to anger.

Anger can manifest itself in various ways according to the child or young person's understanding of death at the time of the bereavement. Younger children may have tantrums and become aggressive towards others; older children might become disruptive at school and get in to fights with other children.

A bereaved teenager might turn to alcohol or drugs in an attempt to placate the rage they feel or they might become involved in offending and become known to the police.

Anger is an understandable response to bereavement and it is something that the majority of children and young people will encounter as they grieve.

How can I help?

- If a child or young person's anger is causing them to hurt themselves or others explain to them that it is OK to feel angry but not OK to hurt themselves or other people.
- Encourage the child or young person to vent their anger towards a pillow or to go for a run. Anything that will allow the child or young person to channel their anger in a safe way can be used.
- Reassure the child or young person that it is OK to feel anger towards the person who has died and that this is a natural response and not something they should feel guilty about.
- If the child or young person's anger is directed towards you, try not to take it personally. Often children and young people will direct their anger at the person they feel closest too. By remaining constant and not getting upset by the child or young person's anger you are reinforcing the fact that you will be there for them no matter what.

Bargaining

For example, a child might be heard to bargain with God, "Please God, if you bring my sister back I promise I'll be good for mummy and daddy".

Bargaining is the child or young person's desire to turn back the clock to the time when the deceased person was still alive. For example, a child might be heard to bargain with God, "Please God, if you bring my sister back I promise I'll be good for mummy and daddy". Bargaining be a tool for distraction, distracting the young person or child from the pain of reality.

How can I help?

- Gently explain to the child or young person that there is nothing that anyone can say or do that will bring the person who has died back.



- Provide the child or young person with the reassurance that they do not need to try and be perfect in order to bring the person who has died back.
- Understand that in spite of your reassurance some children and young people will continue to bargain as it can help them feel that they are being proactive in trying to bring the person who has died back.
- Remember that bargaining behaviour should disappear as the child or young person moves towards accepting the finality of death.

Guilt

Guilt can be seen as anger turned inwards towards the self. Bereaved children and young people are particularly vulnerable to feeling guilty for death of someone close. Children and young people can become convinced that the death was their fault due to something they did or said or something they did not do.

It is vital that bereaved children and young people are reassured that they are in no way guilty of the death and that nothing they said / did not say, did / didn't do would have prevented the death from occurring.

How can I help?

- Reassure the child or young person that they are not to blame for the death of someone close.
- Explore with your bereaved child or young person how and why they feel they are responsible for the death. In turn, explain how and why they are not responsible.
- Remember that not all bereaved children and young people who are experiencing guilt relating to the death of someone close will tell you that they are. However, increased anxiety and worry can often be indicative of guilt so try to be watchful for this. If the child or young person hasn't mentioned that they feel guilty for the death, when you are talking with them remember to include reassurance that the death is not their fault for any reason.
- Encourage the child or young person to talk about how they are feeling and what they are thinking as and when they feel they need to.

Depression

Bereaved children and young people irrespective of their age or cognitive understanding will experience some sort of depression as they grieve.

This is usually experienced when none of the previous reactions have been successful in relieving their grief.

Anxiety originating in bereaved children and young people from the loss of someone they love can permeate in to fears of someone else close to them dying or that they too might die. Anxiety can also cause some bereaved children and young people to fear that they might forget what the deceased person looked like, how they spoke and the like. Constant fretting and unresolved anxiety can lead to depressive episodes in children and young people.



It is important to allow the child or young person to discuss their worries and to not try and make them “snap out of it”. They can’t. Allow them the time to express their sadness whilst ensuring that they are able to communicate their feelings as and when they need to.

How can I help?

- Ensure that your bereaved child or young person knows that their feelings are important. Depression can knock a person’s self esteem and feelings of worth so help your young person or child to feel valued and cared for.
- Recognise that depression experienced as a response to someone dying is not the same as clinical depression and therefore depressive episodes and symptoms amongst bereaved children and young people are to be expected.
- Encourage your child or young person to participate in hobbies, sports and existing friendships if they feel ready to.
- If you become concerned about your child or young person’s welfare following the death of someone close, seek the support from a service such as Cruse Bereavement Care, Mind or your GP.

Acceptance

Gradually as the reality that the death of someone close is irreversible settles in the mind of the bereaved child or young person the move towards acceptance becomes apparent.

Try to avoid viewing the child or young person’s acceptance of the death as a sign that they are “back to normal”. The term “acceptance” in this case means that the bereaved child or young person has now become aware that the person who has died is never coming back and that life will never be the same again.

How can I help?

- Help the bereaved child or young person to understand that it is OK to laugh, smile and become interested in life again and that this is in no way disrespectful to the person who has died.
- Reassure the bereaved child or young person that not thinking about the person who has died all the time is OK too.
- Help your child or young person to realise that although their lives will never be the same again that this doesn’t mean they won’t have a happy life or exciting future ahead of them.
- Participate in activities designed to remember the person who has died with your bereaved child or young person if they ask you to.

There is a wide range of support services to help with bereavement and you can find a full list of these on www.howareyoufeeling.org.uk

SOURCES: Cruse, MIND and Child Bereavement UK

