

# About Bereavement

## Advice and Guidance from Cruse Bereavement Care

For most of us, bereavement will be the most distressing experience we will ever face. Grief is what we feel when somebody we are close to dies. Everyone experiences grief differently and there is no 'normal' or 'right' way to grieve. This section explains how you may feel when you lose someone close to you.

## Feelings when someone dies

You may feel a number of things immediately after a death.

### Shock:

It may take you a long time to grasp what has happened. The shock can make you numb, and some people at first carry on as if nothing has happened. It is hard to believe that someone important is not coming back. Many people feel disorientated - as if they have lost their place and purpose in life or are living in a different world.

### Pain:

Feelings of pain and distress following bereavement can be overwhelming and very frightening.

### Anger:

Sometimes bereaved people can feel angry. This anger is a completely natural emotion, typical of the grieving process. Death can seem cruel and unfair, especially when you feel someone has died before their time or when you had plans for the future together. We may also feel angry towards the person who has died, or angry at ourselves for things we did or didn't do or say to the person before their death.

### Guilt:

Guilt is another common reaction. People who have been bereaved of someone close often say they feel directly or indirectly to blame for the person's death. You may also feel guilt if you had a difficult or confusing relationship with the person who has died, or if you feel you didn't do enough to help them when they were alive.

### Depression:

Many bereaved people experience feelings of depression following the death of someone close. Life can feel like it no longer holds any meaning and some people say they too want to die.

### Longing:

Thinking you are hearing or seeing someone who has died is a common experience and can happen when you least expect it. You may find that you can't stop thinking about the events leading up to the death. "Seeing" the person who has died and hearing their voice can happen because the brain is trying to process the death and acknowledge the finality of it.

### **Other people's reactions:**

One of the hardest things to face when we are bereaved is the way other people react to us. They often do not know what to say or how to respond to our loss. Because they don't know what to say or are worried about saying the wrong thing, people can avoid those who have lost someone. This is hard for us because we may well want to talk about the person who has died. It can become especially hard as time goes on and other people's memories of the person who has died fade.

## **Supporting yourself**

It is important that you take care of yourself following a bereavement.

One of the most helpful things is to talk about the person who has died and your relationship with them. Who you talk to will depend on you. It may be your family, friends, a faith/spiritual adviser, your GP or a support organisation.

### **Do...**

- Talk to other people about the person who has died, about your memories and your feelings.
- Look after yourself. Eat properly and try to get enough rest (even if you can't sleep).
- Give yourself time and permission to grieve.
- Seek help and support if you feel you need it.
- Tell people what you need.

### **Don't...**

- Isolate yourself (unless you have to, eg due to illness).
- Keep your emotions bottled up.
- Think you are weak for needing help.
- Feel guilty if you are struggling to cope.
- Rely on drugs or alcohol – the relief will only be temporary.

## Children's grief

For many children and young people the death of a parent, caregiver, sibling or grandparent is an experience they are faced with early in life. Sometimes people think a child or young person who is bereaved at a young age will not be greatly affected, as they are too young to understand the full implications of death. This is untrue and unhelpful. Even babies are able to experience loss. A baby cannot cognitively process the implications of the bereavement but that does not mean that they do not feel the loss.

Children and young people need to be given the opportunity to grieve as any adult would. Trying to ignore or avert the child's grief is not protective and can be damaging. Children and young people regardless of their age need to be encouraged to talk about how they are feeling and supported to understand their emotions.

### Further information

Read our sections on children and help for schools to find out more about children and young people's reaction to bereavement and what you can do to help.

Our site 'Hope Again' is a website designed for young people by young people.

If you are a young person and someone you know has died why not send a private message to one of our trained volunteers at [hopeagain@cruse.org.uk](mailto:hopeagain@cruse.org.uk) who will reply to you by email.

If you want to talk to someone direct, call our FREE phone helpline on **0808 808 1677**.

We offer a number of leaflets and publications to help children and young people.

## How to help someone bereaved

If you know someone who is grieving the death of someone close you may wonder how best to support them. Read on for some suggestions of what to say and do.

People who have been bereaved may want to talk about the person who has died. One of the most helpful things you can do is simply listen, and give them time and space to grieve. Offering specific practical help, not vague general offers, can also be very helpful.

### Do:

- Be there for the person who is grieving - pick up the phone, write a letter or an email, call by or arrange to visit.
- Accept that everyone grieves in their own way, there is no 'normal' way.
- Encourage the person to talk.
- Listen to the person.
- Create an environment in which the bereaved person can be themselves and show their feelings, rather than having to put on a front.
- Be aware that grief can take a long time.
- Contact the person at difficult times such as special anniversaries and birthdays.
- Mention useful support agencies such as Cruse Bereavement Care.
- Offer useful practical help.

### Don't:

- Avoid someone who has been bereaved.
- Use clichés such as 'I understand how you feel'; 'You'll get over it'; 'Time heals'.
- Tell them it's time to move on, they should be over it - how long a person needs to grieve is entirely individual.
- Be alarmed if the bereaved person doesn't want to talk or demonstrates anger.
- Underestimate how emotionally draining it can be when supporting a grieving person. Make sure you take care of yourself too.

## Coping and adapting

When someone close to us dies we have to cope and adjust to living in a world which is irreversibly changed. We may have to let go of some dreams built up and shared with the person who has died.

The length of time it will take a person to accept the death of someone close and move forward is varied and will be unique to the mourner. How we react will be influenced by many different things, including:

- age
- personality
- cultural background
- religious beliefs
- previous experiences of bereavement
- personal circumstances.

No one can tell you how or when the intensity of your grief will lessen; only you will know when this happens. It is not unusual for bereaved people to think they are finally moving towards acceptance only to experience the strong and often unwelcome emotions they experienced shortly after the death.

Life will never be the same again after a bereavement, but the grief and pain should lessen. There should come a time when you are able to adapt and adjust and cope with life without the person who has died. The pain of bereavement has been compared to that of losing a limb. We may adapt to life without the limb but we continue to feel its absence. When a person we are close to dies we can find meaning in life again, but without forgetting their meaning for us

Many people worry that they will forget the person who has died; how they looked, their voice, or the good times they had together. There are, however, many ways you can keep their memory alive.

### Anniversaries and reminders when you are bereaved

There are many events that will evoke memories of the death of someone close. Some are personal and obvious, such as a wedding anniversary or birthday, and others are more unpredictable, like a piece of music, a smell or a particular TV programme.

Anniversaries and reminders can evoke powerful memories and feelings which are distinctly personal. These days or events, which mean so much to one person, may be ordinary to others who may not understand what is happening.

Just as each relationship and each bereavement is unique, so too are the feelings evoked by reminders. For some people, anniversaries can evoke fond and happy memories, while for

others they can create feelings of sadness, grief, fear, regret and anger. Another disturbing feeling that can be evoked by a reminder is guilt - guilt at what has been said or done, guilt concerning what was left unsaid, and even guilt at having forgotten or not thought about the dead person for a period of time.

### What can help?

- It helps to accept that, when grieving, there are some occasions which will be very difficult and then to work out how best to manage them. Spend some time trying to work out, well in advance, which arrangements will best suit your needs and the needs of others who share your loss.
- Some people try to avoid the pain of certain events by making sure they are away from the people and places which bring sad thoughts and memories. But you may feel it is important to mark the day in a way that is special for you and for the person who has died and whose loss you mourn. What is important is that what you do will have some special private meaning for you and those close to you.
- Some people find it comforting to take part in religious and cultural practices which help individuals and groups remember the dead and celebrate their lives and work.
- Others find they prefer something more personal, and others do nothing at all other than maintain routine and normal life.
- The uncertainty and anxiety surrounding death may lead to fixed ideas and thinking, but it is important to remember that people remember and forget the dead in their own ways and what bereaved people need is acceptance from others.
- As time passes, anniversaries and reminders can help us to begin to focus on happy memories of good times shared in the past.

## Traumatic bereavement

A traumatic loss is one that is sudden and unexpected, and often results from horrific or frightening circumstances. We provide information for those affected by natural disaster, terrorist attack, suicide and other traumatic losses.

## Coping with a crisis

In a crisis someone close to you may have died unexpectedly. You may have been injured yourself or you may have witnessed the death and injury of others. Your experience is a very personal one but here you can read about how others have reacted in similar situations. We also suggest ways in which you can help healing to occur, and how you can avoid some pitfalls.

## Feelings after a crisis

To begin with, you may feel numb. The event may seem like a dream, or something that has not really happened. People can sometimes (wrongly) see this as being 'strong' or 'uncaring'.

You may also feel:

**Fear:** of damage to yourself and those you love; of being left alone; of having to leave loved ones; of 'breaking down' or 'losing control' of a similar event happening again.

**Sad:** as a result of deaths, injuries and losses of every kind.

**Longing:** for all that has gone.

**Guilty:** for being better off than others, for being alive and not injured, for feeling regrets about things not done.

**Ashamed:** for having been exposed as helpless, 'emotional' and needing others, or for not having reacted as you would have wished.

**Angry:** at what has happened, at whoever caused it or allowed it to happen, at the injustice and senselessness of it all, and at other people's lack of understanding and inefficiencies.

**Helpless:** powerless, or as if you don't know the right way to react.

**Let down:** disappointed at all the plans that cannot be fulfilled.

**Hope:** for the future and for better times.

You may find you have strong memories, of feelings, of loss or of love for the other people in your life who have been injured or who have died. You may also find yourself repeatedly dreaming about what happened. A disaster may become the main thing that you think about for a long time. The stress of this and the lack of ability to focus on the here and now may make you more accident-prone.

The extra tension may lead you to increase your intake of substances such as alcohol or drugs. You may feel this will dull the pain temporarily, but it is important to seek help if you repeatedly turn to alcohol or drugs to cope.

It is common to have some or all of these feelings after a disaster and you may experience them immediately or some time later. The feelings can be very strong and frightening, especially if a death was sudden or violent, or if a body was not recovered, or if many people died. It can feel as if you are losing control or 'going mad', but for most people the feelings become less intense over time. Many people find that crying can give relief but it is also common to experience other responses, such as a desire to be alone.

### **Relationships after a crisis**

A crisis can bring people together and lead to new friendships, but it can create tensions and strains. Some families are able to support one another, but this not always possible and conflicts may emerge. Relationships between partners can also be affected.

### **What can help after a crisis**

**Reality:** attending funerals, returning to the scene and talking to people who know what happened are all ways in which a situation which seems unbelievable may be made more credible and easier to bear.

**Talking:** many people find it helpful to talk about what happened and how they feel. This can be an important part of the healing process.

**Support:** sharing with others who have had similar experiences can help.

**Privacy:** some people want to be left on their own.



## Traumatic loss

When someone we care about dies in a sudden and/or traumatic situation, there are additional problems which add to the grieving we feel when anyone we love dies. You may have witnessed the death, or the deaths and injury of others. Everyone's experience and responses will be different and there is no right or 'normal' response. However there are some common reactions and feeling you may experience in the hours, days, weeks and months after a traumatic event. These feelings can sometimes be very strong and frightening.

There are four main types of problems which may arise after someone close to you dies in a traumatic circumstance:

- Problems of trauma
- Problems of grieving
- Problems of anger and self-reproach
- Problems of change

### Problems of Trauma

'I can't believe it's true'

Losses for which we are unprepared, particularly if we can't be present or to hold or touch those we have lost, are difficult to make real.

What helps?

It takes a long time to take in what has happened. Spend time talking it through with others and don't worry that you are being a burden to them, that's what friends are for. Many people might find it helpful to:

- visit the place where the disaster took place
- talk with others involved
- place a wreath in a significant place
- attend memorial services or other rituals of remembrance.

In the end, there may be aspects of the loss that will never be explained. Be prepared to live with the uncertainty of not knowing; we cannot explain or control everything.

### 'I can't get it out of my head'

Many people are haunted by pictures in their minds of the traumatic event. While this is most likely to become a problem for eye-witnesses, television or other pictures can also 'bring home' the awfulness of the way a person might have died. Such images may occur

spontaneously or, in a distorted form, as recurrent nightmares. They may be triggered by any reminder of the loss, e.g. loud noises, cries or shouts.

Some people go to great lengths to avoid any such reminders because the images are so painful. They may shut themselves up at home, avoid talking about the loss, and distract themselves with hectic activity. This kind of reaction is not uncommon and will usually improve with time. However in severe form it may become so disabling that it becomes known as 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD).

What helps?

Haunting images can sometimes be eased by talking to others, going over the events again and again until you get used to them. The images will not disappear but they will become less painful and easier to live with. If the images are stopping you from grieving or getting on with your life, then you should consult a psychiatrist or psychologist. Very effective treatments for PTSD have been developed in recent years. They do not necessarily require prescription medication, although this may help.

### **Problems of Grieving**

'I feel numb'

Numbness is our mind's way of protecting itself from mental pain that threatens to overwhelm us. Sometimes we may be unable to think clearly, or become confused and lose our bearings. At other times we may be unable to express feelings of any kind. In an emergency it is such 'dissociation' that enables us to keep going, searching for a lost person or engaging in the rescue of others. It is only if it continues after the disaster is over that it becomes a problem. Usually this reflects a fear that, if we do not keep our feelings firmly under control, they will take control of us.

What helps?

Grief is the natural response to the loss of a loved person. It is more likely to give rise to problems if it is bottled up than if it is expressed. At times of loss it is normal and appropriate to express grief in any way that feels natural. Some people need to cry, others will rage and others just talk endlessly about what has happened. Try to find someone you can trust who will be a good listener and don't worry if, for a while, you look or feel helpless, that will pass. In grieving we do not forget the people we love, we gradually find new ways to remember them. Memories of the past are sometimes painful but they are our treasure, it is best not to bury them for too long. Paradoxically, if we allow ourselves to lose control of our feelings, for a while, we shall find ourselves better able to live with and to control them.

'I can't stop crying'

Grief can continue much longer than most people expect. We need to recognise that fact and not expect too much of ourselves. This said, there are some types of grief which

become “stuck”. Sometimes this reflects our need to punish ourselves – ‘Why should I be happy now that he or she is dead?’ This is most likely to arise if it is a child who has died, or if we blame ourselves for their death or for not being there for them when needed. At other times it reflects long-standing feelings of depression or helplessness.

What helps?

Grief is not like the measles, we do not go back to being the person we were before our loss. We learn to live with it, and, little by little, the pain will diminish. Grief is not a duty to the dead, those we love would not want us to suffer. Again, talking it through with a friend or bereavement volunteer from Cruse will usually help. If that is not enough or you feel continually depressed or suicidal, you should not hesitate to seek specialist help. Several treatments including Cognitive Therapies, Psycho-therapies and anti-depressant medications will be of help and it is worth discussing with your GP which of these alternatives are available and appropriate to you. Don’t give up.

### **Problems of Anger and Self-Reproach**

'I feel so angry'

Anger is a very natural reaction to loss, particularly if it was caused by terrorism or other human hands. It may be directed against the perpetrators of the trauma, or against all authorities or the people nearest to hand. Some people may find themselves hitting out wildly at the people they love the best. Occasionally ill-directed anger may even feed into or bring about a cycle of violence.

What helps?

Remember that anger can be a force for good if it is controlled and directed where it can do well rather than harm. Try to hold back from impulsive outbursts and, if you have said or done things that have hurt others, don’t be too proud to apologise. They will understand.

### **'I blame myself, I feel so guilty'**

None of us is perfect and it is easy to seize on something that we did or didn’t do in our attempt to find someone to blame. Often, people end up blaming themselves. At the back of our minds we may even cling to the idea that, if we punish ourselves we will make things right again and get back the person we have lost. Sadly this magical thinking is doomed to fail.

What helps?

Sooner or later we have to accept that what has happened is irrevocable and that punishing ourselves won’t change anything. Friends will often say ‘You shouldn’t blame yourself’, and maybe they are right. But you do not choose the way you feel. Guilt and anger are not

feelings that can be switched on and off at will. Rather we should try to find a creative use for our grief, to bring something good out of the bad thing that has happened.

### **Problems of Change**

'I feel so frightened'

We all know that disasters happen, but most of the time we go through life with confidence that we are safe, protected from harm and immune from significant trauma. Then disaster strikes, all in a moment the world has become a dangerous place, we can take nothing for granted, we are waiting for the next disaster. Fear causes bodily symptoms including tense muscles, racing heart, sweating, breathlessness and sleeplessness - all symptoms which, in the environment in which we evolved would have helped us to stay alive in situations of danger. But in today's world they do no such thing and are more likely to be misinterpreted as symptoms of illness.

What helps?

The first and most important thing is to recognise that the symptoms of fear are a sign of normality, at such times a racing heart is a normal heart, headaches, back aches, indigestion, even feelings of panic, are natural reactions that will decline as time passes, they are not symptoms that will lead to something worse. In addition you are not as helpless as you feel. Relaxation exercises, meditation techniques, aromatherapy or whatever helps to relax you will put you back in control.

This said, you should not expect to go back to being the secure, confident person that you were before the disaster struck. You have learned the hard way that life is never - and never was - completely safe. You have lost the illusion of invulnerability and will never quite regain it. You are older and sadder as a result. But you are also more mature. You have learned that life has its dark side, but that does not mean that you need live your life in perpetual fear. The world today is no more dangerous than it was before the disaster. Previously you had an illusion of safety, the feeling of danger is equally illusory, and it will grow less. Human beings evolved to cope with a much more dangerous world than the one in which we live today. You, and those with you, will survive.

### **'Life has lost its meaning'**

Each person's sense of purpose and direction in life arises from a hundred and one habits of thought and assumptions about the world that we take for granted. Then, all of a sudden, we can take nothing for granted any more. Perhaps the person who died is the one we would have turned to at times of trouble and now, when we face the biggest trouble in our lives, they are not there, or, if they are, they are so overwhelmed by their own grief that we cannot burden them with ours.

What helps?

Those who have a religious faith may find it helpful to seek pastoral support; others may find spiritual help outside of formal religious frameworks. When faced with a disaster of this magnitude it takes time and hard work to adjust. It is rather like learning to cope with the loss of a limb. For a while we will feel crippled, mutilated, as if a part of ourselves is missing.

We feel as if we had lost every good thing that relied on the presence of the person we love for its meaning. But take heart, all is not lost. Now is the time to take stock, and ask yourself what really matters? When we do that we may be surprised to find that many of the things that made sense of our lives when the lost person was with us continue to make sense of our lives now that they are away. Indeed they may make more sense because they are away. When people say 'He (or she) lives on in my memory', this is literally true.

## Recognising the impact of bereavement on a child or young person

The loss of someone close through death is a traumatic and painful event for the majority of people. For many children and young people the death of a parent, sibling, friend or relative can be extremely difficult because of the child's inability to understand and articulate their feelings. Similarly young people who have been bereaved whilst they are on the cusp of adulthood can find the emotions that they are experiencing to be frighteningly intense.

### Returning to school

Some children and young people who have been bereaved want to return to school fairly soon after the death as this offers some sort of normality and routine. That is why teaching staff need to be suitably prepared to recognise the impact the bereavement will have had upon the child or young person and be equipped to support them.

### Talking about the bereavement

Discussing death and bereavement can prove a difficult subject for teachers and pupils alike therefore questions and debates that arise pertaining to this topic should be encouraged, as and when they occur.

A school staff member able to recognise some of the potential behaviours that a bereaved child or young person may exhibit is in a better position to support the child or young person as they grieve. As the nature of grief is individual it is essential to remember that no two children or young people will grieve in the same way and exhibit the same behaviours. For a comprehensive overview of the changing perceptions and understandings of death that children and young people commonly experience as they develop, please see the Children and Young People section of this website.

Bereaved children and young people require time, patience and compassion from school staff. The familiarity of school surroundings and existing rapport with teachers, dinner ladies, etc, can be a useful vehicle to encourage communication and to allow the child or young person to convey their feelings.

It is not uncommon for some bereaved children and young people to feel like they are going mad as the process of grieving takes its toll. It is essential for school staff to reassure the bereaved child or young person that they are not going mad and that the feelings they are experiencing are a very normal and natural reaction to the death of someone close.

### Routine and empathy

The need to adhere to the bereaved child or young person's pre bereavement routine whilst in school is paramount as it will help promote security and enable the child or young person to gradually accept the reality of life continuing and the potential for future achievements.

Although empathy and compassion are important for school staff when supporting a bereaved child or young person, it must also be mentioned that forming a strong emotional attachment with the bereaved child or young person can prove damaging to the child in the future and can emotionally drain the staff member. Professional agencies such as Cruse Bereavement Care exist to provide support to bereaved children and young people, and this is worth remembering in order to safeguard both the child or young person and school staff members.

### How can I help?

- A balance is needed to ensure that you can efficiently support the bereaved student whilst keeping their usual school routine as normal as possible
- Ask the school's departmental heads / senior teaching staff about the possibility of school staff attending training relating to bereaved children and young people. Cruse Bereavement Care offers bespoke training nationally
- Stock resources and literature to help support bereaved children and young people and those supporting them. A wide range of books and resources for children, young people, families and professionals are available to purchase via this website
- Ensure that existing school policies and procedures concerning bullying include guidelines for working with bullied bereaved children and young people

### Recognising changes in behaviour

Grief is individual and the processes of mourning are never the same between two people. However some of the responses to death and bereavement can be similar depending on the age, level of comprehension, relationship with the person who has died and the emotional resilience of the mourner.

The following responses are common:

- Alternating play and sadness
- Tiredness
- Mood swings
- Regression and loss of skills
- Anger and frustration
- High-risk behaviours
- Lack of response

### Alternating play and sadness

Members of the school staff may be the first to recognise changes in the bereaved child or young person's behaviour outside of their immediate family, who may not have noticed if they too are grieving. Young children may appear to be sad and withdrawn one minute then might begin playing with building blocks or dolls the next. This is because unlike adults, bereaved children do not possess the emotional reserves to grieve continuously and they will need respite from their grief. Play allows the bereaved child to shift their focus from their grief, albeit for a short while, until they are sufficiently mentally restored to recommence grieving. It is of paramount importance not to view such play breaks as the child "getting over the death" because this is not only inaccurate but can lead to the child being chastised or criticised for attention seeking when they resume grieving. Play breaks are just that – momentary breaks from perpetual grief which the bereaved child does not have the capacity to sustain.

### **Tiredness**

Grieving is an exhausting process for adults and young people alike, therefore school staff may become aware of how tired and listless the bereaved child or young person appears. Bereavement can dramatically affect the sleeping patterns of a child or young person and if they are experiencing nightmares or engaging in hyper vigilance (see Children and Young People for information on sleeping disorders and hyper vigilance), then they will most likely present as being lethargic and lacking energy. Exhaustion will also have a direct effect on the bereaved child or young person's ability to concentrate on their work and it is not uncommon to find a bereaved child or young person falling asleep during lessons.

### **Mood swings**

A bereaved child or young person will probably display mood swings and may display behaviours that appear polar to the behaviours of the child / young person prior to their bereavement. For example, a previously gregarious and popular pupil might become sullen and withdrawn following the death of someone close. A normally confident, academic achiever can become anxious and despondent as they grieve. It can be alarming for a member of the school staff to observe a bereaved pupil develop a stutter or similar speech impairment; it can prove equally worrying to observe a pupil revert to using baby talk or sucking their thumb.

### **Regression and loss of skills**

The loss that the bereaved pupil has suffered has thrown them in to a place populated by doubt, fear and insecurity. The regression towards behaviours exhibited in their formative years enables the pupil to try and emanate a time prior to the death when they felt safer and their world was intact.



School staff may also notice a bereaved child or young person's academic skills deteriorate; their spelling may become poor or they might not be able to understand certain mathematical equations that they were adept at prior to the bereavement.

As the bereaved child or young person moves towards acceptance of the death such behaviour should disappear.

### **Anger and frustration**

School staff may become aware that a bereaved young person presents as being angry, frustrated and aggressive. Such challenging behaviour may be observed in older pupils who have been bereaved, particularly as they progress through puberty. The maelstrom of emotions experienced by many young people as they enter adulthood can be difficult enough and the death of someone close can serve to heighten and potentially complicate these feelings further. A good natured and amiable pupil may become aggressive following the death of someone close and their frustration can become apparent.

If a bereaved young person, or child, is displaying physically or verbally threatening behaviour it is important that appropriate boundaries are put in place and universally adhered to by all members of the school staff. Allowances for the bereaved child or young person's grief should not extend to aggression and violence being left unchallenged. It is worthwhile for a school staff member who knows the bereaved pupil well to speak with the latter should such behaviour manifest. The staff member will need to reassure the bereaved pupil that anger and frustration are acceptable responses to grief but will equally need to reinforce that harming others either verbally or physically is not acceptable. This can be a difficult situation for a member of staff to find themselves in as they may feel that by challenging the bereaved pupil they might make their grief worse or "send them over the edge".

Be assured that nothing you say can make the bereavement experienced by the young person worse. By challenging the aggressive behaviour of a bereaved student you are actually showing that you care about their well being. The reinforcement of school rules on such occasions promotes the familiarity and certainty of normal school life.

### **High-risk behaviours**

In some circumstances a bereaved young person may demonstrate high risk behaviours in response to their grief. Such types of high risk behaviours can include excessive alcohol consumption, substance misuse and self harm. Some bereaved young people may use such vehicles as coping mechanisms endeavouring to anaesthetise the emotional pain they are experiencing. If you are concerned that a bereaved pupil is using any of the aforementioned as a coping mechanism this should be addressed swiftly.

### Lack of response

It is not uncommon for some newly bereaved children and young people to not present any behaviours associated with grieving, or to deny their grief altogether. This is most often witnessed when the bereaved child or young person appears to act and behave as if the death has not occurred. School staff might observe the bereaved child or young person exhibiting compensatory behaviours such as all consuming academic pursuits or an overly keen engagement in sporting activities. This is not because the bereaved child or young person does not intellectually comprehend the death of their loved one but rather that they are trying to throw themselves in to tasks that will serve to facilitate their denial of the death. Denial in such instances can serve as a protective mechanism allowing the bereaved child or young person time to process the death and its consequences.

Therefore, it is not uncommon for some bereaved children and young people to delay their grief for months or sometimes years. Other life changing incidents such as moving home, acquiring a step parent or experiencing a further bereavement can serve to release the bereaved child or young person's delayed or unresolved grief. Unfortunately there is no way to divert grief and ultimately, regardless of how long the child or young person has managed to deny their grief, they will have to go through the grieving process eventually.

### How Can I Help?

- Try not to be alarmed if the bereaved child or young person is displaying regressive behaviours – these should disappear over time
- Be aware that sometimes regressive behaviours displayed by the bereaved child or young person may be noticed by other students and they might tease the child or young person because of this
- If the bereaved pupil appears to be throwing themselves in to their studies take some time to talk with them and reassure them that grieving is normal and that they will need time to grieve
- Liaise with the bereaved child or young person's family if you have concerns that the student's grief is delayed or that they are denying their grief altogether. Explain this to the family
- Help the bereaved child or young person to understand that they won't always feel different or act differently to how they were pre bereavement. Although their lives have been changed forever their grief will lessen over time

## Loss from a child's perspective

For many children and young people the death of a parent, caregiver, sibling or grandparent is an experience they are faced with early in life. It is sometimes incorrectly assumed that a child or young person who is bereaved by the death of someone close at a young age will not be greatly affected as they are too young to understand the full implications of death.

This is untrue and unhelpful. Even babies are able to experience loss. A baby cannot cognitively process the implications of the bereavement but that does not mean that they do not feel the loss.

## Accepting the child's experience

Children and young people need to be given the opportunity to grieve as any adult would. Trying to ignore or avert the child's grief is not protective, in fact it can prove to be extremely damaging as the child enters adulthood. Children and young people regardless of their age need to be encouraged to talk about how they are feeling and supported to understand their emotions.

It is also important to remember that children and young people grieve in different ways. Grief is unique and therefore it is not wise to assume that all children and young people will experience the same emotions, enact the same behaviour or respond similarly to other grieving children and young people. A child or young person's grief differs from that of an adult's grief because it alters as they develop.

## Time to grieve

Children and young people often revisit the death and review their emotions and feelings about their bereavement as they move through their stages of development. Children and young people do not have the emotional capacity to focus on their grief for long periods of time and therefore it is not uncommon for grieving children and young people to become distracted by play. This is a protective mechanism which allows the child or young person to be temporarily diverted from the bereavement.

Bereaved children and young people need time to grieve and in order for them to address the bereavement they need to be given the facts regarding the death in language appropriate to their age or level of comprehension. Avoid using metaphors for death such as, "Daddy has gone to sleep", this will make the child or young person believe that Daddy will come back to them and may constantly ask when he is going to wake up. Similarly the child or young person might encounter problems with bedtime and not wanting to sleep for fear of not waking up.

## Talking to children

It is understandable that many caregivers are reluctant to talk to the child or young person about the death as they do not want to cause distress or fear. Children and young people who are bereaved need to know that their loved one has died, how they died and where they are now. Failure to be honest with the grieving child or young person means that their grief is not being acknowledged and this can cause problems later on.

If the bereaved child or young person wants to ask questions about death and what dying means, answer them truthfully and if you do not know the answer to a specific question don't be tempted to make the answer up. Assure the child or young person that although you do not know the answer to their question you will find out for them.

### Key points to remember:

- Babies can experience feelings of loss
- Be honest with the bereaved child or young person
- Avoid using metaphors for death
- Every child and young person's grief is unique
- Encourage the child or young person to talk about the death and how they feel
- Children and young people may 'revisit' the death and review their feelings about the bereavement as they develop
- Use language that is appropriate to the child or young person's age and level of comprehension.

## Children's and young people's emotional responses

Children and young people may react in a number of ways to the death of someone close. They may experience:

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

They are also likely to experience a range of physical responses.

### 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 the newly bereaved child or

young person again varies and may not be communicated in the same way as bereaved peers or siblings.

Some children or young people might laugh upon being told of the death. This response should not be viewed as disrespectful or inappropriate because it is a reflex reaction over which the child or young person has no conscious control. Laughter originating from shock is indicative that the child or young person's brain is momentarily protecting them from the reality of the death.

It is not uncommon to hear a child or young person in this situation ask the person breaking the bad news to them if they are joking. On an intellectual level the child or young person knows that what is being told them is not a joke but on an emotional level the ability to process this fact is extremely difficult. The laughter will cease when the rational mind has processed that the person has died.

Some children and young people might immediately start tidying up, putting away toys, returning to homework, clearing away plates, etc. This action can appear quite robotic as if the child or young person has switched on to auto pilot. The commencing of mundane tasks such as tidying things away is indicative of the child or young person struggling to process the information and trying to "carry on as normal" in the hope that the news just given to them might not be true.

Shock, like grief, is an individual response and can manifest in many ways. Some children and young people might express a difficulty in verbally acknowledging what has just been said, others might start to sob uncontrollably, others might laugh and some might start putting things away and clearing up. Shock is a protective state, it allows the individual time to process bad news in the manner that best suits them and acts as a temporary buffer before reality sinks in.

Try not to be alarmed if the child or young person's response seems inappropriate, shock, as mentioned manifests itself in different ways.

#### 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

This is another response that you might observe in bereaved children and young people. 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.

A child might be heard saying that they don't want to stay at nanny's house in case mummy comes home. Other children and young people who have been bereaved might adopt certain behaviours such as obsessively tidying their room or furiously brushing their teeth to impress the deceased person when they return.

Searching can be another form which denial can take. For example some bereaved children and young people might actively search for the deceased person as part of their belief that the person is not really dead. Searching varies depending on the age of the child or young person who has been bereaved. Therefore a child might be seen looking under beds and emptying toy boxes to check if the deceased person isn't hiding there. Older children and young people might search local areas or places of work where the deceased frequented in a similar desire to find the person alive and well.

Denial can also be demonstrated by bereaved children and young people who do not want to attend school (please see section, Information for Schools) or go to bed for fear of missing the person who has died returning.

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

Anger as a response to bereavement is common amongst children and adults alike. However, unlike adults, 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.

This inability to communicate their grief can prove highly frustrating to children and young people and this in turn can lead to anger. Children and young people can feel anger towards themselves for something they perceived that they did or did not do which they believe contributed to the death of their loved one.

They can also feel angry with people they feel did not do enough to prevent their loved one from dying. A child might be extremely angry towards the nurses who cared for his mother whilst she was dying believing that their care was inadequate or lacking in some way and that was why his mother died.

Quite common is the anger a child or young person feels towards the person who has died. This anger can be directed at the person who has died for not allowing the child or young person the time to say goodbye, it could be because the child or young person feels that they have been abandoned by the person dying. Anger can also be directed at the person who has died because their death has left the child or young person to deal with the strong emotions that grief entails by themselves.

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

This particular response to bereavement is not peculiar to children and young people, bereaved adults too often plead for the return of their deceased loved one in exchange for a promise to act a certain way, abstain from certain behaviours, etc.

As the nature of grief is individual not all children and young people will experience the act of bargaining as a response to bereavement. Those children and young people that do will often beseech a deity or something that the child or young person sees as having the power to restore their loved one back to life.

Like some of their adult counterparts, the grieving child or young person will plead for the deity / higher power to give life to the deceased person in exchange for a pledge or behaviour that the child or young person believes will please them. 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. Bargaining can serve as a tool for distraction, distracting the young person or child from the pain of reality. The nature of bargaining can alter over time for instance the bereaved child or young person may begin by bargaining for the return of their loved one and then later this plea changes and the child bargains their life for the return of the person who has died to take their place.

Bargaining can offer the child or young person temporary respite from the pain of grieving.

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.



Feelings of guilt in response to bereavement can be heightened if the child or young person felt some sort of momentary animosity towards the deceased person whilst they were alive. Guilt can also follow instances where the child or young person has felt momentary relief during their grieving. If a child or young person is allowed to stay up and watch television for an hour more than they would have been when the deceased person was alive they can feel guilty for enjoying this lapse in rules. Children and young people can also feel guilty if they forget to think of the deceased person even for as little as five minutes.

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. Younger children can sometimes feel guilty that someone close to them died because they misbehaved on the way home from school or because they lied to a teacher. Never underestimate a bereaved child or young person's perception of how they might feel responsible through personal inaction or cross words, for the death of their loved one.

When reassuring a grieving child or young person that they are not to blame remember to explain why and how they are not responsible. If the child or young person showers you with their reasons as to why they feel responsible, listen patiently and answer truthfully each question providing age appropriate examples of how they had no part in the death.

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.

When the bargaining has failed and the anger has proved fruitless, when the reality that the person who has died is never coming back is understood, the bereaved child or young person will probably experience depressive episodes.

This depression can manifest itself physically whereby the bereaved child or young person does not feel like eating, is lethargic and does not have any interest in previous hobbies or sports. Children and young people may complain of feeling “heavy” or feeling weak.

The grieving process although individual and unique to the mourner, is always arduous and painful. Bereaved children and young people might exhibit behaviour or make remarks that indicate they are confused or becoming absent minded. This is natural. The child or young person’s mind will have been so consumed by questions, guilt, fear, anxiety, etc, following the death of a loved one that they are bound to be confused.

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.

Therefore 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 of Cruse Bereavement Care 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.

Children and young people who have been bereaved will need time to reach acceptance and the length of time needed is dependant on the individual child or young person. To enable the child or young person's move towards acceptance the maintaining of routines and "normal life" is crucial.

Bereaved children and young people will cope better if their normal routines and daily structure are kept the same. If too many alterations to this routine are made, the child or young person could become confused or anxious as semblances of their daily lives are interrupted.

Remember, the bereavement that the child or young person has experienced will have already dramatically changed their lives and unsettled feelings of emotional security therefore any other changes are likely to heighten their sense of emotional unrest.

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.

### **Children's and young people's physical responses**

Children and young people are likely to experience a range of physical responses to the loss of someone close, including:

- Behaviour and mood
- Appetite
- Sleep
- Regression
- Illness

They will also experience emotional responses.

### **Behaviour and mood**

Some bereaved children and young people may exhibit certain physical reactions to the death of a loved one. Again, the behaviours and physical responses that some children and

young people might demonstrate whilst they are grieving will differ and no two children or young people will react physically to a death in the same way.

Some bereaved children may use naughty behaviour or throw tantrums, shout and scream. This type of behaviour is most commonly directed at their caregiver or the person they feel most comfortable with. In younger bereaved children such responses can be common. The bereaved child is struggling to process and articulate their emotions and as a result they can display angry outbursts due to feeling frustrated.

Although it is important to allow the bereaved child or young person to vent their emotions it is also vital that appropriate boundaries are put in place. For example, explain to the grieving child that it is OK to feel sad, mad or angry, but it is not OK to hit or hurt someone including themselves when they feel this way.

Older children and adolescents may exhibit mood swings that are frequent and unpredictable. This may be how the adolescent behaved prior to the bereavement due to hormonal changes and puberty; however the mood swings which occur through grieving are more heightened in their intensity.

How can I help?

- Acknowledge that the behaviours and moods of the bereaved child or young person will differ from how they were prior to the death. Remember that behaviours and moods experienced during whilst the child or young person grieves can alter over time.
- Reassure your child or young person that feeling angry, guilty, confused and distressed is normal and encourage them to talk about how they are feeling.
- Put in place boundaries to prevent or discourage your bereaved child or young person from hurting themselves or others. Speak with the school / college if you are concerned about your child or young person becoming physically or verbally abusive.
- Contact Cruse Bereavement Care or your local GP if you are worried about your bereaved child or young person's behaviour or moods.

### **Appetite and eating**

Bereaved children and young people can sometimes experience difficulties with eating and their appetite following the loss of a loved one.

A bereaved child or young person may have a distinct lack of appetite and state that they "Can't face food / eating". Even favourite foods or treats can prove unappealing to the grieving child or young person. Similarly a grieving child or young person can have a tendency to overeat or turn to food to self soothe. Bereaved children and young people can also be observed becoming fussy over food and about what they eat.

Difficulties concerning appetite and eating can be further compounded by changes in routine and altered meal times as a result of the bereavement. For instance, if the person

who has died was the primary provider of meals to the child or young person, difficulties can occur when someone else takes over this task. If the bereaved child or young person is eating at different times and in different places following the death, this too can prove problematic.

If you suspect that there are drastic and sustained changes in the bereaved child or young person's eating habits, particularly if they are losing weight dramatically through refusing to eat, a discussion with your GP might be needed. Remember to gently encourage the bereaved child or young person to eat and try to keep meal times as structured as possible.

How can I help?

- Understand that increases / decreases in appetite in response to someone dying are common.
- Try to keep meal times as routine as possible to promote normality.
- Some bereaved children and young people might state that they cannot physically face the idea of eating, encourage them where possible to eat little and often.
- If your bereaved child or young person appears to be eating much more than they would normally, try not to restrict their diet or chastise them. Food can, for some bereaved children and young people, be a comfort and afford temporary respite from their grief.

### **Sleep and sleep patterns**

It is essential that the bereaved child or young person receives plenty of rest. Sleep is crucial for the mental, emotional and physical well being of the child or young person. In the aftermath of the death of someone close, the sleep patterns of a bereaved child or young person can change significantly.

A bereaved child or young person, irrespective of how tired they are, might not be able to fall asleep easily or may wake throughout the night and have difficulty falling asleep again. Nightmares and bad dreams are not uncommon in bereaved children and young people and time must be given for children and young people to discuss these.

Sometimes a bereaved child or young person may be afraid to fall asleep stating that they are scared they won't wake up again. Sometimes a bereaved child or young person may insist that the light is left on and they may display hyper vigilance which means they purposely stay awake in the hope of ensuring no one else dies or anything bad happens during the night.

If a bereaved child or young person has had the nature of their loved one's death explained to them as "falling asleep" this can increase problems around sleep and sleep patterns.

How can I help?

- Some children and young people will find it easier to sleep if you talk with them whilst they are in bed and preparing to go to sleep. Story books and books to help

the bereaved child or young person better understand their feelings can be useful too. A list of books for bereaved children and young people of different ages can be found here in our bookstore.

- Snuggle or comfort blankets can also be used by children and young people alike. Some bereaved children and young people feel more secure at night time if they can wrap themselves in a particular blanket that is special to them.
- The use of certain calming oils such as lavender can be used to aid sleep and promote restfulness. A few droplets on to the pillow can be used, but do not place straight on to the skin.
- Sometimes sitting with the bereaved child or young person (particularly those engaging in hyper vigilance) until they fall asleep can help them feel safer.
- If your bereaved child or young person tells you that they are experiencing nightmares, encourage them to share them and help the child or young person to talk about any fears or worries they might have.
- Some children and young people who slept in the dark prior to the person dying might now want to sleep with the light on. Leave the light on whilst reassuring the child or young person that you will always be close by during the night should they need you.

### **Regression or reverting back**

The death of someone close robs the bereaved child or young person of their sense of security and protection, particularly if the person who has died was the child or young person's primary caregiver.

When this feeling of security has been impaired the bereaved child or young person may be observed to regress or revert back to behaviours and speech that were first exhibited in previous developmental stages. It is not uncommon for a bereaved child or young person to suck their thumb, use baby talk, wet / soil the bed or to eat with their fingers.

This is not a sign that the bereaved child or young person will not be able to develop intellectually or mentally, rather it is the child or young person enacting behaviours which occurred at a time when everything was good in their world, pre bereavement.

Prior to the bereavement, the child or young person would most likely have felt safe and secure and now that this security has been challenged, the child or young person seeks to "go back in time" to when things were safe and normal. Generally speaking, as the journey through bereavement progresses and the child or young person begins to feel secure again, regressive behaviour should diminish.

How can I help?

- Try not to become alarmed if your child or young person appears to be unable to perform tasks that they were easily able to do prior to the person dying.

- If you have concerns that your child or young person appears to be regressing academically, letting their school know might be helpful.
- Try not to show frustration with your child or young person if they have become absent minded or forgetful, these are common responses experienced by grieving children and young people and should disappear in time.
- If the bereaved child or young person is bed wetting and are frustrated and ashamed with themselves, reassure them that it isn't their fault and is a normal response when someone they were close to dies.
- If you are worried that your child or young person is displaying regressive behaviours over a long period of time contact your GP, Cruse Bereavement Care or any support agency you feel may help.

### Illness – Real and Psychosomatic

When a child or young person is bereaved it can sometimes be observed that they complain of illnesses or physical ailments in response to the emotional trauma they are experiencing. Sometimes these illnesses can be real manifestations brought on by eating too little / too much or from not getting enough proper sleep.

Commonly some bereaved children and young people experience psychosomatic illnesses in response to the death of a loved one. This does not mean that the ailment or discomfort that the child or young person complains of is "all in the mind" but rather that the discomfort parallels the emotional pain they are feeling.

For example, a bereaved child might complain of a headache or upset stomach when actually they are trying to convey their emotional pain in physical terms. Sometimes a bereaved child or young person can become anxious and fretful over the idea that they or someone close to them might fall ill and subsequently die. This is a natural response to the perceived lack of security felt by the child or young person following the bereavement.

A number of bereaved children and young people might start to complain of symptoms similar to those experienced by the person who has died prior to death. If you are finding it difficult to reassure a bereaved child or young person that they do not have a brain tumour, HIV or terminal illness it might be worth taking the child or young person to see their doctor who can explain to them that they don't have such illnesses.

If the bereaved child or young person is becoming obsessive about a particular illness and it is dramatically affecting their daily lives (not being able to touch door handles, compulsive hand washing, for fear of possible contamination) discussion with your GP might be helpful.

How can I help?

- If your child or young person is convinced that they have a serious illness or terminal illness encourage them to see their GP so that he / she can address such fears and put the child or young person's mind at ease.

- Be aware that your child or young person may describe symptoms that the person who has died experienced prior to death.
- Providing a healthy balanced diet and ensuring the bereaved child or young person gets quality sleep can help to prevent infections and colds that can occur whilst they child or young person grieves. The child or young person's immune system can be weakened as a result of too little food or too little sleep so nutritious food is important where possible.
- If your bereaved child or young person is complaining of a particular ailment encourage them to discuss how and where it hurts as they might be trying to explain the emotional pain they feel in physical terms.

### Children's understanding of death

The nature of a child's understanding of death and bereavement will be different at different stages of development. Although a child's grief is individual, their understanding of the loss of a loved one progresses as they mature. In this section you will find the most common understandings of death by children at certain stages of their development.

Do bear in mind that a child's understanding of death during their development will differ in circumstances where the child may be experiencing educational difficulties.

- Birth to six months
- Six months to two years
- Two years to five years
- Five years to ten years

### Key Points to Remember

- Birth to six months:

Babies do not cognitively understand the notion of death; however that does not mean to say that they do not respond to the loss of someone close, or that they don't experience grief. A baby up to six months old experiences feelings of separation and abandonment as part of their bereavement. The bereaved baby is aware that the person is missing, or not there and this can cause the baby to become anxious and fretful. This can be heightened if it is the baby's primary caregiver who has died and the baby is able to identify that the one who is now feeding them, changing them and cuddling them is not the deceased person. Similarly if it is the baby's mother who is grieving a loss, the baby can pick up on these feelings and experience grief too.

- Six months to two years:



At this developmental stage the baby is able to picture their mother or primary caregiver internally if she/he is not present. If it is the primary caregiver who has died the baby will protest at their absence by loud crying and angry tears. It is common for babies to become withdrawn and lose interest in their toys and feeding and they will likely lose interest interacting with others. At the more mature end of this developmental stage bereaved toddlers can be observed actively seeking the deceased person. For instance if granddad spent much of his time prior to death in his shed the toddler might persistently return to investigate the shed in the hope that they will find him there.

- Two years to five years:

During their development between the age of two to five, children do not understand that death is irreversible. For instance a four year old child may be concerned that although nanny was dead she should have come home by now. This example illustrates how children at this stage do not understand the finality of death and nor do they understand what the term “dead” actually means. It is common for a young child to be told that their aunt has died and still expect to see them alive and well in the immediate future. Children do not understand that life functions have been terminated and will ask questions such as:

“Won’t Uncle Bob be lonely in the ground by himself?”

“Do you think we should put some sandwiches in Grandpa’s coffin in case he gets hungry?”

“What if Nan can’t breathe under all that earth?”

“Will Daddy be hurt if they burn him?”

As the cognitive understanding of children in this age range is limited they can sometimes demonstrate less of a reaction to the news of the death than might be observed by an older child and might promptly go out to play on hearing the news of the death.

Children aged between two and five years old have difficulty with the abstract concepts surrounding death. For instance they might be confused as to how one person can be in a grave and also be in heaven at the same time. They will become further confused if they are told that the deceased person is simply sleeping and this in turn could make them fearful of falling asleep or seeing anyone else asleep. They might insist on waiting for the person who has died to wake up or similarly if they have been told that the person who has died has gone on a long journey they may await their return.

At this age bereaved children can become involved in omnipotence or magical thinking. This refers to the concept that bereaved children believe that their actions, inaction, words, behaviours or thoughts are directly responsible for their loved one’s death. This form of thinking is not exclusive to this particular age group and can be experienced by many bereaved children and young people of older ages. It is essential that you explain to the bereaved child that the death was not in any way their fault or responsibility. The need to reassure the grieving child that nothing they said / didn’t say, did or didn’t do caused the death is paramount.

- Five years to ten years:

Children at this developmental stage have acquired a wider understanding of death and what it entails. They begin to realise that death is the end of a person's life, that the person who has died won't return and that life functions have been terminated. By the age of seven the average child accepts that death is an inevitability and that all people including themselves will eventually die.

This understanding can also increase a child's anxieties regarding the imminent deaths of other people who they are close to. Children of this age are broadening their social networks by attending school and are therefore open to receive both information and misinformation from their peers and social circles.

With this in mind it is important that the cause of death, the funeral and burial process and what happens to the deceased person's body are explained in a factual and age appropriate manner to the bereaved child. Children will ask many questions and may want to know intricate details pertaining to the death and decomposition of the body. Again, it is vital that children have such details explained to them clearly so that they understand.

At this developmental stage children can empathise with and show compassion for peers that have been bereaved. Children aged between five and ten often copy the coping mechanisms that they observe in bereaved adults and they may try to disguise their emotions in an attempt to protect the bereaved adult. The bereaved child can sometimes feel that they need permission to show their emotions and talk about their feelings.

The important thing is to let them do this. Avoid remarks such as, "Come on be a big brave girl for mummy" or "Big boys don't cry", such comments however well meant can make children feel they need to hide their feelings or that what they are feeling is wrong. This can cause complications as the bereaved child develops.

### **Teenagers' understanding of death**

Young people or teenagers have developed a greater understanding of death, the long term implications of losing someone close and are more keenly aware of the emotional aspects than their younger counterparts.

Due to the developmental changes taking place within the young person at this time their reactions to death are likely to be extremely intense. Many young people will reflect on the injustice of the death asking why the person who has died had to die and they will be considering in greater depth the notion of fate.

The bereaved young person is likely to become concerned about who will pay the bills or care for them if the person who has died was their primary caregiver. The bereaved young person is likely to have a wider social network which they are more likely to seek support from than their immediate family as they struggle to create an identity independent from that of their family.

The young person's tasks of grieving are very similar to that of an adult but the young mourner is often unable to manage the strong emotions that bereavement entails and can therefore present as being extremely angry and even end up in physical fights. Some bereaved young people can revert to childish behaviour in order to relocate some security and normality in their lives where as others might try to "grow up too fast" and see themselves as taking on adult roles.

It is essential to remember that young people are not adults and should therefore not be burdened with adult roles. Like all children and young people, bereaved teenagers need to be allowed and encouraged to share how they are feeling and what frightens them.

There can be a tendency for young people to try and avert their emotions or bottle them up by avoiding the family or by assuming the role of an adult. If this happens, gentle encouragement is needed for the young person to open up and communicate their feelings. Sometimes a bereaved young person may become involved in risky behaviours in an attempt to manage their grief and its associated emotions.

For example, some bereaved young people may use alcohol or drugs as a way of self soothing. Often the alcohol / drugs act as an anaesthetic to the pain they are experiencing. Self harming can also be employed by bereaved young people in an attempt to help them cope with their sadness. If the bereaved young person is self medicating or harming themselves help should be sought.

### Key points to remember

- 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.

## Complicated bereavement in children

Complicated Bereavement (also known as complicated mourning, complicated bereavement, prolonged grief) is the concept used when a bereaved person appears to be “stuck” in their grief process or their grief has become a way of life.

Grief is a natural response to the death of someone close and everyone will experience grief in a unique and individual way. Although there are no limits as to how long grieving should last and what it should consist of, practitioners, healthcare professionals and academics agree that if a bereaved person is unable to move forward through their grief, then they are most likely exhibiting complicated bereavement. Both anticipated bereavement (when a person is expected to die as a result of a terminal illness) and unexpected bereavement can be further complicated for children and young people by a number of factors, including:

- Relationship factors
- Circumstantial factors
- Multiple losses
- Personality factors
- Social factors

- Relationship factors

The relationship that the child or young person had with the person who has died is extremely important. For example, complicated grief is more likely to occur if the person who has died was the child’s parent, sibling or best friend. If the child or young person was dependent upon the person who has died or has been diagnosed with mental health problems then the risk of complicated grief increases.

- Circumstantial factors

If the death was sudden and unexpected or as a result of suicide the child or young person is at greater risk of experiencing complicated grief. The bereaved child or young person may feel responsible for not being able to prevent the death and in the case of suicide may be acutely aware of social stigma.

- Multiple losses

This means that a child or young person who has experienced other deaths previously or has experienced a number of people close to them die in one instance (for example a terrorist attack, natural disaster or road traffic accident with one or more people close to the child or young person involved) are more vulnerable to complicated grief. Also, if before or after the death a child or young person has suffered other losses such as a change in school or the divorce of parents, this too can make complicated grief more likely.

- Personality factors

How emotionally resourceful or resilient a child or young person is may determine if that child or young person will experience complicated grief. If a child or young person has poor coping skills, is culturally isolated or financially deprived this can increase the likelihood of complicated grief.

- Social factors

If a bereaved child or young person is exposed to poor housing, substance misuse, domestic violence and poverty they can be at risk of complicated grief. The probability of complicated grief is increased if the bereaved child or young person does not have access to social networks and appropriate support systems.

General advice:

It is important to remember that not all children and young people who experience any of these factors will automatically experience complicated grief. Anyone can be at risk of complicated grief and not necessarily because of these factors.

The British Medical Journal has described complicated grief as, "...the persistent and disruptive yearning, pining and longing for the deceased." The following are what the BMJ stated as being symptomatic of complicated grief:

- Frequent trouble accepting the death.
- Inability to trust others since the death.
- Excessive bitterness related to the death.
- Uneasiness about moving on with life.
- Detachment from other people to whom the bereaved person was previously close.
- The prolonged feeling that life is meaningless
- The view that the future will never hold any prospect of fulfilment.
- Excessive and prolonged agitation since the death.

As the nature of grief is so individual it can be difficult to identify possible complicated grief. The process of grief can move quickly or can proceed slowly but no change at all can be worrying. An indicator of complicated grief is grief that appears to be stuck or frozen and the bereaved child or young person cannot move towards acceptance of the death. The grief becomes the child or young person's life and they can appear reluctant or anxious to progress on their journey through bereavement.

Complicated grief often requires support therefore if you think that a bereaved child or young person is exhibiting signs of this you may want to contact Cruse.

How can I help?

- Remember that the grieving process differs from person to person and therefore complicated grief can be difficult to identify.
- If you are concerned that your child or young person has become "stuck" in their grief contact Cruse Bereavement Care for support and advice.

- Encourage your child or young person to talk about their feelings and what they are thinking. Talking can help the bereaved child or young person process their grief and feel supported.
- If your child or young person has mentioned taking their own life speak with your GP immediately.
- Don't be embarrassed to ask for help, you are doing the right thing for your child or young person.

**Key points to remember**

- Complicated grief occurs when the bereaved child or young person becomes stuck within their grief.
- Certain factors such as the relationship the bereaved child or young person shared with the person who has died or the presence of good support systems can increase / decrease the likelihood of complicated grief.
- Complicated grief can be observed when a bereaved child or young person's mourning has become the all consuming feature of their life.
- Bereaved children and young people experiencing complicated grief will require support.
- Grief is a natural response to bereavement but grief that is complicated can be unhelpful and potential damaging to the mourner.

## Tips for coping from children and young people

This page gives some suggestions for coping with bereavement put forward by children and young people who have been bereaved.

Some of the ideas were volunteered by bereaved children and young people who used the Cruse website, RD4U (now replaced by 'Hope Again') to share coping strategies with bereaved peers.

- Get creative. Write a poem or letter to your loved one who has died. Keep a diary of how you are feeling so that you can pour your feelings on to the page.
- Make a memory box. Gather together letters, badges, photographs, and keepsakes you have from your loved one and put them in to a special memory box that you can reopen and reminisce over when you need to.
- Try to focus on some of the good times you and your loved one shared together.
- Remember that people react to loss in different ways.
- Talk to people; don't let your hurt grow until you break down.
- Just take one day at a time.
- Visit the grave if you are ready to. It might make you feel closer to your loved one.
- It is OK to feel sad, angry and scared and to cry. It is also OK to feel happy and enjoy things.
- It is OK if the loved one you have lost is not in your thoughts all the time.
- Hug those loved ones who are still here.
- Remember that you are not alone and that help is out there if you need it.
- Bereavement can seem to last forever, but it does get easier with time.

## How to help a child or young person

### Parents, carers and guardians

If you are the parent, carer or guardian of a bereaved child or young person and you too share the bereavement, it is important that whilst you are supporting your child or young person that you are being supported as well. The death of someone close is extremely painful and therefore you need to safeguard your emotional, mental and physical well being in order to support your bereaved child or young person.

If you share the bereavement ensure that you not only encourage your child or young person to talk about their feelings but 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 and neither of you will be able to progress if you are not being honest with each other about your emotions and how you are coping and this can be problematic later on.

If you suspect that your child or young person is deliberately hiding their feelings in order to protect you, explain to them that they do not need to do this and encourage them to talk about how they truly feel rather than bottling things up to spare your feelings.

The death of someone close can plunge a family in to chaos and confusion and normal daily life can be turned on its head. This said try to keep your child or young person's routines as regular as they were prior to the death, the structure of meal times, bedtime and the like are extremely important as they not only safeguard the physical well being of the child or young person but afford stability and security.

If your child or young person states that they want to return to school, college or work, let them. Don't be tempted to keep them at home; returning to the normality of school, college or work will help the child or young person to progress though the journey of their grief. For further ideas please click on the section, Information for Schools.

If your child or young person has started to become violent against themselves or others do not be afraid to reinforce boundaries. Explain to the child that whilst you understand their frustration and anger it is not acceptable to hurt themselves or others.

If your child or young person states that they do not want to attend the funeral do not force them to. Likewise if your bereaved child or young person does want to attend the funeral let them, children and young people have a need to say goodbye as much as adults and if they wish to attend the funeral to do this or they wish to remain at home and say their goodbyes privately you should respect their wishes. Bereavement affects people in very different ways and therefore if your child or young person is displaying regressive behaviour such as bed wetting / soiling, baby talk or being a little absent minded don't be too quick to chastise them, they are grieving and need support and love.



If you become angry, the bereaved child or young person will probably regress further and their grief will be further compounded. If you are concerned about your bereaved child or young person then don't be ashamed to ask for professional help. Contact Cruse Bereavement Care or speak with your GP.

### **Key points to remember**

The following list gives some key points to remember concerning children, young people 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 to the child or young person.