

Information for Parents/ Carers: How to support your child with bereavement, grief and loss

Your child may react in different ways to the news that someone has died.

In the next few days, and maybe for longer, you may notice some of the following behaviours in:

- Feeling upset, sad, depressed, guilty, helpless or confused.
- Physical symptoms of stress e.g. headache, feeling sick, trembling, palpitations, dry mouth, needing to go to the toilet more frequently
- Being angry or on a short fuse with family members and friends
- Separation difficulties - not wanting to let parents or siblings out of sight
- Sudden thoughts about what has happened – these can be triggered at any time and can make it difficult to concentrate and make decisions
- Finding it harder to relax and sleep disturbances
- Finding it difficult to talk about what has happened. When children find it difficult to talk they will often express their feelings through their behaviour instead.
- Feeling afraid and vulnerable – children may try to hide these feelings
- Denial – they may seem surprisingly unaffected. Sometimes this can be because they are really hurt.
- Guilt – this is a common response to death, especially if the child is unable to express their sadness about the loss. They will need reassurance that nothing they did had anything to do with the death that occurred. In the event of an accident it is important to emphasise that no-one was to blame.

All of these behaviours are normal reactions to hearing about a death.

What Can You Do to Help?

- **Acknowledge what has happened** – talk about the death. Do not be afraid to use the word dead/death.
- **Be patient. Listen** and allow expressions of grief
- **Be clear, open & honest** – Use simple concrete language that is suited to your child's age. If required, give basic facts without giving too much detail. Be guided by the child's questions.
- **Accept their feelings.** It's OK to feel peculiar, afraid, guilty, angry, sad – or any other feeling - and that it is OK to cry and be upset. Reassure them that their feelings are understandable and normal. Giving it a name can help "Name it to tame it".
- **Expect questions** – children will ask questions to help them make sense of what is happening. This can be challenging. You do not need to have all the answers. Some questions may be asked repeatedly.

- **Be available** – when your child needs to talk. They may break off from conversation. This is fine they will come back to it if they want to /when they are ready. Do not be surprised that they can set their grief aside. Play helps children express themselves and release anxiety. Children need to know it is ok to feel happy.
- **Let your child know how you feel too** – don't try to hide your emotions.
- **Provide space and time** – children will need to opportunities be quiet and process their thoughts.
- **Provide reassurance** – being supportive and predictable helps make children feel safe.
- **Try to keep to normal routines and provide stability at home.**
- **Look after yourself** – your capacity to help is related to how well you feel. Make sure you take steps if you feel you need help by reaching out to others. Regular sleep, a healthy diet, exercise and staying connected with friends and family all help.

Avoid the following terms:

- went to sleep
- passed on/away
- gone to the other side
- now you have to be a big/boy girl
- you are now the man/woman of the house
- your family needs you to be strong
- I know just how you feel
- At least
- Your mum/dad would not want you to be.....

When will my child feel better?

All children and their circumstances are different. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Allow your child the time it takes them to feel better. Experiencing death is a normal part of being a human being. Your child should eventually feel better.

The grieving process can last up to a year or longer with periods of "normal" behaviour interrupted by spurts of grief.

Some children have difficulty with grieving and moving on:

- Excessive and prolonged periods of crying
- Extreme changes in behaviour
- Noticeable changes in school performance
- Withdrawal for prolonged periods of time
- Lack of interest in friends and activities they used to enjoy
- Frequent nightmares and sleep disturbances
- Frequent headaches and/ or other physical complaints
- Weight loss

- A general lack of interest in life
- Prolonged negative thinking or lack of interest about the future

Persistent symptoms may need help. You can seek further advice and support from your GP.