

Schools' Information Pack

How to help when there has been a bereavement

This Schools' Information Pack is a guide for teachers, teaching assistants, learning support assistants, headteachers, education welfare officers and other adults working in schools. It aims to provide you with support and information when a death occurs within the school community.

This document has been written with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in mind but is a relevant resource for use in the case of bereavement generally.

People are often at a loss to know what to say or do to help a child who has been bereaved by the death of someone important to them. Every situation is different, and children will be affected to a greater or lesser degree, dependent on the circumstances of the death and the nature of the relationship they had with the person who has died.

Many children and young people will have been isolated from their loved ones. Thoughts and feelings of their own mortality may rise to the surface, manifesting in exaggerated behaviours or those not common for the child or young person such as aggression, noncompliance, tearfulness.

A child may blame themselves for causing a person's illness and feel guilty about things they should or shouldn't have said or done.

There could be concerns about the wider issues which seem tangible to the child or young person during this time of uncertainty: 'Who will cook me dinner?' 'I don't want to live there!'

A student may not have been able to spend time with a loved one beforehand to say goodbye or go to the funeral due to social distancing regulations.

Our brain requires preparation in order to process death. Rituals such as visiting the chapel of rest and attending funerals are a part of this process but as things stand, we are not able to engage in these rituals. For children and young people who have not had the opportunity to do this there could be a prolonged period of shock and a lack of acceptance that their loved one has died and they are likely to experience frustration at unanswered questions, feelings of blame or a strong sense of injustice: these are emotions children often find difficult to verbalise.



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be affected differently.***

What can you do to help?

Most grieving children do not need a 'bereavement expert' they need people who care, and who are emotionally available to them. Schools, just by carrying on with their usual day-to-day activities while being aware of the bereavement, can do a huge amount to support a grieving pupil.

The most helpful thing that you can do for grieving children, is to acknowledge what has happened. Keep it very simple, "I was very sorry to hear that 'n' has died. I imagine you feel a lot of things about it, I would too."

Do not be afraid to use the words death and dying. It may feel harsh to our adult minds, but children and young people need us to:

- (a) give them permission to use that language
- (b) support them to make things explicit
- (c) model to them that we can cope with the situation by using accurate terminology.

It is also important to remember those children and young people who have not been immediately affected. There could be an element of survivor's guilt that manifests itself collectively within schools or in individuals.

Be mindful that some children and young people may have had their own anxieties triggered by what is happening and may need additional support.

It can be a difficult time for a bereaved pupil as they may feel different to their peers and may struggle to connect with their friends. Equally, young friends may find it difficult to interact with someone who is bereaved: people tend not to want to say the wrong thing, or to risk upsetting someone. To be on the receiving end of what may feel like silence, however, can feel difficult. So, we must encourage pupils to talk about it with each other. Nurture these relationships by asking a bereaved pupil what they need and want from their friends and then support these young people as they develop their friendships.

Remember that for some, grieving may not start until long after this pandemic is over and they can finally begin to think about what has happened.

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Helpful tips for parents

We have compiled below some things to note and some useful hints and tips for parents and carers who may be supporting children and young people who are grieving:

Grieving children and young people need to feel heard: make time to listen to your child. We can do this by introducing it as a concept and let them know you will sit with a hot chocolate every day with the sole intention of talking. Or you can do this more subtly and create a time when a conversation may just unfold.

Try to follow routines as they provide a sense of safety for grieving children and young people.

Reassure them that feelings of numbness and disbelief are natural and that you are there for them, will listen and can cope with sharing the emotions and feelings they are experiencing.

There is no time limit on grief – try to remember this.

Talk about the person who has died. It is good to talk about it and it often helps.

Be consistent when answering questions about death.

We often provide children with a role; we should not expect them to emotionally look after the adults in the house.

Remind children and young people that it's okay to not be okay.

Explain to the child or young person that others may be upset and cry as they will also be missing that person too.

Try to maintain boundaries.

Be aware that future illness may cause additional worry for the child or young person.

Useful Resources:

- I'll Always Love You by Hans Wilhelm
- Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley
- When Someone Very Special Dies by Marge Eaton Heegaard

Useful websites:

- **Child Bereavement UK** have guidance films and information to support families and schools in supporting children during the pandemic, including staying in touch with someone who is seriously ill and supporting pupils.
- **Winston's Wish** have produced guidance on topics including talking to bereaved children about coronavirus, telling a child that someone has died from coronavirus, and saying goodbye when a funeral is not possible
- **Cruse Bereavement Care** have produced some tips for talking to children among their wider resources about grief and coronavirus
- **Grief Encounter** are running activities for bereaved children and families on their Instagram page

The Cycle of Grief

It is generally felt that there is a **cycle of grief** which involves five different stages. It is important for everyone concerned to understand that grief is not a linear path. People may visit all of these stages or only some and they can be in any order - particularly with children who will have more ups and downs, good and bad days.

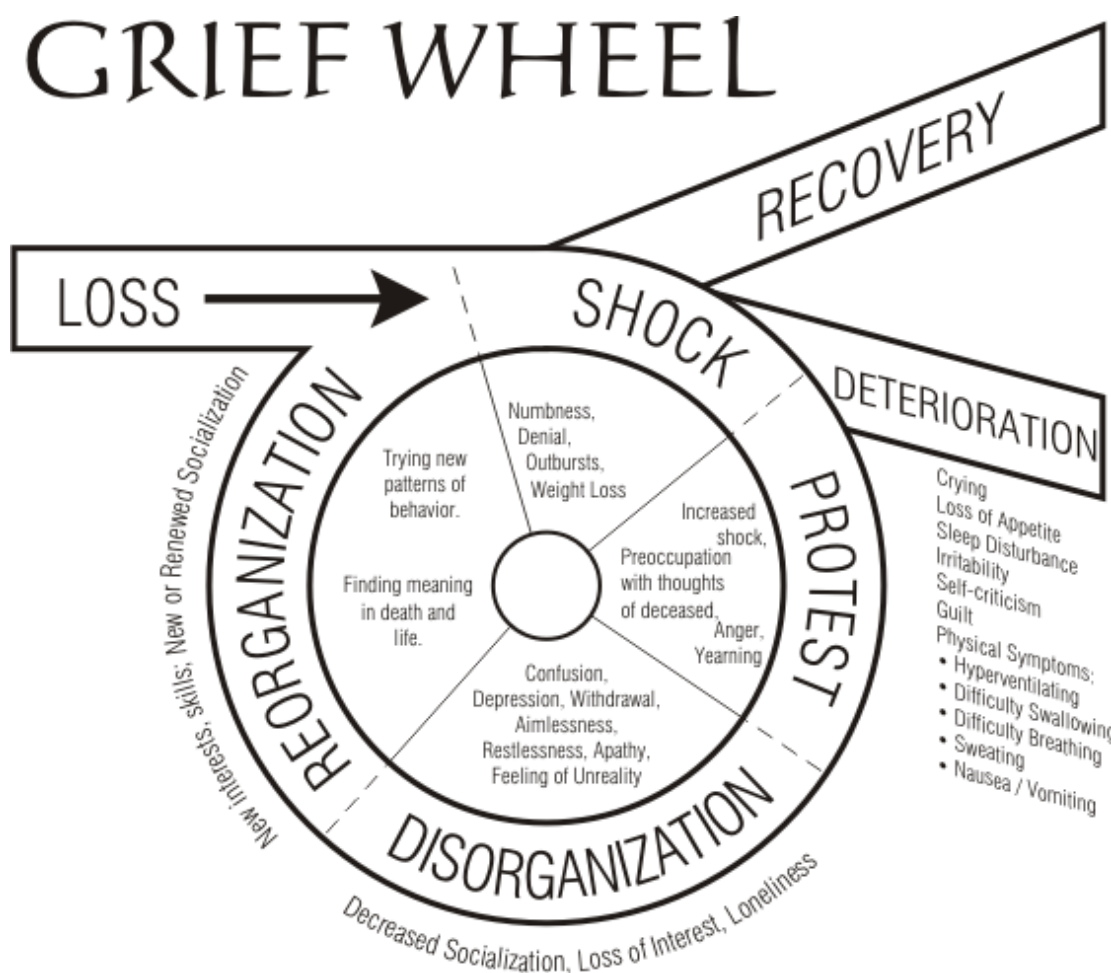
Denial – feeling of shock, can't believe it has happened, things feel surreal, something must have gone wrong, it can't be true etc

Anger – against the system, God or oneself

Bargaining – sometimes with God i.e., "if you bring him back I will be really good". Guilt may surface here – why didn't I talk to him more? What could we have done? etc.

Depression – feelings of emptiness, being overwhelmed, doesn't feel like talking, avoiding social situations etc. There can also be a tendency to not self-care.

Acceptance – a re-entrance into reality. This is not necessarily an acceptance that the situation is okay but an acknowledgement that this has happened and that things won't change.



Looking after oneself while supporting others

Grief will ripple through a community and affect everyone in different ways. It can be difficult to deal with your own feelings whilst supporting others and responses can be muddled and blurred. Remember: your best is good enough. It is important to remember that empathy can be exhausting so make sure you take time to look after yourself.

None of us knows how this pandemic will end. What we do know is that it is important to look after the emotional wellbeing of all adults working with children and young people who have been affected by COVID-19.

If you would like to talk to us about any issues concerning bereavement at this time, please do not hesitate to contact us – we are here to help:

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