

Credit to 'The boy, the mole, the fox and the horse' by Charlie Mackesy (2019).

Managing Death, Loss and Grief; A Guide for Parents and Carers

Birmingham Educational Psychology Team has drawn up this guidance to advise how best to manage bereavement, loss and grief.

It covers different situations and emotions bereaved people may have to deal with, as well as some information on how to support children and young people.

Managing your own needs and emotions



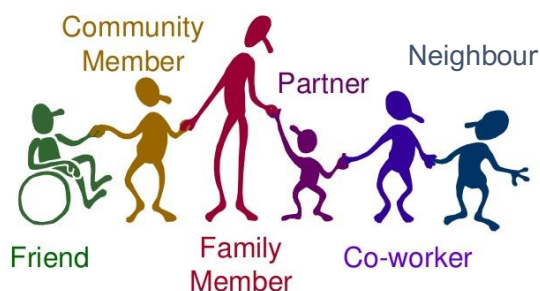
'Put on your own oxygen mask as well as helping your children with theirs'.

Being bereaved, or experiencing loss, and death can be an extremely lonely time.

In order to support your children, it is important that you consider your own support, especially if you are experiencing the death of a close family member. A bereaved family might be isolated together, and although at times this can be a support, at other times tensions and resentments could be magnified making it difficult for everyone to help each other.

Don't feel guilty if you are struggling. Reach out to others who might be finding it difficult too, you may be able to help each other. Don't feel that everything needs to look 'normal'. A lot of what will be happening is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation, and **it's important to avoid putting pressure on yourself at this time.**

Consider your own support network; who do you feel you can speak to, or reach out for help?



Although you may not be able to see people in person, you can **keep in regular contact with others** using phone, text, or internet if available. **Consider keeping in contact with someone everyday however you are able**, even if it is a message, or two-minute call.

Look after yourself and get rest. You may find the following helpful:

- Do some exercise around the house or go for a walk every day; try to keep to a set time wherever possible.
- Keep to a regular routine of getting up, dressed and eating meals.
- Allow some 'down time' on the weekends, as you would in any other situation.
- **Seek practical help from friends, family or neighbours** if needed.

It is normal to move between periods of intense grieving and planning; try to be aware of when this is happening, and plan when you can. It's also ok to be sad or upset in-front of your children, although be aware if this is happening frequently; it might be a sign that you need to check your social support network again.

Grief and loss in children and young people; what it looks like

Depending on their age, children and young people will understand and experience grief and loss differently. It is quite normal for grief and loss to look different in different aged children, and it can often look like there are periods where the child has 'got over it' but is a way of processing what is happening. The grief can often emerge later, or emerge, go away, and then emerge again in a cycle. All ages can and do experience loss and grief.

Infants:

- Can feel loss that affects the way they are looked after and their daily routines; they are sensitive to unhappy feelings around them.
- They might become anxious, fretful and clingy.

Pre-schoolers

- Usually see death as temporary and reversible. They may repeatedly ask when the person is coming back, and struggle to understand abstract concepts such as 'heaven' and 'soul'.
- They may show signs of sadness, but these are often very short. Instead, you might see recurring moments of sadness, and you a lot of death related play, which is their way of trying to process what happened.
- They can also become physically ill, refuse to eat, have disturbed sleep, becoming hyperactive or breaking things, or withdrawing emotionally.
- You might see them losing skills, such as having toileting accidents, becoming clingy, and being fearful of strangers.

Young children

- They understand that death is final and may begin to fear about death of close people, or even themselves.
- They may ask a lot of specific questions about the nature of the death, as a way of understanding, but may not have the language to express their emotions. You may see acting out, or attention seeking behaviours instead.
- They can believe that they caused the death and feel responsible, e.g. by being naughty. They may be extremely guilty.
- You may see them losing skills again and acting as a younger child. They might refuse to go to school (when schools open back up again).

Teenagers

- They understand death is final and irreversible, and so may feel depressed or overwhelmed. While they may understand death more like adults, they can often find it difficult to put their feelings into words. They may not show their feelings in case they upset others.
- They may dislike appearing different from peers or friends, so you may see a denial of feelings, and rejecting offers of support.
- They may act recklessly in 'defiance' of death or may become withdrawn.

Supporting child and young people



There is no perfect way, solution or strategy to help your children cope with grief. Each family will be different, and each death or loss can be different each time for each child, depending on the situation.

What is important, and makes the difference is open communication, normalising of emotions, and being there and present for your children. Grieving children need support and presence more than advice.

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When speaking to children and young people about death and loss, try to:

Use clear language that children understand, is age appropriate and unambiguous. Avoid saying someone is 'lost', they've 'gone to sleep' or 'passed away'; instead say they have 'died'.

Be honest with them about what happened and be prepared to answer questions as much as possible. It's ok to say if you don't know.

Don't make promises, but reassure them that they are loved and that you are there for them. Try to talk about what you can do and is in your control, and come up with a solution together (i.e. can't see Grandma, so we'll make her something).

Give the information a bit at a time if needed, allowing them the opportunity for them to ask questions. Don't feel like you have to divulge everything at once.

Be prepared for your child to ask the same questions multiple times; this is a way of processing what happened. Keep your answers consistent.

Listen to your child's experience of death, and loss without judgment. Ask them about what they are thinking, and reassure them if they blame themselves for what happened.

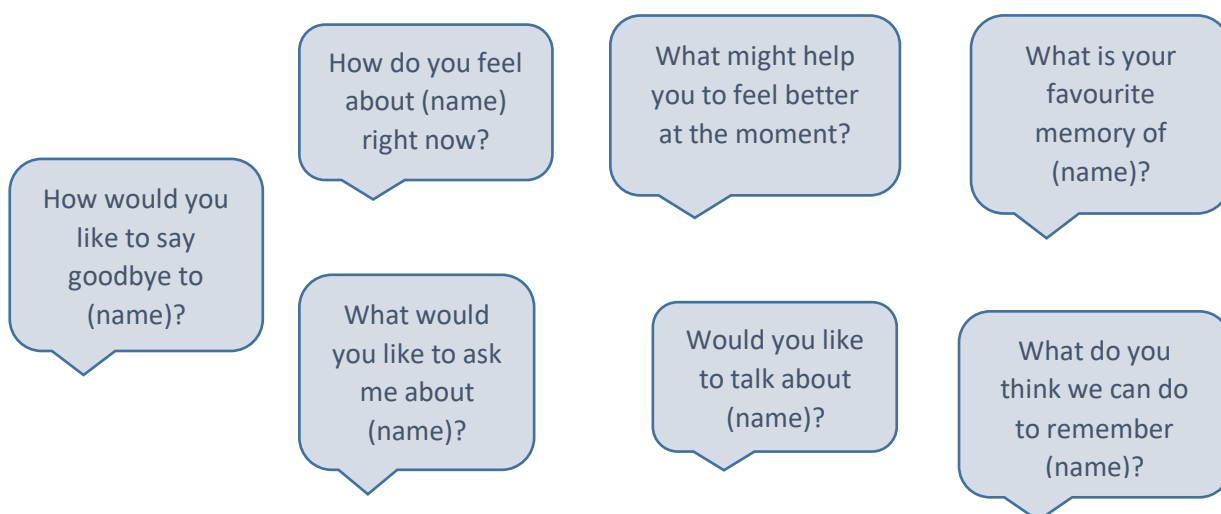
It's also important for you to realise that some things can't be 'made better' for your children; 'super parents' don't exist. Just do and say what you can.

- Don't be afraid to show children how you are feeling; children learn about dealing with emotions by watching us, you are acting as a model on how to name, express and manage emotions.
- Tell them that the reactions they are having are normal.
- Pay extra attention, spend extra time with them, be more nurturing and comforting. Have set family time each week to do something together.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally. Help them find safe ways to express their feelings e.g. by drawing, taking exercise or talking
- As well as advising the child about appropriate use of social media, monitor their use, particularly during this vulnerable time.

Ideas of Activities to Support Children Experiencing Bereavement

- Looking at photos together
- A memory display or box using photos and drawings
- Reading stories about loss
- Watching favourite DVDs and videos together
- Lighting a candle
- Writing letters or drawing pictures to the deceased.
- Saying a prayer
- Doing favourite activities together that the person might have done with them, i.e. making a cake that Grandma used to make, eating a special meal.

Some conversation starters with children and teenagers to talk about what happened could be:



Children with special educational needs may need extra help with their understanding and ways to express feelings. **Talk to your child's school about any resources or support you might be able to access.**

Books to read with children about bereavement, loss and grief

Reading books together can be a useful way to think about death, loss and grief. Some suggested books are below.

For all ages, including teenagers:

- 'Michael Rosen's Sad Book' by Michael Rosen (2001).
- 'The boy, the mole, the fox and the horse' by Charlie Mackesy (2019).

For primary school children:

- 'The Invisible String' by Patrice Karst (2001)
- 'Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine' by Diana Crossley (2001)
- 'Always and Forever' by Alan Durant (2013).
- 'Badger's Parting Gifts' by Susan Varley (1985)

There are less books written for older children on this topic, but the ones below deal with death either explicitly, or as part of the story:

- 'Straight talk about death for teenagers: how to cope with losing someone you love' by Earl Grollman (2018).
- 'The Fault in Our Stars' by John Green (2012).
- 'Before I die' by Jenny Downham (2007).
- 'A Monster Calls' by Patrick Ness (2011).

Useful websites

- Winston's Wish <https://www.winstonswish.org>
- Childhood Bereavement Trust UK <https://www.childbereavementuk.org>
- Candle Project <https://www.stchristophers.org.uk>

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