



**STOCKPORT**  
METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL



# **Understanding Loss and Bereavement**

*A guide for schools  
and families during  
the coronavirus  
pandemic*

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## INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been written to help schools and parents/carers to understand loss and bereavement and to enable them to support children through the challenges that are arising during the coronavirus pandemic.

It is written to provide structure when you may need it but be guided by your instincts and know that with kindness, compassion, sensitivity and time people usually develop their own coping mechanisms. They may just need you to offer a helping hand.

As well as offering understanding and reassurance in dealing with different aspects of this complicated subject, it is hoped that you will find a source of practical help too. There is a list of organisations / websites at the back of the booklet, and we have referenced links to resources on 'well-being', to help to promote a positive and healthy mindset.

## WHAT IS LOSS?

Loss is losing someone or something you really loved and treasured or were strongly attached to, and it can bring great sadness. Life is full of all sorts of losses, some bigger than others. We lose control of the safe world around us and unexpected things happen, affecting us enormously. Young people and children don't expect loss and, very often, they are not prepared for it. Death is one loss and is always shocking no matter how anticipated it is or how long it has been coming. Death can make children or young people feel different from their friends; it interferes with their usual activities, placing a heavy burden on their feelings, expectations and responsibilities.

No two people are the same. How they feel is different. How they react is different. The feeling of loss and the pain of grief will be different for each person. Times of grief can be very scary and confusing for children and young people. Dealing with pain and grief can be very hard but this does give them the opportunity to grow emotionally.

## GRIEF

Grief is a natural response to loss. It is the emotional suffering you feel when something or someone you love is taken away. Often the pain of loss can feel overwhelming, and many difficult or unexpected emotions may occur. It can also disrupt physical health, e.g. making it difficult to sleep and eat. These are normal reactions to loss. The more significant the loss the more intense the grief may be.

Death, mourning and grief involve feelings of helplessness and lack of control. These feelings will be difficult for children and young people to cope with.

## THE PROCESS OF GRIEF

Grieving is an important part of coming to terms with death or any other losses. Inevitably it takes time. Healing happens gradually, it can't be forced or hurried. There is no 'normal' timetable for grieving. For some it's weeks or months, for others the grieving process may take years.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross proposed that there are 5 stages of grief in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. The stages are universal and are experienced across cultures, but people will spend different lengths of time working through each step, and not necessarily in a linear fashion. Some steps may be omitted.

### **DENIAL AND ISOLATION:** *"This isn't happening, this can't be happening"*

Denial is a defence mechanism that buffers the immediate shock of the loss, numbing us to our emotions. Blocking out the world and hiding from facts.

### **ANGER:** *Why is this happening? Who is to blame?*

As denial and isolation fades, the reality and its pain re-emerge. Angry feelings may be experienced towards the person who has died, even by very young children; angry at someone leaving them, angry that their loved one has been taken away. They may show real fury, not in words but in physical actions, perhaps breaking toys or lying / kicking on the floor.

Young people may express the same anger in a more outspoken way or in a more violent way, such as hitting out at others verbally or physically, or sometimes by stealing. Some young people / children may be able to express how they feel in words. Adults need listen and accept these feelings. They should be encouraged to express anger in a way that does not hurt others.

### **BARGAINING:** *"If only...."*

This is a normal reaction to feelings of helplessness. “If only I had been a better person towards them,” Or, if only we’d sought medical attention sooner.” A secret attempt to make a deal with a higher power to postpone the inevitable and the accompanying pain. It is often accompanied with guilt; believing there was something that could have been done differently.

**DEPRESSION: “I’m too sad to do anything”**

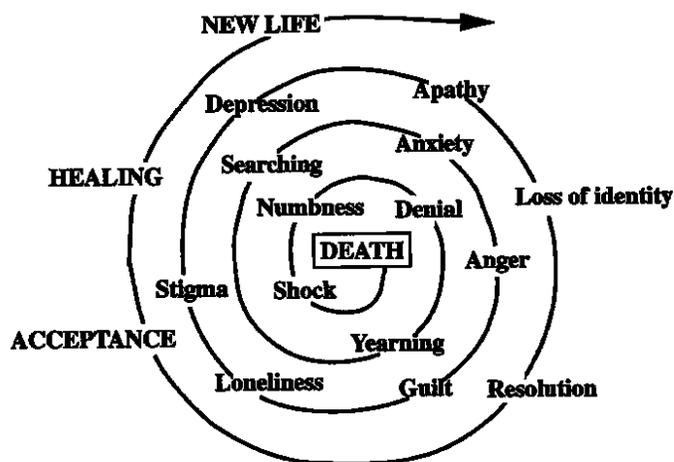
This can be a mixture of feelings; being worried, fearful or guilty. All these emotions together make young people and children feel low or depressed. They may feel that the grief is too much to bear.

Young people and children may have real worries; practical things may concern them, such as “who will give me my pocket money and help me with my homework?” Adults need to reassure them by discussing their concerns and helping to ease the emptiness and the pain of loss.

**ACCEPTANCE: I’m at peace with what happened**

This is the stage where it may be easier to talk more happily about the loss, settling into new circumstances, perhaps regaining a greater interest in life.

*The grief cycle:*



*Passing smoothly from stage to stage or feeling to feeling may not always happen. People can move forwards through the stages quickly or very slowly and go backwards and forwards.*

## REACTIONS TO GRIEF

When young people are grieving, they may experience some of the following reactions; these are **normal** reactions to grief:

- ❖ They may feel unwell and experience aching limbs, colds, infections, headaches, tummy upsets. If the loved one was ill before they died, these symptoms are more likely.
- ❖ Some young people or children may become more fearful. Children especially may be frightened of the dark, have nightmares or not want to go out. They may become anxious about being separated from their parents/carers and worry too that they could die prematurely.
- ❖ Younger children may also start to bite their nails, pick themselves or twiddle their hair. They may start to stammer, wet the bed or regress to an early stage of development, perhaps using baby talk.
- ❖ Children often engage in magical thinking and fantasy; hence they need to be informed of all the facts and knowledge surrounding the death (to stop them thinking they caused the death by their thoughts, for example).
- ❖ Eating difficulties are common. Some can overeat, while others will lose their appetite. These reactions will only last for a short time. If this is not the case it may be a good idea to seek further help.
- ❖ Some young people or children will experience difficulties with concentration and may feel tired or lethargic. School work may suffer.
- ❖ Some may find their own ways of detracting from the pain and hurt. They may become engrossed in sport, clothes or music, and depending on their age they may turn to alcohol or other substances to ease their pain. An awareness by parents/carers of changes in their behaviour may lead the young person in a healthier direction.
- ❖ The young person may worry about their own death when someone close dies. This can cause a sense of confusion and meaninglessness, especially if the person who died was young.

## AGES AND STAGES

Each child will respond in their own way, but the way in which many make sense of death and grief will be related to their stage of development.

**0-2 years:** Infants have no understanding of death but can sense separation and may show physical and emotional reactions.

**2-5 years:** Very young children may think that death is reversible, so they need clear unambiguous language. They may need repeated explanations and reassurance that it is not their fault. Be honest; their imagination may be vivid.

**5-10 years:** By this age, many children realise death is irreversible. They may feel insecure with sudden outbursts of emotion. They may be very inquisitive, so be honest and use language they understand.

**10-18 years:** Young people usually have an adult concept of death. Listen and acknowledge their feelings. During adolescence, the range of emotions experienced may be particularly noticeable.

## SUPPORTING BEREAVED CHILDREN THROUGH THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

### How parents can help:

- ❖ Keep talking and keep listening to what children are saying.
- ❖ Acknowledge their grief / worries / concerns. Talk to them honestly and calmly about what is happening. There are lots of resources out there that you can share together which will help with questions.
- ❖ Acknowledge any guilt or shame, and emphasise / reassure that this is not their fault.
- ❖ Tell them the reactions they are having are normal. Expect changes in behaviour or personality; they will return to their usual selves.

- ❖ Don't discourage displays of emotion. Let them know it is okay to cry. It's also okay to laugh; it doesn't mean they have forgotten the person.
- ❖ Reassure them that they are safe, and if they are worrying that more people will die, advise that more people get better from coronavirus than die. Most people are only ill for a few days.
- ❖ Talk about coronavirus. If you don't talk about it, they may worry more. Limit what they watch / see on the news for themselves and encourage them to get information from reputable websites.
- ❖ Look after yourself. Think about your own mental health and how you need to protect that. If you are feeling worried / anxious, talk to someone who can listen and support you.

*Activities to support children:*

- Share memories. Continue to talk about the loved one who has died and talk about the time spent with them.
- Some may like to create a memory display, light a candle in the person's memory.
- Stories about loss (which help them to understand) may be useful.

**How schools can help:**

*Initial response*

- A key member of staff to contact the family to: acknowledge what has happened and express support.
- Gauge when it is appropriate to raise the issue of sharing the news with the school community. Be respectful of privacy and sensitive to wishes.
- As and when appropriate, share the news with the rest of the staff, and then with the child's peers and the rest of the school, in a manner that respects how the family want it to be shared. The governors will also need to hear the news.
- A key adult could contact the young person through a written card or letter, to acknowledge their loss and to offer support and to agree one or two people who will keep in touch (agreed this with the family/carer).

- Consider the possible impact on others in the school community and the support they may need.
- Check in on staff reactions / response.

#### *Further support*

- Key adults to keep in touch
- Consider compiling condolences for the child from their peers e.g. collect messages electronically
- Offer resources to help the family to deal with their grief

*NB: Check the above with the family first; they may wish to be left alone initially, and to contact you within their own time.*

## **TELLING A CHILD THAT SOMEONE HAS DIED FROM CORONAVIRUS**

Information given will depend on the young person's / child's age and developmental level, but key points for all children include:

- Use simple, direct language appropriate to their level of development
- Use the term 'died', 'dead', 'death', rather than "We've lost x" or "x has gone to another place," which can be confusing.
- Keep children informed about what is happening and what will be happening (e.g. funeral etc.).
- Check how much they have understood.
- Answer questions openly. If you don't know the answer, tell them you will try to find out. If the answer is too difficult for them to hear, tell them that.
- Repeat explanations more than once.
- Reassure them that they are not to blame.
- Allow and encourage the safe sharing of feelings and thoughts.
- Listen to their feelings, worries and words.

## HELPING A CHILD SAY GOODBYE

If the child or young person was not able to say goodbye to their loved one at the time of death, they could be supported to do this through writing / drawing. Special consideration may be then needed regarding how they can contribute to the funeral if they are not able to attend. There are still ways to make the experience special / deeply meaningful.

1. Children and young people can follow the same order of service from home. This could be at the same time, or later when the relative who attended the funeral can share what happened.
2. Live-streaming may be possible in some instances, so people can watch online from home.
3. Family members may video call each other at the time of the funeral, so they can still be together. They may sing some of the songs, which will be played at the funeral together. Their singing may even be played at the service via live streaming, by someone who is in attendance.
4. Photographs can be taken to show children and young people to help them to understand what happened at the funeral.
5. Keepsakes from the funeral may be meaningful for children, for example, some flowers from the tributes to press and keep, a pebble from the surround area, the order of service.
6. Children can participate by contributing to some of the choices within the ceremony. E.g. choose a piece of music or select a poem.
7. Children could write or draw pictures, to be placed on the coffin, or choose a toy to be placed with the body.
8. They could write a tribute to the person, which is read out at the service.

## WAYS TO HELP YOURSELF

- ❖ Parents: take the pressure off yourself. This is a unique situation that no-one has experienced before. The most important thing you can do for your child is look after yourself. Self-care is critical.
- ❖ Keep in regular contact with others using the phone, text, or internet if it is available to you. You might find it helps to reach out to 'good listeners'.
- ❖ If you do not feel like talking, you could write things down. It might help to write freely about the emotions you are experiencing, or to write to the person you have lost, telling them the things you would like them to hear.
- ❖ Get some fresh air or sunlight each day
- ❖ Eat well: eating healthy meals can make a big difference to your overall sense of well-being.
- ❖ Get enough rest, even if you find it difficult to sleep. Make sure your bedroom is a calm place, and as clear of distractions as possible.
- ❖ Keep to a regular routine of getting up and dressed and eating meals at the usual time, whether you are on your own or part of a group / family.
- ❖ If you feel you have more energy, you may want to do some jobs around the house / garden. It's normal to fluctuate between intense grieving and looking to the future, and so there may be some things you can achieve / do to keep occupied.
- ❖ Don't feel guilty if you are struggling. Reach out to others who may be finding it difficult too; you may be able to help each other.
- ❖ Seek practical help from friends / family if you need it.
- ❖ Build time for relaxation into your day. Controlling your breathing can be a useful way to calm. Breathe in through your nose for a count of 4, until your diaphragm expands, hold for a count of 7, then release the breath slowly through your mouth to a count of 8. You might also try yoga, calming self-talk or soothing music.
- ❖ It can help to distract yourself by doing puzzles, watching a film, visiting your favourite websites, drawing, painting, or reading a gripping book.
- ❖ Do some gentle exercise: this has been shown to stimulate hormones which help us all to recover from feeling stressed.

- ❖ Shift your expectations of 'What is a good day', and notice the positive aspects of each day, however small.
- ❖ Try to renew your motivation for future plans; setting realistic outcomes for what you want to achieve.

## THINKING AHEAD TO THE TRANSITION BACK TO SCHOOL

When returning to school is a realistic option:

- ❖ Talk to the family (and child / young person if age appropriate) to see what they would like to happen when they return to school
- ❖ Consider talking to the child's peers about how grief affects people
- ❖ Acknowledge how difficult it may be for the bereaved pupil to return to school. Ask how they feel about discussing what happened in school.
- ❖ Ensure there is a key adult who the child can talk as / when they need to and communicate practicalities around this.
- ❖ Allow access to a quiet space where the young person / child can be alone if they need to be and agree a way to communicate this.
- ❖ Acknowledge their loss when they are back at school; don't act as though nothing has happened at all.

## USEFUL LINKS

Some children and their parents might benefit from talking to someone outside the family. Please refer to the Local Offer for information about services and additional advice and support, including links to wellbeing resources.

<https://stockport.fsd.org.uk/kb5/stockport/fsd/localoffer.page>

Useful websites:

<https://www.winstonswish.org/>

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/grief/coping-with-grief-and-loss.htm>

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirusdealing-bereavement-and-grief>

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