

I need to support a young person through loss or grief

If you work in schools in a pastoral capacity, you will probably come across a situation where a young person has experienced the death of a relative or friend, classmate or teacher. There may even be a death during the school day, and schools will draw on all available support to be available during these difficult times.

➤ How will you respond if you find yourself in a situation like this?

Some people talk about feeling anxious around those going through bereavement and unsure of what language to use or how to act. The following is a guide on how you may best support a young person as they grieve. The thoughts that follow could easily be a help if you are supporting children or young people experiencing other types of loss such as separation, divorce and when someone is seriously ill or a death is anticipated.

▶ Statistics

Research suggests that for children and young people under the age of 18 years:

- 4% of children are bereaved of a parent/sibling
- 6% the death of a friend
- 13% the death of a grandparent

It is estimated that 2 million children and young people have been bereaved by the death of someone special.

▶ Physical Symptoms

Bereaved children and young people are at increased risk of the following:

- Poorer physical health
- A range of mental health difficulties (anxiety, depression etc)
- Lower self esteem and lower confidence
- Increased risk of teenage pregnancy
- Increased likelihood of dependency on alcohol and drugs
- Increased risk of bullying

- Increased risk of emotional, physical and sexual abuse
- Schooling difficulties (poorer concentration, lack of interest, missing school, missed opportunities)
- Possible school exclusion
- Offending behaviour

When someone dies the pain can be overwhelming and feelings can be very scary and difficult and all jumbled up. There may be feelings such as sadness, anger, loneliness, guilt, disbelief. It can be helpful to reassure a young person that these feelings are normal when you are bereaved.

There may be physical symptoms such as exhaustion, tiredness and having no energy. There can also be loss of appetite and also the inability to sleep. Concentration may also be very difficult and going out with friends can just be too much. Young people may see little point in bothering with anything any more and may wonder how life is going to be in the future. They miss their special person so much. Experiencing such a barrage of emotions is difficult but talking to someone who really wants to understand them and who will listen to them without judging them is a lifeline. Often young people who have experienced the death of someone close speak of the need to re-arrange the landscape of their lives, to make sense of a world with a gaping hole in it. Standing back and looking at things objectively by oneself can be difficult. It helps to say things out loud and hear someone else respond. You can help to create an environment where they can explore how they feel, acknowledge deep down that the loss has happened so that over time they adjust to what has happened and can make the most of their life from now on.

▶ On hearing the news

If the young person bereaved is someone you already are in contact with consider the following. These are things that young people find comforting:-

- Send a card
- Consider attending the funeral (young people appreciate this)
- Visit the family at home (if you feel anxious, imagine what the young person is feeling and take a colleague with you if you can)
- Ask them what may help them when they return to school and tell appropriate staff
- Discuss options with parent/carers if appropriate

▶ On returning to school

- It is helpful to ensure that you and anyone else who needs to know have accurate information about the death (including classmates). Information should be based on family's wishes.
- It may be helpful to suggest a time out card so that the young person can leave the room, perhaps with a named person, when they feel overwhelmed. This is not an excuse to opt out but needs to be used sensitively.
- It is important that young people have their grief acknowledged and that they have someone in school with whom they feel safe to talk. This may be you. Plan this with the young person and staff. This is so important as other significant adults in their life will be distracted by their own grief.
- It is important to be aware that other young people may also need support as they too may be affected by the death. It may be appropriate to offer some support to them in a group allowing them to share their anxieties and fears together.

▶ How might young people exhibit their grief?

Young people who have experienced the death of someone close may really struggle and some of them for a very long period of time.

These are just a few of the things you may notice: -

- Lack of concentration
- Low self confidence
- Increased risk of being bullied or becoming a bully
- Crying
- Mood swings
- Angry outbursts
- Withdrawal
- Tiredness
- Loss/increase appetite
- School refusal
- Self harm
- Substance misuse

All young people are individuals and may express their grief in different ways. Some may be very challenging and angry; others may be withdrawn or very focussed on achieving well. Some may not want to acknowledge their grief, looking for normality, not wanting to be treated differently; others may require a lot of emotional support. Some may show their grief immediately, others not for months or years. Grief is an ongoing process which young people need to revisit as they grow up.

▶ What is helpful?

Do not be anxious about initiating a conversation, it shows that you care. Just because they are not outwardly showing their grief does not mean that they are not grieving. Knowing that you understand in some way can make all the difference. If you feel you do not understand do not be afraid to ask them. It is very reassuring for the young person to be told that what they are feeling is normal – this is how it is when someone special dies. It can be so helpful to tell them that over time it will get less painful, not that they will ever forget their special person but that they will learn to adjust to living in a different way.

If behaviour changes we need to understand especially if they are disruptive that these reactions are due to their grief and that they may need further help. Punishing is not appropriate and it may be helpful to point this out to school staff, although boundaries need to be maintained. Often challenging behaviour is a way of expressing what they are feeling inside and cannot verbalise. Allowing yourself to be a sounding board to a bereaved young person can make such a difference to them. It is important to find the balance between overwhelming them with sympathy and being too afraid to say anything in case we upset them. Teamwork is essential so that support offered is consistent throughout the school. It may mean you need to take the lead on initiating this.

Young people may find it helpful to know that it is ok to still go on living and enjoy life - often they can be made to feel guilty because they still want to have fun. They need to be reassured that this is alright and that it does not mean they care for the person any less because they want to enjoy themselves.

Young people often will say that they do not like the person they have become since their special person died. They may be drinking, smoking and experimenting with drugs and having sex as a way of trying to block the pain. Having a dependable adult who will be there for them, no matter what they say, can make a huge difference. Meeting other bereaved young people can really help them, enabling them to feel less isolated and alone. It may be helpful to consider offering to make a referral to a bereavement service.

▶ **What can you do to initiate conversation?**

It can be really difficult to know where to start if you are supporting a bereaved young person. Having the right words is not as important as the caring presence of someone willing to be there for them. The following are some guidelines and ideas that may help you as you share this journey with them to optimise the time you have together. There is no quick fix to grief and we cannot fast track the pain - we need to learn to accept that this is as it has to be.

It can be very helpful to buy the young person a journal in which they can record their thoughts, feelings and memories etc. This can be a support to them as they write but also to look back on in years to come, as a lasting memory of their grief experience.

Winnie the Pooh said 'When you are a bear of very little brain and thinking of things, you find some times that a thing which seemed very thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it.'

Some guidelines for a series of conversations are as follows:

▶ **Getting to know each other**

As with all relationships with young people we need to earn the right for them to share with us. Building trust is crucial. It may be helpful to share a little of yourself with them to make some connections.

▶ **Sharing memories of the person who has died**

It can be helpful to start by asking the young person to share memories by asking them to share special things about the person who had died. These could be written on to card to keep. Looking at photos together gives them stories to tell. Memory jars are another way of continuing the bond. See instructions at the end of this guide.

▶ **Telling the story**

Telling the story is a crucial element of the support you can offer a young person. It may be the only opportunity they ever have to tell their story to someone who is prepared to listen to them. You can do this by asking them what life was like before the person died, what was life like at the time of the death and how is life now. It can be useful to ask the young person to either write or draw their story

- this can be done on A3 paper
- you could draw smallish boxes that could look like a film strip.

▶ **Talking about difficult feelings**

Just being able to understand that difficult feelings are a normal part of the grieving process can be very helpful for a bereaved young person. To know that they are not going mad, that pain, anger, guilt and relief are all ok ways to feel when someone dies can be a huge relief in itself.

You may receive information that a young person needs some support because their behaviour changes. Often this is an outward expression of their inner turmoil. Just understanding that anger is normal is sometimes all that is needed but there are helpful ways to explore difficult feelings. Again writing can be very cathartic and a journal can be very useful. It may be useful to get some idea of what triggers their anger and what pushes their buttons. Sometimes the smaller issues can be discussed and young people can be asked to hide particular buttons not allowing them to be pressed. This can help them to recognise they have some control over how they behave. Drawing an anger scale can also be useful - for some people this may be an overly simplistic view but it is worth trying.

There are many other activities for exploring feelings. Visual activities for working with anger and other difficult feelings can initiate great conversations.

▶ **Talking about what helps and what doesn't and thinking of coping strategies**

Ask the young person what helps them when they are sad. They may choose to make a list. It can be helpful for them to realise that there are things they can do such as listening to music, eating chocolate, going for a walk, looking at photos etc. Everyone is different and some things that one person may find helps them to cope, the next person will not find at all helpful! A first aid kit is a helpful way of thinking of strategies for coping.

Recent research also clearly demonstrates the benefits of physical exercise and grief. It may be helpful to encourage the young person to channel their energies into something positive. Exercise releases mood enhancing hormones.

▶ **Thinking about hope for the future**

Young people need to be encouraged to think of their future with hope. Despite the fact that their special person has died they can make the future as they would like it to be. They do have some control. The past is behind them and out of their control but they make their own life choices about their future. It can be helpful for them to write down some of their hopes for the future.

This last session can be a time for reflection and it may be a special time to light a candle to remember the person who has died - something they can take with them as a reminder which they could light on special days (anniversaries, birthdays etc). A balloon release can be very special. Use a helium balloon in a colour of some significance to the young person. Allow them to write a message on rice paper and attach it to the top of the balloon. Release it in an open space.

▶ Models of grief

Grief is a messy process and is not as may have been thought for many years - a nice neat linear process that disappears after two years. Although there are stages of grief, often these are revisited time and time again. It is a bit like the waves on the sea shore, it ebbs and flows going back and forth. There are many models of grief that can be helpful. Understanding these ourselves can make a difference when supporting a young person and in some instances can make a difference when shared with the young person. Below are two examples;

▶ Whirlpool of grief

Imagine you are sailing along in a small boat on the river of life. All of a sudden something catastrophic happens to you and someone dies. Grief feels like your boat has fallen over the edge of a waterfall and you are suddenly plunged into the whirlpool below. The whirlpool carries you round and round, visiting the same emotions time and again, with the occasional respite in the shallows and the risk of being cast against the rocks. The time spent in this period of disorganisation will vary and some who have been washed up on a bank will choose to stay there. But when the time is right for reorganisation, the 'River of Life' leads away from the whirlpool to calmer waters. Your boat is patched up and you sail off on a new river. Richard Wilson (1992) comments on this model:

'It may be a little fanciful. However, it is less rigid than suggesting that there are stages of grief which must be completed? People cannot be healed by shepherding them through a fixed treatment plan; however, we may be of some assistance as they make their way along their own difficult and personal journey. Grief is a turbulent time, and although there may be precious periods of calm, violent emotions which had seemed to be over can return. They are innumerable and all valid. In grief there is a disorganisation of life and thoughts and values, but most people are then able to reorganise their life in a new way. Although old emotions can always return in almost the same intensity, they do so less frequently and for shorter periods of time.'

▶ Continuing the bond

Continuing the Bond challenges the previous held belief that you need to 'let go' of the person who has died. It is clear from research that a relationship has to be constructed with the person who has died. The relationship changes over time and gives comfort to those who are bereaved. Adults and young people can struggle and feel embarrassed about trying to find a place for the person who has died in their lives, afraid of being seen as having something wrong with them. It is important that young people have the opportunity to talk about the person who has died, to participate in memorial rituals and to understand that their grief is an evolving and changing process and not static. Continuing the bond does not mean that you live in the past, those who have died are neither finally present or always absent. The bond shifts and takes new forms in time but the connection is always there.

In some special circumstances a young person may not want to continue the bond with the person who has died especially in instances of abuse etc. This though does not mean that they are not grieving - it does however complicate the grieving process.

▶ Other things to consider

- Special days such as anniversaries, birthdays, Mother's Day and Father's Day etc. These days may be difficult - ask the young person what might help.
- Some young people may fall behind with their coursework and revision for exams. If you are supporting them you could negotiate with the school staff. Do they need extra support? Who can provide this? Should the exam board be informed?
- Increased school absence can occur for many reasons - not seeing the point of education, responsibility for siblings, anxiety about leaving a parent, insomnia. Check this out and liaise with the family if appropriate. The family may need to be signposted to other agencies such as Cruse for bereaved adults (see links at the end of this guide for more).

▶ Supporting yourself

It can be overwhelming to support a young person who is bereaved but remember you cannot take their grief away. It is sad and very hard but it will be easier for them with your support than without.

Be sure to look after yourself, you can do this by:

- Finding a colleague to talk to
- Keeping it in perspective with your own life - it does not help the young person if you are overwhelmed by their sadness
- Pampering yourself when stressed
- Remembering if you are recently bereaved you may not be the best person to offer support - ask for help
- Realising that not all of us can do this work.

Winnie the Pooh also said 'If ever there is a tomorrow when we are not together ... there is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is, even if we are apart ... I'll always be with you'

▶ Memory jar activity

1. Take a clean dry jar and fill it with salt
2. Pour the salt onto A4 paper in 4 or 5 piles depending on the number of memories
3. Choose 4 or 5 colours to represent the memories and then use the chalks and rub it into the salt on the paper - this colours the chalk very easily
4. Pour the salt back into the jar either in block colours or in small layers (It can be helpful to use a funnel)
5. Ensure that the jar is tapped down as salt settles and you may need to add some extra
6. Secure top tightly as colours are easily mixed
7. Make a label and write down the memories and attach to jar



Conclusion

The adolescent years resemble a storm. Yet it is also a time of excitement when young people discover new strengths. Life for a bereaved young person is complex, they face many unique challenges. Many people assume they are 'grown up' and then make unreasonable expectations of them but it can be a real privilege and honour to support a young person as they are grieving the death of someone special in their lives.

When someone dies you are changed forever and life as you know it is suspended but young people and their families can, if given the right support, adjust to living in a different way. Unfortunately some bereaved young people do become increasingly vulnerable and they may not realise their lives full potential due to events in their lives spiralling out of control. However experiencing the death of someone special as a young person does not necessarily mean they will not develop and flourish given the right support.

Links

CRUSE BEREAVEMENT CARE - <http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/>

WINSTON'S WISH - <http://www.winstonswish.org.uk/>

RD4U - <http://www.rd4u.org.uk/>

MACMILLAN YOUTH SITE - <http://www.whybother.org.uk/index.html>

BBC - http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/emotional_health/bereavement/

BUPA - http://hcd2.bupa.co.uk/fact_sheets/html/bereavement.html

MIND - http://www.mind.org.uk/help/diagnoses_and_conditions/bereavement

Training in Bereavement Support

Quality Training - <http://www.qualitytraininguk.com>

*With thanks to CHUMS child bereavement and trauma service for this 'I Need To' guide.
Visit <http://www.chums.info/>.*

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