



Helping Your Child Cope When Someone Has Died Suddenly

Bereavement can be devastating in any situation, but a sudden unexpected death has the added layer of shock and disbelief for the bereaved family and friends. The reality of what happened can be even more difficult to accept and make sense of, there may be regrets over lost opportunities and unfulfilled plans, and there may be a greater need to go over and over what happened.

A child who has been bereaved suddenly will need love, support and care to help them through their grief, and this leaflet will provide some simple ways that you can help your child.

How might your child be feeling?

Children, like adults, will grieve in different ways at different times. There is not one right way to grieve, and people may display a number of different, and natural, reactions. Children may display shock, sadness, anger, worry, guilt, and feel out of control, isolated and hopeless. Children may have a loss of appetite, have difficulty sleeping, display mood swings, become withdrawn and lose interest in activities. They may display poor concentration, have nightmares, and engage in risk-taking behaviour. Grief can be like a roller coaster and your child may seem fine one minute and then incredibly sad the next. You can help your child by reassuring them that what they are feeling is natural given what they have experienced.

Shock may cause your child to display seemingly insensitive reactions (such as appearing not to react to the news when they are first told about the death) or there may be moments when your child forgets what has happened (for instance, when they first wake up in the morning), only to be flooded with intense feelings of grief when they do remember.

Your child may be in denial about what happened (such as expecting the person to come back). This is a natural protective mechanism. If it happens, encourage your child to talk about what has happened and gently explain the person won't be coming back.

Children sometimes feel in some way responsible for what has happened. It will be important to provide lots of reassurance that nothing they said or did caused the death and it is in no way their fault.

Grief is an on-going process but gradually over time your child should start to find things easier. If your child's reactions are very extreme or continue for more than 4 weeks after the bereavement and do not seem to be improving, then talk with your GP as a referral to more specialist service may be needed.

Help your child understand what has happened

Just like adults, children will need to talk about what has happened and to have their questions answered (When? Where? Why? for example). If children are not told about what has happened, they will often use their imagination to fill in the gaps, which can be far more frightening than the truth. There is a great deal of evidence that shows that it is best to be honest with children and answer any questions they have as truthfully as you can (giving simple, factual and age-appropriate information). Providing this information can help children to make sense of what has happened and clear up any misunderstandings.

Follow your child's lead when talking about what has happened. Try to answer their questions as best you can but remember that it is ok to say "I don't know". It may be difficult to know how much information to share with your

child, but the advice is generally that if a child is mature enough to ask the question, then they are mature enough to hear the answer. You may however feel that it is best to give a little information at a time depending on your child's reaction to the news. It can be reassuring for children to know that everything was done to save the person who died and providing information about the role of emergency services can be helpful.

Sometimes in the case of a sudden death, there may not be much information about the manner of death. It is important to acknowledge that it can be difficult not knowing but also to discourage your child from speculating or listening to rumours.

Help your child to find ways to cope with difficult feelings

Encourage your child to share their thoughts and feelings about what has happened. Some children, particularly adolescents may be reluctant to show strong emotions as it may create a feeling of embarrassment but look for opportunities to talk with them about their feelings when they are ready or as different situations arise. Crying is a normal part of the grieving process. Be there for your child if they need a good cry and afterwards help them rehydrate and restore their energy levels by offering a drink and a snack. Speak to your child's school so staff know about what has happened and so they can offer your child a quiet place that they can go to in school if they are feeling upset.

Talk with your child about what helps them feel a bit better when they are sad (listening to music, going for a walk, drawing, looking at photos, etc.). The ideas that your child comes up with could be put together into an emotional first aid kit that they can go to for ideas when they feel particularly sad. Exercise can be helpful for grief as it helps to produce mood enhancing hormones.

Anger is another common reaction. Try to help your child find appropriate ways to express feelings of anger, for instance, encouraging them to take their frustration out on a pillow by hitting it or screaming into it. Exercise is another useful way of exerting some of the energy you feel when you are angry. Try to understand if there are particular things that trigger your child's feeling of anger as this may help you identify things that can be done to help.

Thoughts like 'Why didn't I/they...?', 'Why did it happen' and 'If only..' are common. Providing your child with information about what happened may help to answer some of their questions and put their mind at ease, however, some questions may never be answered and you may need to help your child cope with the feeling of uncertainty that comes from not knowing.

Children who are suddenly bereaved can often feel very alone, like no-one else really understands what they are going through. Ways that you can help your child are by: being available when they want to talk and having time together doing fun things; speaking with the school so there is a named member of staff who your child trusts and feels able to go to when they are at school; and helping your child re-connect with their friends. Talking to other bereaved young people may also help your child to feel less isolated and alone (you can find access to peer support groups at bereavement agencies such as Winston's Wish and Cruse).

Grief can cause people to lack interest and motivation in everyday life. You may find that your child does not want to leave the house and they may have lost interest in activities that they previously enjoyed. You will need to be patient with them, and it may help to adopt a very gradual approach (offering just a short time out of the house

initially to get some fresh air and building on this). Reassure your child that it is ok to want to carry on living and to have fun and this does not mean they cared about the person any less.

Your child may find it intimidating going back to school but re-establishing this routine as soon as possible is usually advised. Talk to the school so they know what has happened and then make a plan with them and your child so things are in place to make things easier for your child when they return (e.g., having a named member of staff and safe place your child can go to in school if they are feeling upset, the teacher talking to your child's friends/classmates and sharing as much information about what has happened as your child is comfortable with) . A gradual reintegration back to school may be necessary (e.g., your child just attends for a short time or for certain lessons initially).

After a sudden death, children will often worry that they will die or someone else who is special to them will die. It will be important to reassure your child that it is rare for people to die suddenly, and that most people will die when they are very old. Your child may find it more difficult separating from you and if so you may wish to talk with your child's school about them being able to phone or message you in the school day if they need that reassurance. Relaxation and mindfulness techniques may help your child deal with feelings of anxiety and worry (there are lots of useful apps for young people that can help them to use these techniques e.g., Mind Shift and Smiling Mind.).

Children may feel such sadness and think that life will never be good again. Some children, particularly teenagers may start to engage in more risk-taking behaviours. If this happens, openly discuss how you think the bereavement may be impacting on their behaviour and help them understand the potential risks that they are taking. Help your child to feel more positive about the future by talking with them about their hopes and aspirations and planning nice things to look forward to. Be mindful that teenagers may suddenly decide they want to make major life changing decisions and if this happens, encourage careful consideration of choices. Help your child to remember the person who died

Your child will need opportunities to talk about and remember the person who has died. This may include going to somewhere special that helps them remember the person, thinking about a happy time they shared with the person, and talking to other people who knew the person who died and who can share their memories. Another really helpful activity is to make a 'Memory Box' which contains items that will help your child remember positive things about the special person (it could be photos, souvenirs from times spent together, the person's favourite CD/perfume/scarf etc.).

Be mindful that there are likely to be events during the year that will trigger upsetting feelings for your child. Make sure the school is aware of such dates (e.g., birthdays and other special events). Talk to your child to help them choose what they would like to do on these dates.

Dependent on circumstances your child may experience intrusive and upsetting thoughts and images about how the person died, and this may lead them to want to avoid thinking about the person. It can be helpful to encourage your child to think of the whole person; who they were and the things they did together and not just the way they died. A nice activity that can help this process is called 'Memory Stones' (Winston's Wish, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liVHXHeqqEg>).

If you are concerned about your child, their response to the death or their general wellbeing please talk to a member of staff at school, or your GP who can consider whether further support is needed.

Take care of yourself

No parent wants to see their child upset and supporting a child when they are grieving can be extremely difficult. It can be even harder if you are suffering the same bereavement as your child. It will be important that you are mindful of your own emotional needs, take time for yourself, have people who you can talk to, and you are able to access the support you need.

Useful Services

- The 'Your Mind Matters' website provides useful information and signposts to local agencies that are aimed at helping children with their emotional well-being and mental health needs (<https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/campaigns/your-mind-matters/>).
- Winston's Wish (a childhood bereavement agency) (www.winstonswish.org.uk). For information on supporting a child after a sudden death go to <https://www.winstonswish.org/out-of-the-blue-talking-about-sudden-death/#:~:text=If%20you%20need%20advice%20on,urgent%20support%20in%20a%20crisis>. You can contact them on a Freephone Helpline 08088 020 021 (9.00am-5.00pm, Monday-Friday), email them on ask@winstonswish.org or use their online chat. They also have a Crisis Messenger available 24/7 for urgent support in a crisis. Text WW to 85258.
- Cruse Bereavement Support (provide bereavement support and information). Their helpline is 0808 808 1677. Their website is www.cruse.org.uk and for specific information on sudden and traumatic loss go to <https://www.cruse.org.uk/understanding-grief/grief-experiences/traumatic-loss/>
- Sudden (a free, confidential, charity service when someone you love dies suddenly, or too soon in their life). Their helpline is 0800 2600400, their email is help@sudden.org, and website address is www.sudden.org
- Child Bereavement UK (helping children and families when a child is bereaved or a child dies). Their helpline is 0800 028 8840 and their website is www.childbereavementuk.org.
- Brake (offering support for people bereaved through a road traffic accident). Their helpline is 0808 800 0401 and their website is www.brake.org.uk.
- Sussex Bereaved by Suicide (for those affected by a suicide or possible suicide). Their phone number is 07376 616628 and their email address is sussexbereavedbysuicide@cruse.org.uk.

Useful resources for your child

- 'Someone has died suddenly' (by the charities 'Sudden' and 'Brake'). This is a free workbook for parents to read with their children about sudden bereavement, which explains important things the child needs to know and that can help them cope with what has happened (Available from www.sudden.org).
- There are many novels on the topic of bereavement that your child may find helpful to read on their own or with you (e.g., 'Vicky Angel' by J.Wilson, 'A library of lemons' by J.Cotterill, 'My sister lives on the mantelpiece' by A.Pitcher, and 'A Monster Calls' by P.Ness).
- 'Hope Again' is a website for young people by Cruse bereavement agency that provides information and support (<https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/>).

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