

Haringey Educational Psychology Service



COVID-19 Bereavement Guide for Families

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet aims to give you information on how to support your children and yourself during this unprecedented time surrounding coronavirus in the event of a traumatic incident during lockdown.

We want to share some information which may be supportive to your children and you as a family during this time. This includes the following:

- What are traumatic incidents?
- What to do in the short term after a bereavement?
- Grief and loss
- Helping bereaved children and young people
- Suggestions for adults in talking with children and young people who have been bereaved
- Funerals and memorials
- Common questions and answers
- Helplines and support for individuals following loss, bereavement and/or traumatic incidents

WHAT ARE TRAUMATIC INCIDENTS?

- Traumatic incidents are sudden unpredicted tragic events, which come out of the blue.
- They may involve sudden death and serious injury and cause distress and disruption not only to those directly affected, but also to everyone around them.
- The current pandemic is likely to lead to unexpected deaths – parents, extended family, friends, children, siblings, school staff and the wider community.
- This distress often affects a person's ability to cope, plan, and take effective action.



WHAT TO DO IN THE SHORT TERM AFTER A BEREAVEMENT?

Feeling shocked and numbed or feeling a strong urge to talk are normal reactions for those thrown into a major crisis.

- Allow time for in the day for your child to share their thoughts and feelings with you.
- **Aim to return to 'normal' as soon as possible but be flexible.** For example, if you are following the school's guidance of completing schoolwork, encourage your child to continue with this if they want to but be flexible.
- Review how things are going.
- Consider what other support your child might benefit from particularly during this period of social isolation, e.g. talking with friends, family, or teachers on the telephone, time to engage in activities they enjoy. There are also local and national support websites and lines. Ensure that your child is aware of these.
- Think about how you will keep an eye on **and deal with your child's feelings and reactions.** Draw up strategies that will allow pupils to express their feelings about the situation if they wish

Yourself

Supporting your child as well as managing the processes, can be very stressful. Find time to talk about your own personal feelings with someone you can trust.

GRIEF AND LOSS

Grief is a normal, essential response to death. It can be short-lived or last a long time. It is an emotional response to this loss. It may affect how you feel physically, mentally and socially. **There's no right or wrong way to grieve.** The following are some of the feelings or reactions that you might see or feel.

Early grief

Shock
Numbness
Alarm
Denial and disbelief

Acute grief

Yearning and pining
Searching
Strong feelings of
sadness, anger, guilt
or shame
Disorganisation
Despair

Integration of loss and grief

Acceptance

Shock and disbelief

This happens when our model of the world is upset. The bereaved person may feel numb or overwhelmed.

Denial

This generally occurs within the first few weeks and can last minutes, hours or weeks. In this stage the bereaved may behave as if the dead person is still alive and the loss is not acknowledged.

Growing awareness

Some or all of the following emotions may be experienced:

Yearning – The urge to search for answers, going over the what happened, trying to find a reason or someone to blame.

Anger – It can be directed against anyone including medics; the person who may seem to have caused the death; the deceased for leaving; a god/father for letting it happen.

Depression – The bereaved person begins to feel the despair, the emptiness, the pain of the loss.

Guilt – The bereaved person may feel guilty for the real or imagined negligence or harm directed to the person who has just died. They may feel guilty about things they have said or done or that they did not say or do. There is a tendency to idealise the person who has died.

Anxiety – In some cases anxiety can become panic as the full realisation of the loss begins to

Acceptance

This generally occurs much later in the grieving process and often after the death has been re-lived at the first anniversary. The bereaved person begins to make some sense of their loss and to adjust to life without the deceased.

HELPING BEREAVED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children have different responses to death and dying depending on their age and experiences. There are no clear-cut stages, no correct order, no set time for grief to last, so try not to think about it in terms of a 'right way' to grieve. The age of the child affects the ways in which they are likely to express their feelings and the kind of support they need from the adults around them. It is important for children not to feel under pressure to display more conventional signs of grief and for them to be allowed to grieve in their own way and in their own time. Parents need to be prepared for young children to slip in and out of grief in a way that can be shocking and upsetting to a grieving adult.

Infants

- Concept of death is experienced as 'absence'

Age 3 – 5 years

- The child sees death as impersonal
- Death has to do with "not being alive"
- Death is a temporary state
- Egocentric beliefs - "Granny died because I didn't visit her"

Age 5 – 9 years

- The child becomes more aware of death
- Child develops a fear of death
- Is particularly vulnerable to being overwhelmed by their feelings

Age 9 onwards

- The understanding that death is irreversible begins to be consolidated and almost matches that of an adult
- Child begins to approach mourning in the way that an adult would

Some children, however, are very anxious about attending school after a bereavement. Often, this is because they are worried that their surviving family may come to harm. Let the child know that you understand their problem, and want to help, but don't be tempted to spoil them or treat them differently.

By talking about their feelings and receiving support, they will be able to model a healthy reaction to loss.

Children may feel frightened and insecure because they sense other people's grief and stress and feel powerless to help. They will need additional love, support and structure in their daily routine.

Points to remember

- All children respond differently.
- Children act out their feelings through their behaviour.
- Grief is a normal, healthy response, essential for healing, and is a long-term process. It is painful, but normal.
- Work, attention and behaviour may suffer because of their emotional distress.
- The loss of a loved one involves the loss of part of a child's own identity.
- When supporting a bereaved child, keep in contact with their family.
- Children will generally learn how to respond to loss by watching other adults in the family.
- Dealing with a bereaved child will give rise to feelings in you. These are normal and natural. Make sure that you get support for yourself, too.



SUGGESTIONS FOR ADULTS IN TALKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN BEREAVED

The patterns for coping with loss and grief begin in early childhood and often continue through to adulthood.

Find time to listen

Always take your cue from the child. When they want to talk, try to find the time to listen. **If it's not possible straight away, tell them you would like to talk; naming a time and place when you will.** Be patient and reassuring. Gently encourage them to talk about their loss and do so yourself.



Expect questions and try to answer them honestly

The child may become intensely curious about death and burial. For example, children may fear or resent a God that takes to heaven someone they love and need. **Don't be afraid to say "I don't know".**

Be alert for changes in behaviour in the first few weeks after bereavement

The child may be withdrawn, feel abandoned, helpless, desperate, anxious, apathetic angry, guilty and/or afraid, have sullen moods and lack concentration. These are common reactions and are often acted out aggressively because the child may be unable to express their feelings in any other way. **Try to handle them all patiently and calmly; don't seem surprised, and don't get cross.**

Help the child to recognise and express their feelings

This will help the child avoid developing unhealthy defence mechanisms, like behaving badly or refusing to talk, to cope with difficult emotions.

Let the child know it's okay to laugh and to cry

Adults and other children may feel tearful at times. It's okay to lighten the mood with memories of happier times shared with the lost parent, sibling or friend.

Believe what the child says and acknowledge their feelings and thoughts

Resist the temptation to make comments such as "I'm sure you don't mean that" if a child believes that they caused their mum's death, or to say to a distressed child that "You'll soon feel better". The child's strong feelings must be acknowledged, believed and discussed. Children have 'magic thinking' and may believe that their behaviour, or thoughts, can cause or reverse death.

Be sensitive to special days

They may revive painful memories. **As always, it's best to take your cue from the child.**

'Death' as part of education

It's important that death and dying are not seen as taboo subjects. Children need a clear explanation of the cause of death using terms such as 'die' and 'dead' not 'going away' or 'asleep' as this merely confuses.

FUNERALS AND MEMORIAL SERVICES

- Very few people will be allowed to attend during lockdown because of social isolation and this in itself will have an impact. If your child is not attending and wanted to, it may be very difficult to accept emotionally.
- If your child is not able to attend the funeral, there are ways to make the day special and deeply meaningful. For example:
 - the service could be live streamed or family members not attending could video call each other and follow the same order of service.
 - Photographs could be taken at the funeral and then shown to the child.
 - Collect keepsakes from the funeral service e.g. flowers from the tributes to press and keep; a leaf from one of the trees in the grounds; a pebble from the surrounding area; the order of service.
 - Children can be involved by offering some suggestions for the ceremony. For example, they could choose a piece of music, select a poem, or suggest flowers.
 - Children could write and/or draw cards to be placed on or in the coffin or choose a toy or something **meaningful to be placed with the person's body**.
 - They could also write a tribute to the person who died which is then read at the funeral.
- You may decide to hold a memorial service later which can be planned slowly, with input from the child. This can provide a helpful opportunity to remember and celebrate the person who lived as well as mourn the person who died.
- When someone important in our life dies, we sometimes worry we will forget things about them. Your child might like to make a tribute to their loved one, such as:
 - lighting a candle
 - making a memory box or jar
 - writing a message to the person who has died
 - decorating some cakes and sharing them
 - listening to music
 - creating a photo album of precious memories
 - making a cushion or teddy bear from one of the **person's clothes**.



COMMON QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. When should you tell children that a person has died?

Children should be told as soon as possible to prevent them finding out from some other, less appropriate, source. Try to use a normal tone of voice and clear direct language. Avoid speaking in hushed whispers as these may convey spooky or unnatural feelings.

2. How should you tell them?

Where possible, children should be told by someone close to them, in familiar surroundings where they will feel more secure. Both you and the child may feel uncomfortable and uncertain, so it might help to hold or hug the child to help reduce their fear and insecurity.

3. What should you tell them?

It is very important to tell the truth as far **as you know it. Even 'white lies' may have** to be revisited later on. The truth is the best way to prevent rumours and fantasy building up. This information will stay with the child for a long time and if found to be incorrect, it may destroy the trust between you and the child. Children may not take it all in at this stage, but will go over and over the facts later, asking more questions as they gradually take in the **truth. Don't worry about having to keep** giving the same answers.

4. How much should you explain?

Children will vary in their ability to take in information. If your own information is limited, tell them what you know and make every effort to find out more. In the absence of facts our imagination may take over, and children may start to believe that what they were doing might **be related to the person's death. These** fears may need to be brought out and talked about later. Giving an honest, objective account of the truth is the best way to prevent this.

5. What if I feel very upset myself and find it difficult to talk?

It is important to let children know that it is natural and acceptable to be upset and to cry - even for adults. It is better to share feelings, such as crying together, rather than deny them. Sometimes, however, it may be better to protect a child from witnessing extreme adult grief. If the adult is traumatised with grief, they may need time and space to release their feelings initially. Give your child permission to grieve as well as the opportunity and support to do so, without trying to force them to behave in a certain way.

6. In what ways are teenagers different from other children?

During adolescence, young people have very confusing feelings about themselves and the world about them. Grief tends to heighten these feelings, increase the confusion and may lead to severe depression. Allowing the teenager to talk about their feelings with a caring, supportive adult is better than trying to be **'forcefully helpful'**. Your child may lean more towards their friends, and away from their family for support and comfort. **Don't feel rejected.** Just be there for them and tell them so. Art, music and sport can be good ways of expressing these feelings, and should be encouraged.

7. How long does it take to come to terms with bereavement?

There is no set period, though some cultures and religions have a formal period of mourning. Everyone progresses through grief at their own pace. This makes it particularly difficult when several people are grieving, because they will all be at different stages at the same time. Grief should be allowed to run its natural course.

8. Are some children more vulnerable than others?

This varies according to the child's age, developmental level and personal circumstances. Very young children (under 5 years) are beginning to develop their independence from the security of their home, and loss can be particularly damaging to them. Because of the way they see the world they may also feel **responsible for what's happened**. They may also show their anxieties in other indirect ways, such as bed wetting, nightmares or phobias. They should be reassured and comforted.

9. Can we help by seeing the 'positive side' of the bereavement?

There is a temptation to talk about 'new responsibilities' within a family, or the 'man of the house' or the 'little mother'. This approach may diminish the child's own grief and add more stress to an already difficult situation. It might be better to allow the child to regress to more childish behaviour, if only for a little while. Although it is always good to talk positively about the dead person, especially when remembering events that involved the bereaved, these discussions can be sensitive and might only really be appropriate in the later stages of the grieving process. They should be thought through carefully.

10. How can I tell if my child is attention seeking and or genuinely grieving?

This is the most difficult question to answer, because it really depends on your knowledge of the child. It is true that some children, seeing the care and attention that genuinely upset people are **getting, will appear to 'try it on' to get** attention for themselves. It is important to remember, though, that children who are seeking attention may also need to grieve and be handled sensitively.

11. Can the school, or a family religion, be helpful?

They can be very helpful, because they provide explanations, support and, above all, structure for the child. Problems may occur if the child starts to question the religious explanation, especially if the death was unexpected. You may need guidance from a religious adviser at this stage.

12. How might children and young people react if they do not attend the funeral?

Alongside all of the range of emotions during grief because someone important has died, there will be added feelings of confusion and frustration because, at the **present time, there can't be** a traditional funeral. Young people may feel they are letting down a relative or friend if they are not present at the funeral. Younger children may find it even harder to understand what has happened without the chance of observing the funeral.



HELPLINES AND SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUALS FOLLOWING LOSS, BEREAVEMENT AND/OR TRAUMATIC INCIDENTS

The outbreak of Covid-19 means that many aspects of children's lives are changing. School is closed for most, lots of parents are working from home, and some families are having to spend time apart when they would like to be together. The news is full of talk of the virus and the effect it is having.

Many children will have questions and worries about the virus, but those who have experienced the death of someone important or who have an ill family member might be particularly worried. Here are some helplines and websites which have information on supporting bereaved children with worries and concerns about the virus.

Child Bereavement UK

Helpline: 0800 0288840

<http://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/coronavirus-supporting-children>

Child Bereavement UK have made a short film about supporting children through difficult times <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/coronavirus-supporting-children-through-difficult-times> and also Child Bereavement UK have made a short film about supporting bereaved children during the outbreak

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/coronavirus-supporting-children>

Grief Encounter – supporting bereaved children and families

Telephone: 0808 802 0111

Website: www.griefencounter.org.uk

Supports bereaved children and their families to help alleviate the pain caused by the death of someone close. Updated to reflect impact of pandemic. Grief Encounter are running activities for bereaved children and families on their Instagram page.

MIND: Contacts for Young People – alleviating anxiety because of Covid-19

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>

Self Isolation – Recommendations <https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/looking-after-your-mental-health-while-self-isolating/>

Winston's Wish – Supporting bereaved children and young people

Website: www.winstonswish.org.uk

National services includes Family Line 08088 020 021

Winston's Wish have produced guidance on: telling a child that someone is seriously ill

<https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-children-young-people-serious-illness/>

talking to bereaved children about coronavirus

<https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people/>

telling a child that someone has died from coronavirus

<https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus/>

Cruse Bereavement Care

The number is 0808 808 1677 Email helpline@cruse.org.uk

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/helpline>

Cruse Bereavement Care have produced some tips about talking to children

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/coronavirus/children-and-young-people> among their wider resources about grief and coronavirus among their wider resources about grief and coronavirus

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

Local support for individuals including support following loss, bereavement, and/or traumatic incidents

Choices (Haringey CAMHS)

www.haringeychoices.org

T: 0208 702 3405, which offers emotional support for children, young people and their families in Haringey. NB This is not a crisis service.

ConnectEd

<http://ccsconnected.org.uk>

T: 0208 969 5305

Run by The Catholic Children's Society

Website to assist school staff and parents/carers to support children who have or may be at risk of developing mental health problems.

Haringey 24/7 Crisis Line

Telephone 0208 702 4500 available 24/7 to all Haringey families and young people.

Haringey Local Offer Support and Services

<https://www.haringey.gov.uk/children-and-families/local-offer/covid-19-guidance>

Haringey Mental Health Support Team (MHST)

Telephone Support Line run by Mental Health Practitioners

Tel: 0208 702 6035 available 9am-3pm Monday-Friday or email

Beh-tr.camhstrailblazerinbox@nhs.net

For children/ young people, parents/ carers, school staff.

To listen and offer support with your worries and emotions.

KOOTH (Haringey CAMHS)

<https://kooth.com/>

Free, safe and anonymous online support for young people

Monday – Friday 12pm – 10pm, Saturday – Sunday 6pm – 10pm

Kooth, from XenZone, is an online counselling and emotional well-being platform for children and young people, accessible through mobile, tablet and desktop and free at the point of use.

Mind in Haringey

www.mindinharingey.org.uk

Monday-Friday 9am-3pm - call 0208 702 6035. (April 2020)

In Haringey the Mind Mental Health Support Team have set up a telephone support line for young people, parents and families. Offers bereavement counselling for adults with costs on a sliding scale (from £5)