

WHEN SOMEONE DIES

**An information Booklet
For Children**

Calderdale Educational Psychology Service

INTRODUCTION

This booklet was written to help children understand and deal with some of the feelings and thoughts, which often mix them up after someone close to them has died.

You can read the booklet yourself, or get an adult to go through it with you and help you by explaining further. Remember that the adults near to you will also be very upset themselves, and not always be very good at explaining their own feelings, let alone yours, so that it may be easier to talk to someone less close, like a teacher.

A list of questions are included, and these are the sort of questions that other children have asked in the past.

We can get very upset when we lose a favourite pet, but nothing can prepare us for the strange feelings and reactions that can happen when a person we know very well, or who we love a great deal, dies and leaves us.

The booklet may also be helpful to read in order to help us understand how others might be feeling, such as a friend who has lost someone. It may give us some ideas as to how we can support them.

There are special words that people use when talking about death and some of these are included at the end. The word used to describe "losing someone close" is **bereaved**.

Remember, there is no proper way of feeling (or behaving) when someone dies. Everyone reacts differently, and the booklet will give you an idea of some of the different ways that people can behave.

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1. Why do people have to die?

All living things, including people have to die. Most people die when they're very old, others die when they get very sick with an illness like cancer. Others die from being badly hurt in an accident or a fire.

If someone close to you has died, you might be afraid that you're going to die. Most people close to someone feel this, but it may help you to know that most people will live a very long time, and so will you probably.

2. What happens to people close to the person who has died?

All those people who are close to and/or love the person will be upset in some way or other. Some will feel hurt, some frightened, some very angry, some just numb and others feel great pain. Your feelings are likely to all mixed up, but grief is the deepest sadness that anyone can feel.

These feelings may change from day to day, and will vary from mild to very, very intense. Each person is likely to feel differently, but most will be experiencing these strong feelings for the first time in their lives.

Some will not feel like eating, not be able to sleep, have disturbing dreams, or spend all their time wishing for the person to come back.

3. Does the way the person died affect the way people feel?

Yes, of course. If the person is older and we know they are going to die, then we can prepare ourselves a little (we still get very upset). If a person is very sick for a long time, we can get upset before they die, as we miss the healthy person who was around before.

However, if the person is younger, or their death is very sudden and unexpected, then we cannot prepare ourselves and our reactions can be very, very confusing and severe.

4. How long will you feel upset?

This changes from person to person (it varies from hours to days to weeks). With most people the feelings are strongest in the beginning, and gradually get less unpleasant and hurtful over time, but anything can suddenly act as a reminder of the person, or when they died.

Things like funerals, anniversaries and birthdays are very strong reminders, and can bring all the upsetting feelings back for a short time. It will get better in time, but you will always be a little bit sensitive.

5. How should you behave?

There are no real rules of how to behave either for people who are close to the dead person, or for those who have to meet with them. Many people get very uncomfortable and embarrassed, and neighbours, family and friends do not know what to say (they often say nothing and/or avoid you completely).

Some people feel that you should not have fun anymore, but it is important to remember any share the funny and enjoyable memories about the person you've lost, and I'm sure that they would want you to have fun as well as being sad.

Remember if you do what feels right for you, it will probably be the best way to behave, and the person will appreciate your concern.

6. Why do some adults find it difficult to talk to you about what has happened?

It can be very upsetting when adults do not seem to be telling the truth, or seem to be keeping you out of any discussions.

Remember that the adults around you will be very upset themselves. They are struggling to handle their own grief, and may be afraid that they will be unable to cope with your reactions as well as their own.

Adults like to think that they are in control, in relation to their children, and they do not like being "out of control".

They may want to "soften the blow" and tell you the story in bits and pieces.

They may not know what language to use, so that you can understand and they may be afraid of upsetting you.

Remember it is a very hard thing for them to do this comfortably.

7. What sort of feelings will you have?

It is likely that these feelings will be different and stronger than any others that you have felt before.

Each person will react differently, so do not feel that you have to feel a certain way, or that there is a "proper way" of reacting.

Do not be afraid if you are confused by these changing feelings which can include numbness, sadness, real pain in some part of your body, strong anger, panic, emptiness, etc.

You may find yourself crying a lot for no apparent reason, or find that something someone says suddenly sets you off crying again.

You may be worried that these feelings may come and go in waves, suddenly hitting you then going away again. This makes you feel as though you are "out of control".

Remember that the adults around you may be as confused as you by their own feelings and not always in the best position to make you feel better. It is important to talk about how you feel not just hold everything inside you.

8. Can this experience make you feel ill?

Yes, it is very common for people who are bereaved. Many children can develop headaches, stomach ache, feeling sick or pains in different parts of their bodies. Although these feelings are real, they are signs that your body is reacting to the shock of the upset, rather than being due to some underlying illness.

Remember to tell the people close to you when you feel ill, and don't just try to "soldier on"

9. Do all children react in the same way?

Everyone react differently when they hear the news. Some refuse to believe that it's true, others feel numb and shocked. Others become hysterical and really cry for ages. Some children on the other hand behave as though nothing has happened and carry on with their routines.

Remember how you react is related to your particular personality, and is not a measure of how much you care.

10. Can it make you frightened of dying or worried about losing other people?

Yes this often happens as this is probably the first time you have lost someone, and it makes you realise that life does not go on forever. You may start to feel frightened for your parents and other family members and this may make you feel very insecure about all of your family.

This can be very frightening, but talk to your family about it as they will need to reassure you that they will probably live a very long time.

Remember that just because one person has died, it does not mean that anyone else, close to you will die for a long time. Most people die when they are very old.

11. Why is it that teachers, parents and other adults can get anxious and fussy?

All these people see themselves as keeping you from harm. When someone dies they cannot protect you from being hurt and they then try to make things easier for you, sometimes not very successfully. They are also feeling very upset and confused themselves, whilst trying to control their feelings.

Remember it is not easy for anyone to handle bereavement.

12. How should you think about the person who has died?

There is no "proper way" of thinking. In fact your mind will be filled with a confusing mix up of memories, some really nice (which you can recall and enjoy), some not so nice (which may upset you and wish that you might have behaved differently), some very strong (where you might hear, feel and even smell the person).

It is helpful to talk about these with others and share their memories as in this way you will be able to remember a more complete person.

13. **What is the most important thing for you to do?**

The most important thing is to talk about the way you are thinking and feeling. Ask questions about anything which is worrying you, as this will make it easier for the adults to help you.

Remember it's very hard for your friends and family to guess what you're feeling, particularly if they are dealing with their own very strong feelings.

14. **What is the purpose of a funeral?**

Funerals are part of all religions, but groups without a formal religion also have some ceremony when people die.

In addition to the religious reasons, funerals and services are the opportunity for a lot of people to get together and show their affection and respect for the dead person and to share their grief, and thoughts.

The rules and routines of funeral services are helpful as people know how to behave and it may be helpful for people to cry in public.

You may not like being at a funeral but it can be an opportunity of saying a proper and last good-bye to the person you love.

15. **Is there any experience to compare with this?**

Some people who have gone through the experience have tried to explain it by painting "word pictures".

It has been compared to the following experience:

<i>Before the death</i>	<i>You're walking along on firm ground, feeling safe and secure</i>
<i>At the death</i>	<i>You don't believe it at first, think that you're still walking along - that nothing has changed</i>
<i>Realising he/she's dead</i>	<i>The ground has suddenly given way - you're falling helplessly, - all your security's gone - you feel frightened, angry, sad - mixed-up</i>
<i>After the death</i>	<i>You're still falling - being bashed by rocks and falling debris - it hurts so much - every so often you think you have reached firm ground, only to be disappointed and start to fall again</i>
<i>When things start to get better</i>	<i>eventually the ground is firm again - you're on your feet again and walking forward - but the ground is not even now - you keep falling into potholes when you least expect it - and you don't feel quite as secure anymore - you have lovely memories of how things were before</i>

Min O'Hara

SOME REACTIONS WHICH CHILDREN MAY HAVE

Not everyone has these feelings and although they may be very strong and confusing, they are normal feelings which are associated with many bereaved people. Hopefully they will lessen over time, and with reassurance from adults.

Being anxious

You may find that you're becoming far more anxious than usual, and need constant reassurance from parents and teachers.

You may find that you're worried about things that you've always taken for granted like, crowds, traffic, heights, thunder, animals etc. and that you become very nervous or even panic.

It is very common for children to worry about the health and safety of their friends and family, soon after the death, but this feeling does ease over time.

Having vivid memories

It is very common for children to have very strong day or night dreams about the person, or the way that they died. These can be so vivid that they feel real, and so can be very upsetting.

Some children can get very frightened as they see, feel, smell or have a conversation with the person who has died. Other people may frighten you with stories of ghosts but don't feel frightened as this is a product of your imagination, for someone who is close to you.

Try to enjoy the nice memories as these will help you keep the person in your mind, and bad memories will get fewer over time.

Trouble sleeping

It is not unusual for children to have difficulty sleeping, or tending to wake up after bad dreams or nightmares. You may find it helpful to have the light left on or have someone with you until you get to sleep for a while.

Feeling sadness

Most children go through a period of sadness and longing for the missing person. This sadness may come and go when we least expect it.

Naughtiness

Some children's behaviour changes and they become very naughty, either at home or more usually in school. This does not usually last very long.

You may find that you keep getting bad tempers and may start to throw temper tantrums. With patience from adults, this behaviour does not usually last too long.

Feelings of anger against people and things

Many children feel very strong feelings of anger. You may feel angry towards the following:

- the death itself (why should it happen to that person?)
- God (for letting it happen - it's not fair)
- some adults (who you blame for letting the person die)
- other adults (for not being honest with you immediately after the death)
- against yourself (for letting the person die) or not being the person who died
- against the dead person (for dying and leaving you)

All these feelings may lessen with time.

Feelings of guilt

It is very common for children (and also adults) to feel guilty. This means that you might feel:

- that you might have caused the person's death
- that you could have done something to prevent it
- that the dead person would **only** remember bad things about you
- that you (rather than the dead person) should have died
- that you are alive and they are dead
- that the last thing you did with them was to (be naughty, argue with them, be unpleasant)

Regressing to behaving like a younger child

Some children may behave for some time as they did when they were younger. This is called regression and seems initially to help you to deal with some of their strongest feelings. You might want to be cuddled or comforted more from your family, or do things that you did when you were younger, or play with "babyish" toys.

Changing personality

Some children may seem to change their personality in several different ways. These include:-

- isolating yourself and wanting to be alone
- becoming 'very grown-up', mature and over serious
- beginning to feel that 'life isn't worth it' and there is 'no point in thinking about the future'
- retreating into a 'fantasy world' and withdrawing from adults and friends

School problems

Many children begin to have temporary problems with their school work. It is common to have difficulty in concentrating on what teachers say, or on the work in hand. You may find school work unimportant, or begin to show behaviour problems, or in keeping friends in class.

If your behaviour changes, other children may find it difficult to understand how and why their friend is behaving differently.

THINGS YOU CAN DO WHICH MAY HELP YOU COPE BETTER WITH YOUR FEELINGS.

1. Talking

It is very important to talk about your feeling (however "silly" you may think that they are), to friends, teachers and most important of all, your family. This is the only way that they will be able to understand and possibly help you.

Sometimes it may be difficult to talk to those nearest and dearest to you, and it may be advisable to get the help of someone outside the family. This can be a professional counsellor or just an interested adult who is known to you.

Talking over the feelings does ease the pain with time.

2. Drawing and colouring

Some children find drawing and colouring can be very helpful. You may prefer drawing your friend doing the things you did together when they were alive, fantasy pictures, or neutral themes that just give you pleasure.

3. Writing

Other children get a great deal of relief from writing stories or poetry about their late friend or things that they remember doing together.

4. Playing

Sometimes playing can be enjoyable and also help you feel a little better. This can take the form of imaginary or fantasy play (like you used to play with your dead friend) but also other competitive or intricate games which allow you to "lose yourself" for a little time.

5. Physical exercise

Some children throw themselves into physical activity such as swimming, sport, jogging and find that this gives them some relief for some time.

6. Hobbies

A hobby can be particularly helpful, particularly one which makes demands of you. Examples might include model-making, sewing, scouting/guiding, sailing etc.

7. Music

Some children who can play an instrument, or like listening to music say that they find this very helpful. It is probably because music can effect our moods and can make us feel happy or sad, or simply produce nice feelings in us.

8. Photographs or videos

Having a photo or video of the person who's died means that we have a permanent record of them when they were well. It can be a wonderful keepsake which can give you pleasure when thinking of the good times in the past.

9. Personal belongings

It may help you to have something personal that the person or their family have given you. Looking at or handling the item may bring back nice memories.

10. Memorials

Creating a permanent memorial in memory of the person is often seen as a very helpful and positive action. Elaborate forms of this are plaques or memorial stones, but it is much easier for small groups to buy a cup and present it to school for prizes, to buy a bench or seat, to plant a tree or bush, to create a memorial flower-bed or pond. (It is nice to try and think what your dead friend would have liked.)

MY PLAN OF ACTION

What are you going to do to remember

What positive things are you going to do to try and make things better for yourself?

Who are you talking to regularly, who can listen to you and understand how you might be feeling?

Remember

If things keep "looking black" and you don't think that they are getting any better please tell your parents and ask them if you can speak to someone outside the family.

Memories

My personal memories - by

The person close to me who died was called:

They lived at:

They were born on:

They died on:

There were aged:

I first met them on:

I liked them because

I liked to do this with them

I miss this mostly about them

My favourite memory of them is

SOME WORDS PEOPLE USE WHEN TALKING ABOUT DEATH

Anxiety	"being anxious about something"
The Bereaved	"being close family and friends of someone who does"
Bystander	"a person standing near but taking no part in an event"
Counsellor	"a person trained to listen and advise on problems"
Depression	"feelings of extreme sadness or hopelessness"
Emotion	"a very strong feeling"
Fantasy	"imagination"
Grief	"feelings of very deep sorrow"
Grieving	"all the feelings we go through after someone dies"
Guilt	"feeling that you are to blame for something (which may not be true)"
Mourning	"to feel or express sorrow after someone has died like wearing black clothes or black armbands"
Regression	"behaving like a younger child babyish, immature behaviour"
Shock	"a sudden violent effect on your mind or emotions which can make you ill or behave in very strange ways"