

How to Support Your Child through Bereavement



Young People's Reactions to Bereavement

Every young person is unique and will deal with bereavement in their own, unique way. The way they react can be different depending on whether it was a sudden, unexpected death, who has died, and the relationship they had with the person who has died.

Common reactions include:

Hiding their emotions – Some young people may struggle to understand what is happening and struggle to explain their feelings. They may prefer to keep their emotions hidden or they may just not have the emotional vocabulary needed to describe what they are feeling.

Continuing as normal – Some young people may choose to return to school straight after the bereavement. They may do this either because they need the comfort of the routine or because their parents or carers feel that it is the right thing for them and will provide a positive distraction.

Asking for help – Some young people may want to seek out the support of their friends and peers. It is important that the young person's school is informed about what has happened so that a plan can be put in place to support their needs. Once school is informed, they can monitor the young person and respond appropriately if there are any issues.

Specialist Support

If you think your child is struggling and you are unable to help them by using these suggested strategies or by using ideas of your own, it may be time to seek specialist support.

There are a number of agencies and charities that can support the young person directly. A number of agencies ask that the young person is supported by a parent/carer in the initial first six months after the bereavement before a referral is made. This allows the young person to start to move through the natural grief process before any interventions occur.

On some occasions, if interventions are put in place too soon, it can contribute to the process of grief lengthening. The young person may not deal with the really difficult emotions and these may be heightened at a later stage (years later in some cases) when any interventions will have stopped and support will be limited or non-existent.

If your child is at an age where they can talk about what is happening, discuss the option of support with them. They need to understand what support is available and be guided to choose the right support for them.

Keep talking to your child as they access any specialist support and remind them that you are there for them. Keeping close to each other will help you both.

Practicalities

Young people are very aware of any change in their routine. If the changes are not explained or acknowledged, a young person may worry about who is going to look after them, take them to school, pick them up, cook for them etc.

This is understandable but may not be avoidable. It is important to be honest with your child. Some young people may appreciate a timetable of who is picking them up from school and where they are going. A timetable can help them to feel more secure and feel in control as they know what is happening in advance.

Taking the time to talk through the plans for the week and looking at the timetable together will help your child, especially if they are feeling anxious. If at all possible, include the opinions of your child so they feel that they are being heard.

Becoming angry and responding differently to situations –

Some young people may become very angry with the world and with themselves. They may overreact to situations that they would have previously dealt with in a calm and controlled manner. Although boundaries and sanctions need to be put in place, an understanding of what is happening for that young person is vital.

Talk... Talk... and Talk Some More

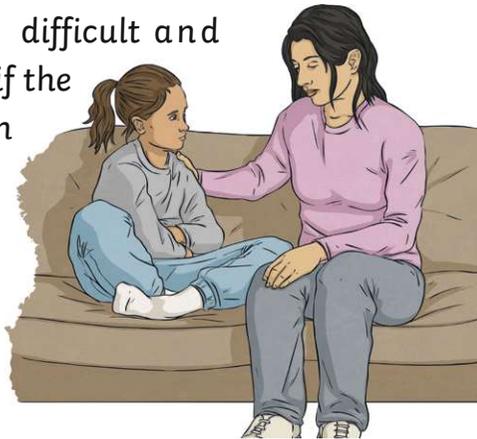
Some young people will have lots of questions. These questions may be very difficult to answer for you emotionally. It is OK to let your child see you upset. It can help them to understand that everyone is upset and it is not a weakness to cry; it is actually a healthy, positive way of coping with the loss of someone important.

Try to be as honest as you can while considering their age and their ability to understand the process of death and grief.

Try not to shy away from talking about bereavement. If and when the opportunity arises, use this as a way of creating a talking point. Honesty and openness are important to support young people. If you are open with them, the chances are that they will be open with you and other trusted adults.

Young people may exhibit changes in their behaviour. It is important to observe and monitor these changes. Some young people may react in a completely different way to someone else who is in the same situation.

These changes can be very difficult and upsetting to observe, especially if the young person has changed from being a happy, calm child to an angry child who is out of control.



themselves with other interests and become absorbed in them.

Try and allow the young person their own space and time. Reassure them that you are there for them, if needed. This gives the young person the opportunity to speak to you when they do start to grieve. Remind them and reassure them that grieving is a natural part of life and that it is normal.

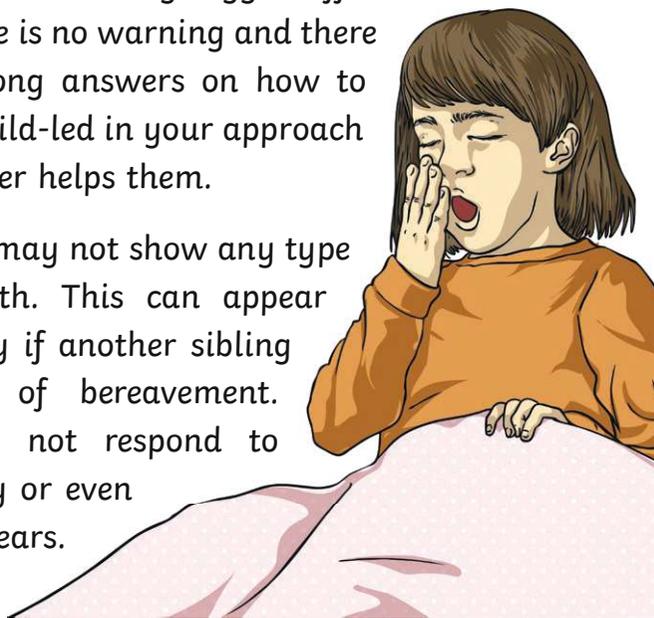
Young people may worry about what is happening to them. They may feel that their emotions are all over the place and that they are feeling several emotions all at once. It might help to discuss how you feel and how you manage your feelings.

Tiredness and Exhaustion

Young people often suffer from tiredness due to the emotional exhaustion and the inability to sleep at night. This tiredness can contribute to mood swings. You may also be having difficulty sleeping and this can cause you to react in a different way to normal. Being open and honest with each other is important. Explain that you are tired as well and that you might be reacting differently. Apologise if needed. Your child will appreciate your honesty and may feel reassured that their feelings and behaviour are normal. Adults are not always right and they also have to grieve. It is important to be honest when you notice that you are tired so that you can support one another.

Young people may appear happy and content one moment and then become distressed the next. You can't prepare for this because different situations may trigger different emotion. Often, there is no warning and there are no right or wrong answers on how to deal with this. Be child-led in your approach and go with whatever helps them.

Some young people may not show any type of response to death. This can appear strange, particularly if another sibling is showing signs of bereavement. Young people may not respond to death straight away or even for months or years. They may distract

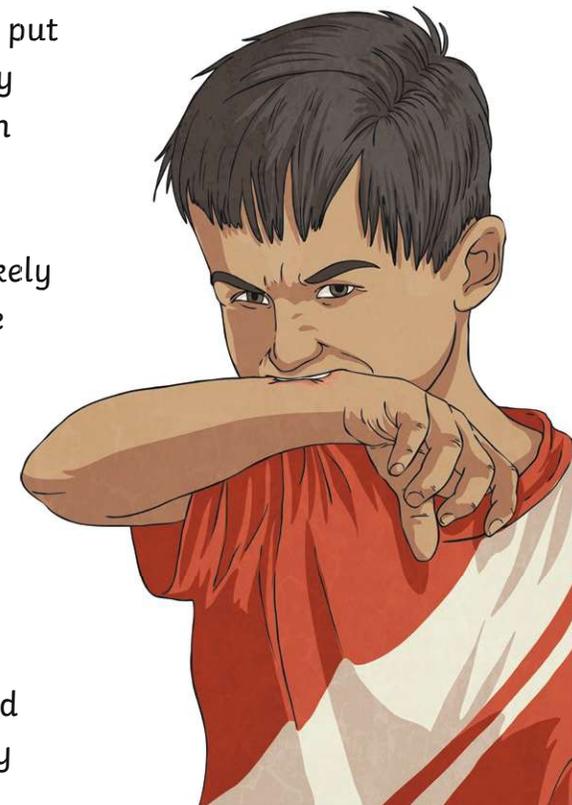


Behavioural Changes

It is important to remember that this is all part of the grieving process – the same child is still in there. Try and continue to react calmly and compassionately to them so that they know they are loved.

Don't be afraid to address the difficult behaviours – it is important to acknowledge the behaviour and its negative impact. Explain that you understand why they are behaving like this and that you will still be there for them. Explain why you need to address the behaviour and put boundaries in place. If they understand that your main focus is keeping them safe while letting them express their emotions, they are likely to move through this stage more safely.

Sometimes, the opposite can occur. A young person who has previously been outgoing, confident or challenging can become withdrawn and introverted. They shy away



from others and prefer to isolate themselves. They seem full of apathy for life and struggle to motivate themselves to do anything. It is important to remain close to them and remind them that you are there when they are ready to talk. Try and encourage social activities so they don't isolate themselves all the time. Being with others can help give them respite from their emotions and allow them some 'normality' for a short while.

Anger

Anger is a natural emotion that makes up part of the grieving cycle. It can be very challenging for the child and the adults around them. Anger can cause a lot of problems for young people and although they need to express it, they also need to be supported so they do not cause damage to themselves or others. Anger cannot be ignored. The angry behaviour needs to be dealt with, just as at any other time. This will provide consistency which helps young people to feel safe. Once they have calmed down, it is important to talk about what happened and why it happened. Think about what triggered the aggression and what support strategies can be put in place to help them deal with their emotions in a calmer way.

