



**Has  
someone  
died?**

*advice  
for parents  
and carers*

# Has someone died?

*A guide for parents and carers  
in supporting children and  
young people*

## How do children and young people react when someone dies?

There is no 'right way' to react when someone dies and every child or young person will respond differently. If you are caring for a child or young person it may help to know what many say, think and feel when someone important to them dies, and examples are given in this leaflet. But don't be surprised if the child or young person you are caring for finds it difficult to express how they are feeling - remember that many cope remarkably well.

*'Dad didn't die. When is he coming back?'*

Whatever your age, it can take a long time to believe that someone who matters very much to you is not coming back.

*'Where has she gone?'*

Younger children may find it more difficult to grasp that a dead person is not coming back and may ask repeatedly "Where have they gone?" expecting to be told of a place that they know about.

*'Why did it have to happen?'*

Information is very important and children and young people may need to ask the same questions over and over again. It will take them time to accept what has happened and the death may seem very unfair to them. They may be very angry that someone they care about has left them.



### 'It was my fault'

However far-fetched this may seem to you, many children and young people worry that something they said or did, or didn't say or do, contributed to the death.

### 'Will you die too?'

It is difficult for children and young people to understand why someone dies and they may become frightened about their own death or worry that someone else close to them will die soon.

### 'I wish I was dead'

Like adults, children and young people may sometimes feel it is not worth living without someone they love. They may imagine that if they die they will be reunited with the dead person, or the dead person will come back to life.

'I don't want you to be sad'

It is difficult for children and young people to see people they care about cry and suffer, but it is also important for them not to be shut out and to see that people can survive the sadness. There may also be great comfort in shared grief.

'What happens to his body?'

Young children may need help to understand that when someone is dead the body no longer works and must be buried or burned. Some small children may not understand that the body includes the whole body i.e. head and limbs as well as torso.

'Will it hurt her when she is burned?'

Children may think that being dead is like sleeping. They may need to be told there is no feeling or pain after death.

## Other things you may notice about a child who is grieving

### **Mood swings -**

One minute happy and the next very angry or distressed.

### **Not able to concentrate -**

Many cannot focus on schoolwork or any activity for some time after a death.

### **Quiet and withdrawn -**

Some will find it difficult to share their thoughts and feelings, preferring to be alone.

### **Sleeping patterns disturbed -**

Some may find it difficult to settle to sleep for a while or may also wake in the night.

### **Behaving like a younger child -**

Many children and even young people may start doing things they did when they were younger, like sucking their thumbs, wetting themselves or clinging to you.

### **Difficulties with friends -**

The death may make a child feel different from their friends and less sure of themselves with other people. They may be bullied or even bully others.

### **Breaking the rules, stealing, playing truant from school –**

A child or young person may feel there is no point in behaving well. They need firm and loving control to show them that the world is still a safe place for them.

### **Being very good –**

Some will be frightened of causing further upset. They may hope that if they are very good the dead person will come back.

Some will work very hard to behave like an older child, trying to take care of the adults around them. Some may have been told to do so by well-meaning relatives or friends, e.g. “You’re the man of the house now” or “your mother is going to depend on you”.

This is not appropriate. If you suspect this has happened and that the child or young person is bearing a weight of responsibility, talk to them about it and let them know that you do not expect this

*For most children and young people these behaviour patterns will pass in time but if you are worried and they are still struggling more than a few months after the death, do ask your GP for help. Do ask for help urgently if a child or young person persists in talking about wanting to be dead.*

## **What can I do to help?**

### **Shall I tell him what happened?**

Many adults worry that they will frighten a child or young person by telling them the truth. It can be hard to believe that a child's own ideas about what happened may be more frightening to them than the truth. Not all their questions will have answers. This may be frustrating for them but you are being honest. Giving children and young people the chance to ask the questions and tell you what they think and feel will be as helpful as providing the answers. It can be difficult to listen,

especially if they are being very matter of fact about what has happened, but encouraging them to be frank is a way of showing them that you care.

Try to use words like 'death' and 'died'. Phrases such as 'passed away' or 'gone to sleep' can be confusing.

## **What should I say about what happens after death?**

There are many ideas about what happens to the essence of people after death and it may help to share your own ideas with a child and certainly with a young person. Younger children may find it harder to understand and ask more questions.

### **Should I let them see the body?**

Seeing the body can help children and young people understand that the person they knew or loved is gone. It can help them believe that death is permanent and give them the opportunity to talk. However, they will need to be told what to expect and given the choice.

### **Should I take them to the funeral?**

Many children and young people do attend funerals, burials and cremations. Telling them what to expect will help them, and you, to decide if they should come. If you are very distressed it can help to let someone you both trust take responsibility for them during the ceremony and explain to them what is going on. Occasionally they may laugh or giggle during the funeral, and this may be an understandable release of unbearable tension.

Most places of worship and crematoriums are happy to arrange for a child to visit in preparation for the ceremony.

### **Should I let them see me crying or being angry?**

If they see you cry it will let them know that it is all right for them to cry too. It will always help if you can explain what you are sad or angry about so that the child or young person doesn't think it is their fault. If you are overwhelmed with pain and feel you are not able to care for them, perhaps a close relative or friend whom they trust could take over for a while.

### **Should I let them stay up late?**

You may find it difficult to keep to usual routines immediately following a bereavement, but letting a child or young person break all the rules will not help them, or you, in the long run. Routines provide a sense of security.

### **Should I tell the school?**

There are things the school may be able to help you with. Do have a discussion with the school staff. Teachers will be able to be more sensitive to a child or young person if they know about a death. You must let the teachers know what you are telling the child or young person so that they can support your cultural and religious beliefs.

### **What about the future?**

Future events, e.g. anniversaries or important family ceremonies will bring back feelings of sadness and loss. This is normal. Do continue to talk about the dead person at these times.

## **Is there anything else I can do to help?**

Showing a child or young person that you care and are interested in them is always helpful. Talking about the person who has died and bringing them to mind will often help both children and adults. They may need your help to find their own ways of remembering. Looking at photographs, drawing and painting are all ways in which they can express themselves or remember times with the person they have lost.

If you want further advice or help for a child or young person, you can contact:

#### **Cruse Bereavement Care**

Tel : **0870 167 1677**

Email: [helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk](mailto:helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

Young People between the age of 12 and 18 should call  
Freephone: **0808 808 1677**

