

Bereavement support from Bridgend Educational Psychology Service



Supporting Children and Young People who have been bereaved as a result of a death due to COVID-19

Introduction

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are living in highly uncertain times. This pandemic will be especially challenging and stressful for those who are already grieving the loss of a loved one or have recently lost a loved one due to COVID-19.

A death from COVID-19 is likely to mean that:

- There is little time to prepare for a loved one's death, following a period of illness that they suffered
- There may be little or no time spent with a loved one before they died, due to the risk of infection
- People who are grieving may not be able to say goodbye after the death during this time because there are restrictions on gatherings of people and funerals
- People who are grieving may be separated from loved ones who are also grieving. It is likely that loved ones will be in other locations, as people are restricted from moving around and may also be socially isolating
- There may be practical challenges, for example if the person bereaved was previously receiving care from someone who died, or they have responsibilities to care for others or to continue working
- It may be that people are coping with a bereavement at a time when the bereaved person, or others in their circle of family and friends, may also be ill with COVID-19

The coping resources of a bereaved person are under severe strain in the context of the pandemic. Some of the reasons for increased stress during this time may also include:

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- Being less able to receive in-person support from friends and family, potentially leading to a greater sense of isolation and loneliness
 - A decrease in activity levels which may lead to more "thinking" time and a reduced ability to use hobbies and interests as helpful distractions
 - High levels of social, health, and occupational uncertainty, reducing stability in life as you grieve, which can create difficulty planning for the future
 - More frequent reminders about illness and death, including the fear of experiencing further loss
- Every person's experience of grief is unique. When someone close to us dies, we may initially feel shocked, numb, guilty, angry, afraid and full of pain. These feelings may change to feelings of longing, sadness and loneliness – even hopelessness and fear about the future. These feelings are not unnatural, or wrong. These feelings are all 'normal' reactions to an incredibly difficult experience. Due to the additional stresses of experiencing a pandemic, the coping resources of a bereaved person are under severe strain.

Children grieve from an early age, but not in the same way as adults. Children often grieve in bursts and can show their feelings in their behaviour and play. Adults have a key role in helping children understand what is going on providing information and reassurance, and being aware of how their own reactions might impact upon children. Children are not little adults and their understanding depends on their developmental stage.



This means that we need to talk to children about what is happening at a level that is developmentally right for them.



We all have basic needs that we need to meet before we can move onto higher level needs. Psychologists think of these as the bottom of a pyramid of things we all need. We need to meet these most basic needs, like food, water, sleep and safety before we can move onto other needs.

Safety is one of these most basic needs and it is essential for good psychological

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development. It is important to remember that Covid-19 is making many children (and adults) feel unsafe.

Diagram based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Need (Maslow, 1943)

This pack has been designed to offer general advice about supporting children and young people who have been bereaved as a result of a death due to COVID-19. This advice is for families and for those who work with children and young people. This advice covers:

- Talking to children and young people about death as a result of COVID-19
- The process of grief
- Possible emotional, physical and behavioural reactions to bereavement
- The importance of looking after yourself as well as looking after a bereaved child or young person
- How to support Children and Young People
- Referring on to specialist services



Throughout this pack there are signposts highlighting where more advice and information can be found for certain things. They also signpost helpful resources and support from specialist organisations. Press the button on your keyboard while clicking on the link to take you to the information.

Talking to children and young people about death as a result of COVID-19

Talking to children developmentally aged 0-3

- It is important to understand:
 - Children will struggle to understand things that they can't see and touch, for example understanding what illness means will be difficult unless they can see it (such as someone sneezing)
 - Children this age don't understand that death is permanent ▪ They may:
 - Be easily confused or misunderstand things
 - Be more clingy and needy, show changes in toilet/eating/sleeping routine, and/or have trouble separating from key adults
 - Carry on with playing even when things around them may be difficult ▪
- You could help by:

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- Trying to use short sentences and focusing on the 'here and now'
 - Being honest and trying not to use complicated explanations or adding lots of detail
 - Focusing on structure and routine
 - Using play with dolls and stories to explain situations or concepts that it is important for the child to understand
- Talking to children developmentally aged 4-7
- It is important to understand:
 - They will struggle to understand concepts that they cannot picture in their mind
 - Children are beginning to learn that death is permanent
 - Children may not be able to identify or express their feelings, these may be shown in their behaviour and in their play
 - They may:
 - Be very matter-of-fact in the way they talk about death
 - Want lots of information, ask lots of questions repeatedly and need to hear what has happened on a frequent basis. This is due to their limited understanding of illness and death
 - Blame themselves or think something was their fault (e.g. this happened because I did not wash my hands)
 - You could help by:
 - Repeating the information you have given them consistently – answers do not need to be increasingly complex or more detailed
 - Helping them to label and name their emotions by labelling and naming yours



For more information about explaining death to younger children and the importance of language, see pages 7-9 of the following guidance:
https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf

Talking to children developmentally aged 7-12

- It is important to understand:
 - They are more able to understand concepts of time and permanence, and will understand that death happens to everyone and is permanent
 - Children might have strong views about what has happened and they may be interested in life after death and ask questions about it
 - Children are more able to understand what other people are going through and the impact of the loss they have experienced as they get older
- They may:

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- Not want to voice their feelings or concerns because they may be fearful of upsetting parents, friends or others
- Have difficulty verbalising their distress ○ Experience stress as physical symptoms, like a headache, a stomach ache or wanting more physical contact
- Ask more questions about how this will affect other people or wider changes to their life ▪ You could help by:
 - Encouraging emotional expression through drawing, stories, questions. For example, you could create a feelings box where they can write down their questions and thoughts and discuss them with an adult
 - Normalising different feelings appropriately and talking about what you are doing to help with their worries and feelings
 - Encouraging them to be active (provided they are well). This helps to get rid of some of the chemicals in the body which are released when we are anxious and will help with physical symptoms of stress
 - Making sure children don't take on adult roles in a desire to help others
 - Ensuring explanations are accurate (but also appropriate)



Winston's Wish was established in 1992 as the UK's first child bereavement charity, and currently supports around 30,000 children and young people per year.

<https://www.winstonswish.org>

Phone: 08088 020 021

Email:

info@winstonswish.org

Talking to children developmentally aged 13+

- It is important to understand:
 - Adolescents grieve in much the same way as adults ○ They can imagine the future and lots of possibilities. Therefore, their imagination may mean they are able to worry more about things that have not happened or might not happen (for example, losing other friends or family members or becoming very ill themselves)

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- They can understand the different causes of illness, that illnesses can be very different and can understand the role of stress and worry on the body
- Adolescents often experience emotional 'ups and downs' and can become deeply distressed ▪ They may:
- Ask fewer questions and turn to other sources of information such as social media, their friends and news outlets. They may respond better to peer support than adult support
- Want to find ways of helping others ○ Express grief and sadness through 'acting out' and angry behaviour that covers up their underlying feelings
 - You could help by:
- Continuing to offer space for support, affection and discussion (in line with social distancing guidance)
- Asking open questions to encourage them to talk about their feelings and needs ○ Offering choices within the context of what is possible and appropriate – if a teenager can't go out, giving more choice about activity within the home or garden may be helpful



Hope Again is the youth website of Cruse Bereavement Care. It has been designed by bereaved young people as a safe, interactive place where young people aged 11-18 can share their stories about loss and find information and advice, for example through video links, memory-making ideas, blogs and photos. <https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/>



For further information on children's understanding of death at different ages, Child Bereavement UK has produced a short guidance film. <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/childrens-understanding-of-death-atdifferent-ages>



For further information on talking to children and young people about illness, see advice produced by the British Psychological Society's Division of Clinical Psychology:

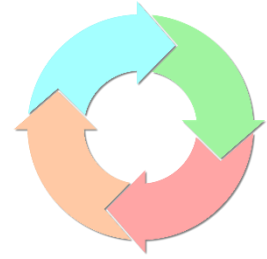
<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20%20Files/Talking%20to%20children%20about%20illness.pdf>

The process of grief

There is no set pattern or time limit to grief. Different life events may re-awaken the sense of loss, and for children and young people they may need to revisit their grief at different stages of their development.

It is important for adults who are supporting children and young people to understand the process of grief.

The process of grief has several different dimensions and stages and these include shock, denial, growing awareness and the acceptance and readjusting to a new reality. The process of grief is not linear – people's emotions can change rapidly. Individuals may move backwards and forwards in the process.



Shock is the initial response to major loss. It can manifest itself in many ways, for example:

Lack of response Numbness

Physical collapse Silence or inactivity

Outburst of emotion (screaming, shouting, confusion in speech, change in behaviour)

The second stage of grief is **denial** and it is usually experienced during the onset of the early stages of loss. Denial is used as a way of coping to try to deal with an inability to cope with loss and grief. An individual at this stage is attempting to come to terms with the loss. They may fluctuate between reality and denial.

Growing awareness is the third dimension in the process of grief. It involves becoming aware of the reality and of the change and loss. At this stage, many different emotions will evolve including sadness, yearning, despair, guilt, anger, anxiety and depression.

Over time, these intense feelings of loss tend to decrease and the young person will be able to discuss their feelings more readily and return to established routines.

The process of **acceptance and readjustment** enables the bereaved young person to begin to participate in life once again. For most people, the grieving process can take approximately two years, but this is influenced by individual circumstances and contexts.

Due to current government restrictions put in place to slow the spread of coronavirus which include social distancing and self-isolation, it may mean that there may have been little or no time spent with a loved one before they died, due to the risk of infection. It is also unlikely that people are able to attend funerals, and people who are

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grieving may be separated from loved ones who are also grieving but in other locations. It may also be that people are coping with a bereavement at a time when the bereaved person, or others in their circle of family and friends, may also be ill with COVID-19.

Therefore, due to these additional stresses, the process of grief may take longer. People may also move more frequently back and forth through the different stages.

Reactions to bereavement

Children cannot sustain emotional pain in the same way that adults can. Children and young people tend to move in and out of grief. At times, they may appear to be coping much better than expected.

It is important to remember that children and young people may not have the words to express their feelings. Because their emotions may be expressed as angry outbursts or misbehaviour, rather than as sadness, they may not be recognised as grief-related.

Possible Emotional Reactions	Possible Physical Reactions
▪ <u>Shock/humbness</u> – An immediate reaction may not be shown as tiredness they struggle to absorb the implications of the news. ▪ <u>Denial/disbelief</u> – It may be difficult to accept the death. They may headaches continue to talk about the dead person in the present tense or try loss of appetite to find the person. ▪ <u>Panic/separation anxiety</u> – They may fear their own or other family shivering members' death. They may need reassurance as their world neglect becomes insecure and they feel vulnerable. ▪ <u>Sadness</u> – They may be tearful or prone to sudden emotional activity outbursts. ▪ <u>Anger</u> – This may be expressed in words or in behaviour which sleeping signals intense pain. ▪ <u>Guilt</u> – They may feel something they did or did not do contributed to the death. This is often linked with anger and may lead to feelings of isolation. ▪ <u>Exhaustion</u> – Grief can feel physically and emotionally draining. ▪ <u>Despair</u> – They may feel overwhelmed and that nothing will ever be right again. ▪ <u>Helplessness</u> – They may feel out of control. ▪ <u>Lowered self-esteem</u> – As a result of changed circumstances and forgetfulness abilities.	- distress - minor illnesses - nausea - self-neglect - panic attacks - decrease in - difficulty - Possible - Behavioural - Reactions - aggression - restlessness - detachment

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- **Regression** – They may start doing things they did when they were younger (regress to an earlier stage of development). The separation anxiety child may be seeking to revert to a time when life was secure. For school refusal example, they may suck their thumb, lose previously gained skills or start wetting the bed.
- loss of motivation
disorganisation
inability to concentrate

It is also important to remember that being less able to receive in-person support from friends and family can potentially lead to a greater sense of isolation and loneliness. We are also experiencing a decrease in activity levels which may lead to more "thinking" time and a reduced ability to use hobbies and interests as helpful distractions. There are also more frequent reminders about illness and death (e.g. on the television and online) which may also increase the fear of experiencing further loss.



For information on what to look out for when attempting to support a bereaved young person, see pages 11-12 of the following guidance:

https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf

The importance of looking after yourself as well as looking after a bereaved child or young person

Adults will be better able to help children and young people if they are taking care of themselves too.

If you are also grieving:

Try to...	Try not to...
✓ Talk to other people (e.g. family, friends, a faith/spiritual adviser, your GP, a support organisation) about the person who has died, your memories and your feelings ✓ Look after yourself - eat properly and try to get enough rest (even if you can't sleep) ✓ Give yourself time and permission to grieve ✓ Seek help and support if you feel you need it ✓ Tell people what you need	✗ Isolate yourself from support ✗ Keep your emotions bottled up ✗ Think you are weak for needing help ✗ Feel guilty if you are struggling to cope ✗ Use temporary coping strategies such as alcohol

If you are struggling with supporting a child or young person, find someone you both trust for support, for example a family member, friend, a faith/spiritual adviser, your GP, or a support organisation.

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Bereavement Advice Centre offers a free helpline for people who are bereaved and for professionals. It also has information on its website about practical matters and coping with grief.

<https://www.bereavementadvice.org/> Phone: 0800 634 9494



Care for the Family offers a variety of resources to those who are bereaved. The charity also runs events, support days and weekends away for different age groups.

<http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/> Phone: 029 2081 0800 Email: mail@cff.org.uk



Child Bereavement UK supports families and educates professionals when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement. The organisation aims to provide families with the support they need to rebuild their lives.

<http://childbereavementuk.org/> Phone: 01494 568900 Email: support@childbereavementuk.org



Cruse Bereavement UK offers support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies, and works to enhance society's care of bereaved people. Cruse offers telephone, email and website support.

<http://www.cruse.org.uk/> Phone: 020 8939 9530 (Office) 0808 808 1677 (Helpline) Email: info@cruse.org.uk



Grief Encounter offers personal support and a variety of resources to those bereaved. The organisation also provides training, professional support and resources for schools.

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/> Phone: 020 8371 8455 Email: contact@griefencounter.org.uk



Samaritans The Samaritans are there for people need them, at any time of day or night. The organisation reach 228,370 people a year in schools, hospitals and the homeless.

<http://www.samaritans.org/> Phone: 0330 094 5717 Email: jo@samaritans.org



Sudden is a global charitable initiative for suddenly bereaved people, and the people caring for them, including their families and professionals. This website cares for people who are suddenly bereaved. <http://www.suddendeath.org/>

What families and professionals can do to support bereaved children and young people

It is also important to be aware that each child's experience of grief is unique, and we cannot expect that they will express their emotions like adults. Their behaviours may not necessarily reveal their internal distress.

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Help children express their feelings ○ Let children know you understand they are having difficult feelings and provide an environment where they feel safe to express their feelings in whatever way they can.

- Help them find ways to express their feelings, for example through play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting, drawing or music.
- Allow children time to talk, ask questions and share their worries. They may be very confused and need to ask lots of questions. You may have to answer the same questions over and over as children try to make sense of things.
- If a child finds it hard to talk you could open the way by saying something like: 'Some things are hard to talk about but talking things through can really help.'

Share your feelings ○ Share your feelings and tell children you are sad for their loss too – it helps them accept their feelings if they know others feel the same.

- Telling children how you are managing your feelings, even if you are sad, shows them that grief can be coped with. You will help them understand grief is a normal part of life.
- If you are really distressed it may not be wise to share this too much with children – they need to feel you are in control and can keep them safe.

Be honest ○ Tell children what has happened simply and honestly in ways that suit their age and development. This helps them find ways to cope. Children need to know what has happened even if they do not ask.

- If you do not tell children you may prevent them from dealing with the loss. It may cause problems when they have other losses later in life.

Provide routine and support ○ Currently, keeping to usual, daily routines is likely to be difficult. Try to stick to a routine as much as you can, because routines can be reassuring to children when everything else seems to be disrupted. ○ For example, try to keep to regular routines such as mealtimes, schoolwork, breaks, play and bedtime.

- Children feel more in control, and therefore less fearful, if given simple clear jobs to do, such as washing their hands properly, or simple jobs around the house.
- Keep to the same rules about what children are allowed to do. ○ Make extra time to spend with children and young people – they will need closeness and comfort.



The British Heart Foundation has produced a short animated story called 'The Small Creature' to help bereaved children.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ks2DOoZtZ4A>

The importance of remembering

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Grief is not about forgetting the person who has died, but finding ways to remember. By remembering, people can also heal. Being actively involved in creating ways of remembering is extremely helpful for both children and adults.

There is no right or wrong way of remembering. At its best, it is a deeply personal expression of love for this special person in their life who has died and yet lives on inside them.

Memory box – Buy or make a special box and fill it with precious possessions such as letters or cards from friends, dried flowers from the funeral, photographs or treasured possessions of the person who has died – for example a piece of jewellery, their glasses, a diary or letter.

Memory book – It can be a helpful process to create a special book in memory of the person who has died. It could contain photographs, poems, letters and thoughts. It can be looked through to help remember and think about that person.

Planting trees or shrubs – Some people like to plant a tree or a shrub as a way of remembering. It is important to make sure that a hardy plant tree or shrub is planted to reduce the risk of it dying.

Artwork – Making artwork and framing it in memory of someone who has died can be a helpful activity for people who are bereaved. Making something in memory of someone special who has died helps connect to them in the making of it, and gives the bereaved person something to treasure in the future.



Candles – Lighting a candle and perhaps reading a special prayer or poem can be a simple and yet powerful way of commemorating an anniversary or other special time.

Keeping a diary – Writing a diary of their journey through grief can be helpful for bereaved people for a number of reasons. Putting into words what they feel can help release some of the pain. It is helpful as a reference point for them to look back on how they felt before – what they have been through and what it was like.

The Bereavement Box aims to provide children and young people with a wide range of remembering and celebrating activities and ideas – including all of the above key suggestions. Parents and carers can also use this resource which can be adapted to different circumstances. For



information about this resource, see pages 24-26 of the following guidance:

https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement_box-booklet-cov19-edition2020-web.pdf

Golden rules

How you can help and support a child or young person to deal with their loss is always difficult. The following golden rules may be helpful to adults and other young people in supporting them:

- Accept that the bereaved child's feelings may be very different to yours.
- Silence is Golden. Sometimes there are no words that bring enough comfort to take away the pain. Presence alone can sometimes say what words cannot.
- Be there to listen if they do want to talk. Grieving children often need to tell their stories repeatedly. Listening without judgement or interruption can be very helpful.
- Be truthful and always answer questions honestly.
- Empathise but never say: 'I know exactly what you feel'.
- Allow time to grieve as there is nothing to be gained by rushing the process.
- If you are too upset to help find someone else who can stand in for you for a while.
- Try to keep to predictable surroundings and routines.
- Always show love, care and consistencies as these will act as healing tools.
- Provide reassurance that strong feelings are a normal part of grieving.
- Try to share positive and happy memories (prompt them to talk about happy times and good memories that they have.)
- Ensure the child understands that the pain of loss is a part of life and it isn't something to be ashamed of.
- Be sensitive to delayed grief responses and remember that there is no single timescale with coming to terms with loss.



Referring on

It is important to recognise that children and young people who become stuck in their grief may need further support, especially when there is a traumatic circumstance surrounding the death. School staff, parents and carers need to vigilantly monitor

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behaviours to make a decision regarding the need for further specialist therapeutic support.

Services in Bridgend



Cruse Bereavement Care offers support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies, and works to enhance society's care of bereaved people. Cruse offers telephone, email and website support. Cruse in Morgannwg covers Swansea, Neath, Port Talbot and Bridgend.

Email: morgannwg@cruse.org.uk Tel: 01792 462845



Bridgend Community Bereavement Support is a registered charity that has been operating since 2017. Their objective is to ensure that every bereaved adult, young person and child within the Bridgend County and surrounding areas can access consistent and high quality Bereavement services. <http://www.bridgendbereavement.co.uk/>

Tel: 073791 69836

Email: hello@bridgendbereavement.co.uk

Information in this pack has been drawn from: "Talking to children about illness" - Guidance issued by the British Psychological Society (Division of Clinical Psychology), "Coping with bereavement and loss during the COVID 19 situation: A self-help guide to support NPT CBC staff" by Neath Port Talbot Educational Psychology Service, "How to cope with bereavement during the COVID-19 pandemic" by Dr. Jason Spendelow, "The Bereavement Guide" By Dr Tina Rae (Edited by Kevin Kibble), "Remembering" by Dr. Lorna Nelson and Dr. Tina Rae, "Has someone died? Restoring hope" by Cruse Bereavement Care, and resources from SeeSaw (Reg. Charity No. 1076321), Owl signpost image from <https://pngtree.com/so/hand-painted>