

# Grief In The Family

## Understanding Bereavement



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# Summary

At some point in our lives, all of us are affected by grief—whether we have lost someone close to us, or we are the support for a friend who has lost someone close to them. Dealing with grief is a different process for everyone, and is very different for younger family members. This video illustrates the many ways to deal with family grief among people of different ages, and what to avoid saying when helping bereaved friends and their family.

Being a parent can be difficult enough—as a bereaved parent day-to-day tasks may seem impossible. A bereaved parent not only has to provide support for their family, they have to explain what has happened to their children. Often, the children in the family are at varied ages, and their ways of dealing with grief are very different. As this program points out, a bereaved parent cannot forget about himself or herself in such a difficult time; there are several ways that a parent can help their children through their grief. A deceased family member doesn't have to be forgotten; there are many things that can be done to help children remember those who are no longer with them. Dealing with grief as a family can help to make such a difficult time a bit easier.

## Key points:

- Though death is a fact of life, today's world of isolation can make dealing with bereavement even more difficult.
- Dealing with grief is a process that is different for everyone; no matter what the process for each person, how they grieve is fine for them.
- The process of grieving is often both a mental and physical one.
- A bereaved person is in need of support from family and friends; what you say and how you say it can make a difference.
- Children deal with grief in ways that are very appropriate for their age, though it may seem unusual from an adult's perspective.
- Parents have the important task of being the main source of support for their family; however, they should never forget about their own needs/support.

# When Someone Dies

*Communities used to have ways of letting everybody know that something important and unchangeable had happened.*

---

Most people in the modern world do not live in this kind of community. For many of us, death has become unfamiliar—we expect medicine to keep everybody alive, at least until they are very old. In most parts of the U.S., dying is a private event involving only close family and friends, not whole communities.

Caring for those who are dying, laying them out when they die, and carrying them to cremation or burial, are tasks no longer done by relatives but left to professionals. Even comforting the bereaved, and helping them to mourn, are seen as jobs for trained counselors – ordinary people are often afraid to “interfere”.

This distancing of ourselves from death can make it even more difficult to deal with. Dying is a fact of life, and we need to accept this in order to keep in touch with reality.

People might think at the time that they will avoid distress by having no direct contact with the dead and dying, but in the long term this often makes it harder for them to believe in the finality of what has happened. Relatives, friends, and neighbors can provide enormous support to a bereaved person, no matter how ‘amateur’ they may seem.

# The Process of Grieving

*Grief itself isn't an illness, or a sign of madness. It's normal for a bereaved person not to feel normal. They frequently become sad, relieved, angry, forgetful, calm, bad-tempered, cheerful, despairing, anxious and exhausted... possibly all on the same day.*

---

When someone dies, the members of their close family experience all kinds of feelings and emotions. Some feelings they may expect, such as: sadness, helplessness, and loneliness. Other feelings, however, may take them by surprise—for instance:

- Shock – numbness, as the fact of the death takes time to sink in; disbelief, and refusal to accept what has happened
- Anger – about what has happened, how and why; about the injustice of it; about other's lack of understanding
- Fear – of something similar happening again; of being left alone; of not being able to cope
- Guilt – about being still alive; about being somehow to blame for the death; about not having done the right thing; about starting to feel happy again
- Relief – especially if death follows a long illness
- Shame – about not having reacted in the right way
- Depression – anxiety; a feeling that one is also about to die; a lack of interest in everything; sense of worthlessness; despair

People react physically, too, in a variety of ways:

- Initially – symptoms of shock can be seen
- Many suffer from tiredness, sleeplessness, loss of concentration, dizziness, breathing difficulties, nausea, aches and pains
- Bereavement causes stress, which has many effects—including a greater likelihood of being involved in accidents
- Immunity to illness is reduced for up to two or three years

Customs and rules developed over the centuries by different communities and religious groups were designed to help people mourn. These include:

- The funeral ceremony or other ritual which includes a public acknowledgement of the deceased person's life
- Visits of condolence from other members of the community, immediately after the death, so relatives can talk about what has happened and receive support
- Letting some days pass before family members leave the house or do any kind of work, so that they may concentrate on grieving
- Letting weeks or months pass before they attend entertainments or parties
- Marking the anniversary of a death in some way

# What a Grieving Person Needs

*A lot of people say grief is like a burden they have to carry around. At first it's very heavy, and the effort is tiring.*

---

Every individual reacts differently, and everyone has to grieve in their own way. However, bereaved people of all ages are in recovery from a severe shock—which affects them mentally and physically. They need to be gentle with themselves: to take time for extra rest, and for activities that relieve stress.

In order to get used to what has happened, they need to talk about it. Going over the events again and again, as they tell different family members and friends about their experience, is part of their recovery process.

Simple words of sympathy from others – *I'm sorry about your sister* – can really help bereaved people to feel they are not carrying a burden entirely alone.

It is helpful to acknowledge how they are feeling, and offer comfort, by saying things like: “This is a very difficult time for you;” “I am sorry you have had such a sad loss;” or “You did everything you could.”

It is not helpful to avoid talking about the death, or to try and cheer people up by saying things like: “I know how you feel;” “You've got to be brave;” “You should try and forget it;” “At least you've got another sister.”

Most people go on grieving for a close family member for at least two years – even if they are unaware they are doing it.

# Don't Tell Me How to Grieve

Michael Rosen

please don't tell me that I mourn too much  
and I won't tell you that you mourn too much  
please don't tell me that I mourn too little  
and I won't tell you that you mourn too little  
please don't tell me that I mourn in the wrong place  
and I won't tell you that you mourn in the wrong place  
please don't tell me that I mourn at the wrong time  
and I won't tell you that you mourn at the wrong time  
please don't tell me that I mourn in the wrong way  
and I won't tell you that you mourn in the wrong way

I may get it wrong  
I will get it wrong  
I have got it wrong  
but please please please don't tell me

*Michael Rosen, the performer who acts as the narrator in the video Grief in the Family, is a poet and a bereaved parent.*

# Being a Bereaved Parent

*Just when children are in need of extra support, so are their parents and caregivers*

---

Bereaved parents may find their grieving is delayed as they concentrate on looking after the rest of the family, or that their feelings overwhelm them so that they cannot care for their children. Grief and shock cut people off from one another, so it can be hard for parents to appreciate their children's feelings and fulfill their needs.

Parents are not super-human. They can't do everything, and they will sometimes get things wrong. At this time they need support, either from people they know, or from organizations such as those listed at the end of this booklet.

Reaching out to friends and relatives is one important way to help children with their grief, and to help their bereaved parent(s). Seeing a friendly, familiar face can help children feel less isolated, and provide an outlet for the parent to feel less pressure. With that relief, hopefully the parent can allow themselves to grieve.

# How Children Grieve

Some adults think young children do not grieve because they are not old enough to understand what death means. However, children of all ages experience grief, though they may not show it in a way that is easily recognized.

Small babies react to the loss of a main caregiver by changes in eating, sleeping, and crying patterns. Older babies may also search for the missing person—they become anxious or withdrawn, and lose interest in playing. Young children may protest at their bereavement through temper tantrums. They become clingy and demanding, as their main fear is being separated and abandoned from those who care for them.

Having little concept of time, they cannot understand that death is final – attending a funeral and seeing the body can help them realize this. They need repeated explanations and reassurance. They take things at face value, and are easily confused by stories such as “She’s sleeping”, or “He’s gone away”. It is best to say simply that the person has died and cannot come back to life.

Children of school-age can usually understand that death is permanent. However, their language skills are limited—so they may express sadness, fear, and anger through actions and play.

Strong emotions are hard for children and young people to handle. Some disruptive behavior, anxiety, or sulkiness should be expected. Bereaved people of all ages may start acting as though they were younger. For a child this may mean a return to bedwetting, thumb-sucking, or fear of the dark.

Teenagers think and talk about the concept of death and experience emotions more as adults do, but this age group still has particular problems with bereavement. Adolescence is already a time of strong emotions, when young people develop their own identity, and may be in conflict with their families. The natural process of withdrawal from parents may make them feel guilty or angry, and this can be made much worse during bereavement. They are self-conscious, and may fear that they will be seen as childish if they show their emotions or ask for help. It is important to remember that adolescents are not too old to need reassurance, comfort and affection.

# What Bereaved Children Need From Adults

*In order to grieve as they need to, children and young people must have affection and reassurance. They need someone to listen to them, and answer their questions honestly.*

---

Children may feel excluded by adults who think they are too young to grieve. They may feel anxious and afraid, but unable to ask questions for fear of upsetting other people

Children do not need protecting from their sadness but they do need support. If their grief is suppressed, it may come out in other ways—causing behavioral problems, physical illness, or mental illness later on. However, if they are enabled to express their feelings openly, this will help them grow stronger.

## **Information**

Information should be given as soon as possible, by someone very close to the children, preferably a parent. It should be clear, simple and truthful, telling them as much as they want to know at any one time, without overloading them. It will probably need to be repeated, and questions answered in a way the children will understand. As a child grows older the facts will need to be explained again in a way suited to their increased understanding. If you don't know the answer to a question, just say so honestly.

## **Communication**

Children should be encouraged to express their feelings, but not told how they should feel. They need to talk, and be given time to ask questions; to be listened to, and taken seriously. They should be able to choose whether to view the body or attend the funeral, and should be told what to expect. Schools need to know there has been a death in the family so that they can give children understanding and support.

## **Reassurance**

Children need to know someone will take care of them. They need stability and affection, to give them a sense of security.

They need to know that they are not responsible for the death.

They need to know they and others are not about to die too.

They need discipline and routine, with kindness and flexibility.

## **Role models**

Children learn how to mourn from adults. They need to see others cry and express sadness and anger, in order to know they are allowed to do this too. If adults in the family allow a child to give them comfort, the child may be able to receive comfort more easily in return.

Children of all ages need a lot of love and care, but they also have a lot to give back, and they should be given the chance to do so.

# Activities to Help a Bereaved Child

- Make a 'book of memories'—which could include drawings, paintings, writing, and photographs
- Choose a box or bag to keep special mementos
- Write a letter to the person who has died
- Express feelings through drawing, painting, or music
- Tell stories with play-acting or puppets
- Remember anniversaries or birthdays in a special way
- Read books about bereavement together
- Meet with other children who have had similar experiences
- Use physical activity to help express feelings

# Questions For Discussion

These questions may be better discussed in small groups—role-playing should be encouraged.

**1. Create your own case studies:**

Each group could focus on a specific child age (toddler, grade school, up to teenager) and create their own case study—how could that child's bereavement be best addressed? Other members of the group could evaluate if the study seems accurate (for example, were all the child's concerns addressed?)...this could be an opportunity for role-playing to get everyone's input.

**2. Each person should discuss his or her own experiences with bereavement:**

How might that experience have been different if you were of a different age at the time? Did you feel supported at that time—what more could have been done? Practice offering words of sympathy—can you be empathetic?

**3. Imagine you're a close friend of Sue's family—her husband died this afternoon.**

Now the bereaved mother asks you to tell her daughters, ages 6 and 14, that their dad has died. What do you say? How might the conversation be different with each child? How can you offer more support to Sue? Imagine yourself as the bereaved parent—how might the conversation with the children change?

**4. Each person should consider some homework in the case of a loved one's death:**

Does your family have a plan?  
Are there any children—if so, will their needs be addressed?

# Grief In The Family

## Multiple Choice Worksheet

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) Grief can affect a person mentally and physically.
  - a) true
  - b) false
  
- 2) A bereaved person may feel:
  - a) sad
  - b) relieved
  - c) angry
  - d) all of the above
  
- 3) Younger children are more likely to show their grief through:
  - a) talking
  - b) thinking
  - c) actions
  - d) none of the above
  
- 4) Children should learn and hear about loved ones who have died.
  - a) true
  - b) false
  - c) both true and false
  
- 5) A good example of how to tell a young child that her sister has died is to tell the child:
  - a) that her sister is asleep
  - b) that her sister has gone away
  - c) that her sister died and cannot come back
  - d) that her sister has run away
  
- 6) When a family member dies, children may worry that:
  - a) they are to blame
  - b) they will die
  - c) they are immortal
  - d) both a & b
  
- 7) As they grieve, children may:
  - a) want to stay home from school
  - b) want to go school
  - c) have difficulties at school
  - d) all of the above
  
- 8) It's okay for bereaved parents to depend on younger children for support.
  - a) true
  - b) false
  
- 9) To help children cope with their bereavement , parents can:
  - a) have the child write a letter to the deceased
  - b) let the child keep a memento
  - c) set up a special anniversary
  - d) all of the above
  
- 10) Overall, bereaved children need:
  - a) affection
  - b) a reality check
  - c) honesty
  - d) both a & c

# Grief In The Family

## Multiple Choice Worksheet *Answer Key*

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) Grief can affect a person mentally and physically.  
a) **true**  
b) false
- 2) A bereaved person may feel:  
a) sad  
b) relieved  
c) angry  
d) **all of the above**
- 3) Younger children are more likely to show their grief through:  
a) talking  
b) thinking  
c) **actions**  
d) none of the above
- 4) As they grow older, children should learn and hear about loved ones who have died.  
a) **true**  
b) false  
c) both true and false
- 5) A good example of how to tell a young child that her sister has died is to tell the child:  
a) that her sister is asleep  
b) that her sister has gone away  
c) **that her sister died and cannot come back**  
d) that her sister has run away
- 6) When a family member dies, children may worry that:  
a) they are to blame  
b) they will die  
c) they are immortal  
d) **both a & b**
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d) **all of the above**
- 10) Overall, bereaved children need:  
a) affection  
b) a reality check  
c) honesty  
d) **both a & c**

## For More Information...

1. HelpGuide.org – Coping with Loss  
[http://www.helpguide.org/mental/grief\\_loss.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/grief_loss.htm)
2. American Cancer Society – Coping with grief and loss  
<http://documents.cancer.org/6036.00/>
3. MayoClinic.com – Grief  
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/grief/MH00036>
4. Hospice – Helping teenagers cope with grief  
<http://www.hospicenet.org/html/teenager.html>
5. LiveStrong – Grief and Loss  
<http://www.livestrong.org/site>
6. Caring Connections – Grief  
<http://www.caringinfo.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3282>
7. Connect for Kids – Help with the healing  
<http://www.conneforkids.org/node/392>
8. Kidsource Online—The Grief of Children  
<http://www.kidsource.com/sids/grief.html>
9. Children, Youth and Women's Health Service—Grief and Loss  
<http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=141&id=1662>
10. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry—Children and Grief  
<http://aacap.org/page.wv?name=Children+and+Grief&section=Facts+for+Families>