

Supporting with Loss & Bereavement

What do we mean by Loss & Bereavement?



Loss is when something or someone leaves or is taken away from us. The death of anyone is a loss but it is not the only loss we and our children/young people may experience. Under lockdown and social distancing measures, our children and young people have experienced many different types of loss including: not being able to see their teachers and friends, not taking examinations or tests, not being able to visit grandparents and other special people and loss of normal routines.

Bereavement is what we experience when someone dies. Some children and young people, very sadly, will also have experienced bereavement through the death of someone close to them from COVID 19.

How does Loss & Bereavement effect Children and Young People?

Loss and bereavement affect everyone including children and young people. Every child or young person will react to loss and bereavement differently. It will depend on lots of different things including their age, what their previous experience has been, how close they were to the person who died and also how their family and other people around them deal with the loss.



Children and young people's behaviour may change as they try to deal with the feelings that they have following experiences of loss. These changes can include: separation anxiety (especially younger children), developing new worries or fears, problems sleeping including nightmares, irritability, anger, deep sadness, difficulties with concentrating and loss of interest in their usual activities. They may also have physical symptoms like a tummy ache.

How can I help my Child or Young Person deal with Loss of any type?

1. As we have said in other factsheets, the most important thing that you can do is to ensure that you make your child or young person feel safe, created through spending regular quality time with them. Spending this time together lets your child/young person know that you are there for them and they are not alone, giving them a sense of safety.
2. Give lots of reassurance to your child. Spend time with them, cuddle them and let them know you are there to help them through these difficult times and feelings.
3. Routines are important for helping children feel safe and reassured. Try and stick to routines as much as possible including meal times and bed times. It may feel like a kind thing to do to perhaps let your child/young person stay up later, not have to do something they would normally do. However, routine makes us all feel in control and safe and without it we can feel the opposite, that things are out of control.
4. If there are going to be changes to routines, prepare your child or young person as much as possible.
5. Don't be afraid to show your own emotions. By showing your feelings you are encouraging your child/young person to show theirs too. Explore different ways for your child/young person to express their emotions – stories, drawing, playing, keeping a diary can all help with this.
6. Your child/young person will have lots of questions, e.g. *Why can't I see my granddad? Why can't I sit my exams? Will schools ever open again? Will my grandma die?* Some of these questions might be painful and uncomfortable, but it is important to answer your child. It is important to answer all questions honestly and calmly and not to shield



them from what is going on in the world. Remember that you do not need to have all of the facts and answers, but to just be honest about, e.g. *I don't know when schools will open*. It is ok to say you need time to think about a question or you do not know the answer. Be prepared for your child to ask the same questions over and over. Keep answering them – this is their way of processing what has happened and seeking reassurance from you.

How can I help my Child or Young Person deal with Bereavement?

1. All of the points above are also vital when a child/young person is experiencing bereavement, especially of someone close to them. However, you will also need to talk about and discuss death.
2. Be open and honest with your child. Keep explanations age-appropriate and use clear language to explain why the person died. We may find it hard to talk about death, but it is important we avoid phrases like “gone to sleep” or “gone away”. Phrases like these are confusing for children as they may believe the person who has died will come back. They can also become fearful of going to sleep themselves. Use age appropriate ways to explain what death means, e.g. *‘When someone dies, their body stops working, and this means that they don't need anything to eat or to drink and they can't feel anything. Because their body has stopped working they cannot come back to life, even though we may really want them to.’*
3. Younger children in particular often have what is called ‘magical thinking’ and might believe the dead person will come back to life. Gently remind them of what has happened and give lots of reassurance.
4. If children do not understand properly what has happened, they may blame themselves for the death. They might also worry the same thing is going to happen to them. Make sure you explain in an age appropriate way why the person has died.
5. If your child/young person is attending school it is important to tell their school so they can offer some support.
6. When someone has died there can be a lot of changes happening quite quickly. Let your children know the plans for the days and weeks ahead. If someone else will be looking after them, let them know as this will help them feel safe. Involve them in the funeral planning even if they are not attending. With the right preparation (knowing what they will see and what will happen) even very young children can attend funerals and many find it helpful.
7. It is important that time is given to remembering the person who has died. Even though it can be painful, talking about them regularly can help children/young people know that they can also talk about them when they want to. Help them make a memory box. You might include photos, drawing, clothing and other significant items.
8. Whether or not your child/young person goes to the funeral, it may help them to mark the death in a special way such as lighting a candle, saying a prayer or poem, planting a tree or shrub, visiting the grave or another special place.
9. Finally it is crucial that you take care of yourself. Try and give yourself space and time to grieve. The more you look after yourself, the better you will be able to support your child/young person.



Special Note:

Please consider that if your child or young person has experienced the death of someone close to them prior to the COVID 19 situation they may be particularly anxious, more so than other children/young people, that something will happen to someone else close to them. It is important that you acknowledge these concerns, e.g. *‘I guess you might be wondering if this virus will make Grandad more sick?’* It may be helpful to remind your child that some people only experience mild symptoms and reassure them that more people are recovering from the virus than dying from it. You could tell them that it is unlikely they will get very ill and if they do you will look after them, and if you get the virus you will probably only be ill for a few days, e.g. *‘I want you to know that I am very healthy and even if I get the virus, I am only likely to feel a bit poorly for a few days.’* *‘We’ll make sure that Grandpa gets looked after safely.’*