

Grief and Loss



Practical strategies
to support children
and young people
cope with grief & loss

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“The gift of Hope is the greatest gift we can give those who mourn.
Hope that all is not lost,
Hope that life can still be worth living and meaningful,
Hope that the pain of loss will become less acute and above all else,
The Hope that we do not walk alone, that we are understood.”

Rev Simon Stephens R.N., OBE, Founder, The Compassionate Friends

It is inevitable that at some point in every child's life they will be affected by grief or loss of some sort. This includes deaths of family members (grandparents, parents, siblings), or within the school or wider community. Feelings of loss can also come from parental divorce, a move of house or some other separation that adversely affects the child.

Through providing a curriculum that acknowledges and addresses loss, death, bereavement and grief we can improve the skills of children and young people to deal with and emerge positively from them. An important part of this is the ability to support pupils, families and staff at times of loss and bereavement, as well as helping children and young people to support their peers, decreasing the sense of isolation that can be part of it.

Every death, and the circumstances in which it occurs, is different. Nevertheless, through this leaflet we aim to provide pointers and advice to teachers and school staff who may be providing specific support to individuals or groups following a loss.

1) Understanding the stages of grieving

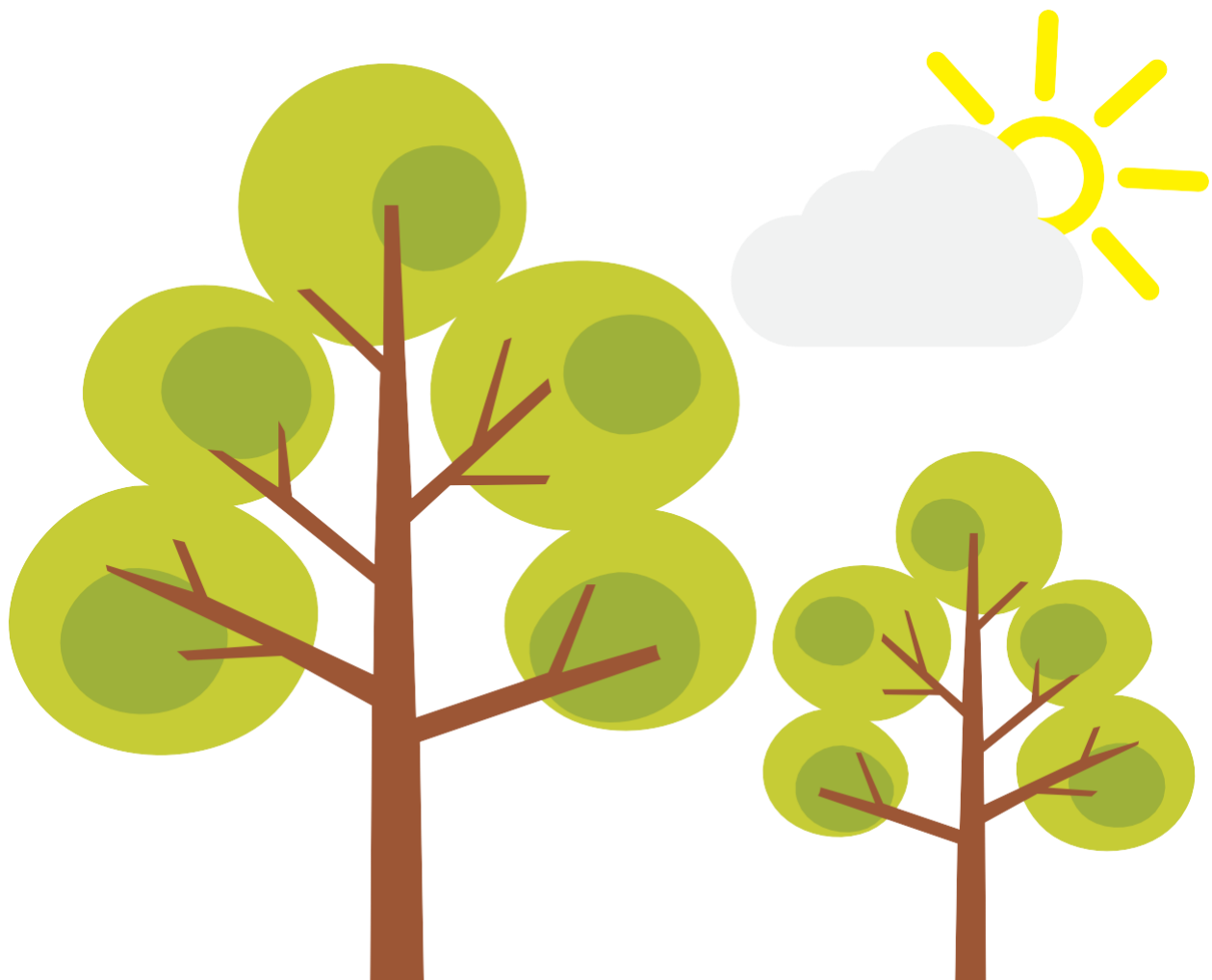
The grieving process varies from person to person, however in an attempt to understand and effectively help those grieving different models of grieving have been developed by psychologists. Many of these models use 'stages' in order to understand how one moves through the grieving process.

Commonly seen stages in children and young people are described below. It is important to understand though that the order in which one experiences the stages and how long it takes to go through these stages will vary from person to person. Some people may start with anger, while others may start with denial. The stages of grieving can also be experienced more than once. However, each step helps with the healing process.

Protest stage: This may include denial where one can try to believe that the death has not occurred. One may feel numb, or in a state of shock. Denial is a protective emotion when a life event is too overwhelming to deal with all at once.

Grief Stage: This may include anger and questioning of why this has happened. The child may also feel guilty and search for a cause or something that they personally did that could have contributed to the death. Depression or a profound sense of sadness is also often seen. This is normal and may be accompanied by physical changes such as trouble sleeping or excessive sleeping, changes in appetite, or difficulty with concentrating on simple daily activities.

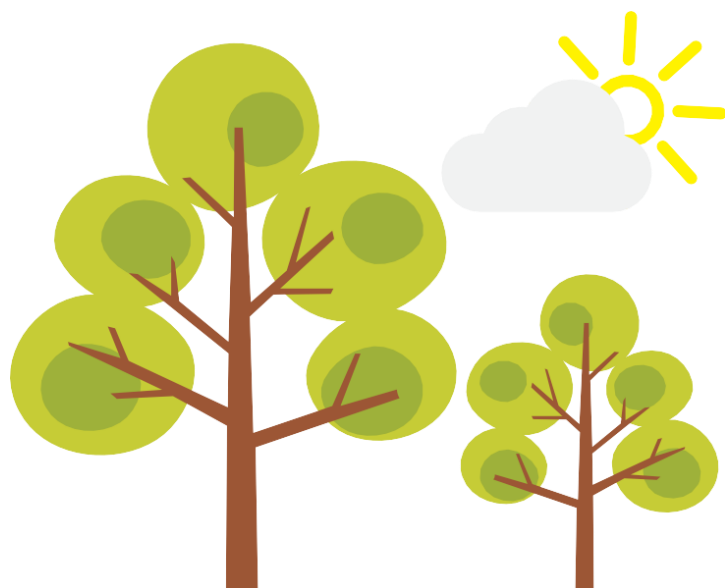
Acceptance Stage: This is where the death has been incorporated into the child's or young person's life story and they have adjusted to the loss. This does not mean that they will no longer feel sad or difficult emotions, but that they are more resilient and better able to manage their lives overall upon reaching this stage.



Children's behaviour

Protest stage	Helpful adult responses
Apparently not hearing or not understanding the news of the death; acting dazed.	Repeat the news later in the day or the next morning. Answer questions clearly and honestly. Wait for awareness to occur.
Panic and fear of being alone; nightmares	Maintain usual routines as far as possible. Be sure children know who will take care of them in the coming weeks. At night keep a radio playing or leave a door open so the child can hear sounds of life. Be sure someone is near to comfort the child after a nightmare.
Grabbing the limelight to tell about the death	Allow this. It won't last long.
Denying that the death has occurred; being unusually active and boisterous to keep from thinking about it.	Accept this behaviour. If it persists more than three to six months, consult a therapist.
Grief stage	Helpful adult responses
Sadness and tears, yearning, acute loneliness.	Share adult sadness and tears with children. Support crying, join in yearning. Hold, cuddle, touch. Review pleasant and unpleasant memories of the dead person. Together make a memory book of photos captioned by the child. Collect home movies, videotapes, and tape recordings for the memory file.
Regression to earlier, more infantile behaviour.	Accept and facilitate (e.g. if wanted, give a toddler a bottle), yet support attempts to regain mature skills.
Searching for the dead person.	Allow this to continue until the child feels that he/she has made a thorough search. Help child to talk about repeated disappointments.
Difficulty in school, inability to concentrate, development of learning disability.	School problems may last as long as two years. Teachers can work with the class around death issues; have the school counsellor work regularly with the child on personal problems so he or she can concentrate during classes. Help child keep at their studies but do not allow it to impinge on their playtime.

Grief stage	Helpful adult responses
<p>Anger and guilt. Anger may be misplaced and directed towards caretaker, siblings, adults in the exosystem.</p>	<p>Accept anger, understanding that it is misplaced. Empathise with and respect feelings. Reassure that hurting is part of grieving and eventually will subside. Find physical outlets for children's rage. Put aside adult activities when possible to emphasise the value of conversations about guilty or angry feelings. Encourage drawing, writing, and playing out feelings. Where possible meet periodically with the siblings as a group to explore feelings of guilt and anger and work out solutions to common problems with their new living situation.</p>
<p>Hopelessness and despair.</p>	<p>Validate such feelings as legitimate and painful. Reassure the child that they are temporary. Use books and stories to show how others coped with death. Reading fairy tales where a child conquers adversity is a way to help restore meaning and hope.</p>
Acceptance stage	Helpful adult responses
<p>Acceptance of loss; seeking closer bonds with new caretaker; strengthening relationships with siblings.</p>	<p>Allow memory of dead person to be a part of children's lives by remembering anniversaries, recalling feelings.</p>



A similar model to the above that may also be useful to think about is that developed by Worden's (1988). Once again this is a four stage model:

1) Accepting the reality of loss (What do people need?)

- Information about what happened in language which avoids metaphors and euphemisms.
- Help to understand 'dead' means not moving, not breathing, not living.
- Attending the funeral where possible.
- Having an opportunity to symbolise 'goodbye'- flowers, notes etc.
- Visiting the grave.

2) Working through the pain of grief (What do people need?)

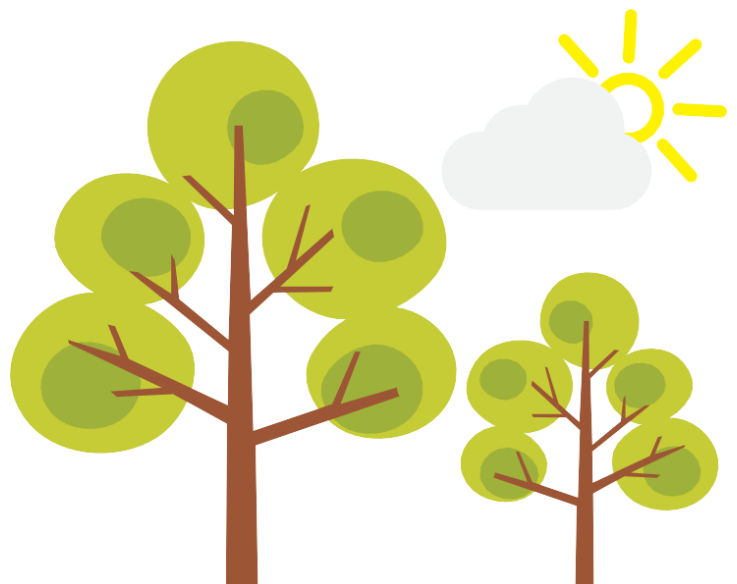
- Talking about/communicating feelings.
- Time to pace grief.
- Opportunities to maintain familiar routines.
- Experience of compassion from carers.
- Talking about how feelings have changed.

3) Adapting to life without the deceased (What do people need?)

- Opportunities to keep the memory of the deceased alive.
- Time to grieve and to adjust.
- Opportunities to manage their lives.
- Naming significant other people they know.
- Maintaining contact with people who know about their likes and dislikes.
- Mementoes and symbols to remember the deceased.
- Marking anniversaries etc which were an important part of life before the bereavement.
- Opportunities to develop new interests.

4) Investing in new relationships (what do people need?)

- Reminiscing about past times.
- Reminiscing about past relationships.
- Permission to enjoy life and to move on.



2) Suggestions for helping children to express their grief

Here are some suggested activities which will be helpful in facilitating a child's movement through the process of grieving:

Letter writing

Giving the child/children a chance to "say goodbye" or say things they would have liked to have said to the person who has died.

Drawing/painting

This is a good approach with younger children as it helps them to externalise and express their feelings. Be available to allow an opportunity for the children to talk if they want to.

Button boxes

This is useful for working on a 1-to-1 basis with a student or even with a small group of younger children. The student, using the box of assorted buttons is asked to choose one of the buttons that is "like them" or say who the different buttons might represent to them. Some students may like to extend this activity into making a group collage etc.

Memory box/book

This offers a place to collect significant items that are representative of the person who has died or represent an important memory connected with that person.

Decorating a wall

Students can work together to make a display which is meaningful to them and which can be photographed before being taken down.

Engaging in accident prevention activities

A project which raises awareness of safety e.g. a swimming or road safety project.

Poetry writing

Children sometimes like to write poems to remember and/or celebrate the life of the person who has died.

Painting/drawing

Visual ways of showing how intense the pain of grieving is at certain times can be helpful. The student can say "how heavy the pain is" or can show with their arms the "size" of the pain. Intermittently encouraging children to communicate in this way can help us monitor progress through the process of grieving.

Some suggestions for rituals which people have found helpful:

Tree planting

Students often like to make a collection for something which is a permanent memorial to the person who has died.

Sending off balloons

This can be a touching way for a whole class to “say goodbye”. Children can write labels for the balloons which are released all together.

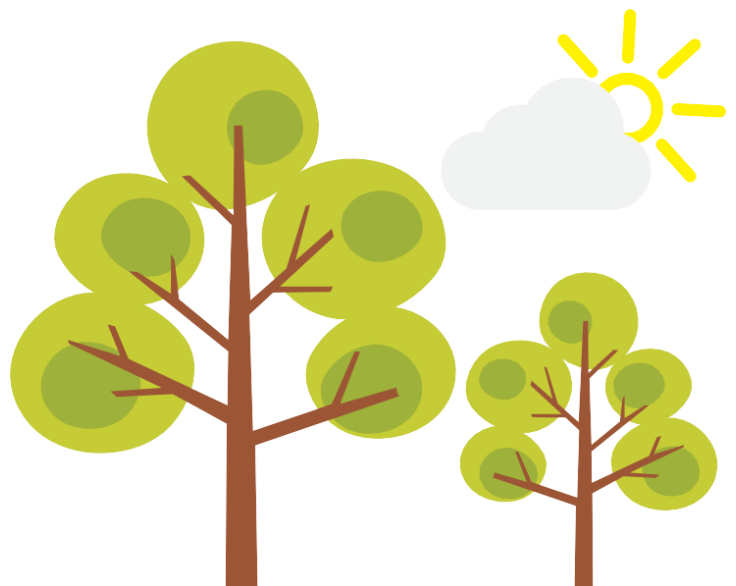
Lighting a candle or incense stick

Students sometimes find it helpful to light a candle or an incense stick and allow it to burn away to “mark the absence” of one who has died.

A school memorial

This allows for a dignified acknowledgement of what has happened. It provides a meaningful way in which the school community can express its grief and confront the reality of the loss. The content can be decided by family, teachers, religious leaders and students. Any memorial of this nature must be discussed with the bereaved family. It might include:

- Words from the Head
- Words from the Class Teacher
- Reading of suitable prose/poetry
- Contribution from the Students
- A short Sermon by a Priest etc.
- A song or piece of music
- A symbolic act



3) Helping children cope with anger and despair

Children may display their anger and despair at a bereavement or a loss, such as a marital break-up, by being aggressive at school. Clearly, teachers will need to deal with this, especially when the safety of others is at risk. Equally most children do not enjoy behaving badly, with the consequent disapproval and embarrassment at their actions. So from this point of view also it is reasonable to help them to try and control their behaviour.

The key factor to remember is that criticism of the child as a person will exacerbate the underlying emotional distress. Thus, an exclusively punitive approach of telling the child that they are naughty, bad, unkind etc. is to be avoided.

The gist of the message needs to be that you like the child, but that you dislike the behaviour. As is generally the case when dealing with difficult behaviour, problems are likely to be minimised by adopting a very quiet, calm, controlled and unemotional manner.

Expressing disapproval of poor behaviour should always be linked with some discussion on ways to help the child behave better in the future. When children are trying to deal with strong emotions it is important that they have the time and space to bring themselves under control hopefully before the situation gets out of hand.

4) Frequently Asked Questions

What to do with the pupil's desk/ tray/ belongings?

- Acknowledge with the class that it's a dilemma. If appropriate ask the other children what they think. Ask a child's close friend or desk partner what they think first.

How to manage the first calling of the register?

- Acknowledge that this is the first register since the death. Acknowledge the dilemma and ask the class what they would like to do.

What to do about any imminent exams or planned activities?

- What do you/children/staff/family think the deceased would want us to do? There is no right way. Sound out staff. Explore all options and their consequences.

Should we close the school?

- What would be the effect on the pupils? Would it have to be closed all day? Are there enough staff to keep the school open for pupils to feel that they can come in if they wish to?

Should we contact the parents/ visit the home?

- Is it possible to contact parents? What is the relationship with parents? Is there a particular member of staff who has a good relationship with them? Is there a family member who is managing the communication with parents? Parents usually appreciate contact from school, particularly from a Senior Manager. It is useful if two staff can support each other.

Who should go to the funeral?

- What do the family want? If it is open for anyone to go should the school remain open? What effect will closing the school have on other pupils? Consult with parents of pupils who might be going/ want to go. Consider the wishes of staff.

Is there such a place as Heaven?

- Acknowledge that people have different beliefs - some people believe there is. Show an interest in what child's parents might think.

How long should the memory board/wall stay up?

- This needs to be negotiated with the pupils. The board has to be maintained. If the pupils want it to remain they have to take responsibility to maintain it.

Will they come back as a ghost? – They might think they have seen the person.

- Answer all questions as factually as possible and don't be afraid to say you do not know.

Should the bereaved pupil come into school?

- This is a parental decision, not the school's. If a parent or carer asks for advice say that for some children it can be helpful, others will need more time at home. The decision has to be made by those who know the child best.

What should we do/ say when they come in?

- Have a plan, worked out with the parent, teacher and the child. It is advisable to acknowledge the loss with the child as soon as possible on their own.

What to say to other pupils?

- Plan for this, discuss with staff, parents and the child.

Will I make things worse?

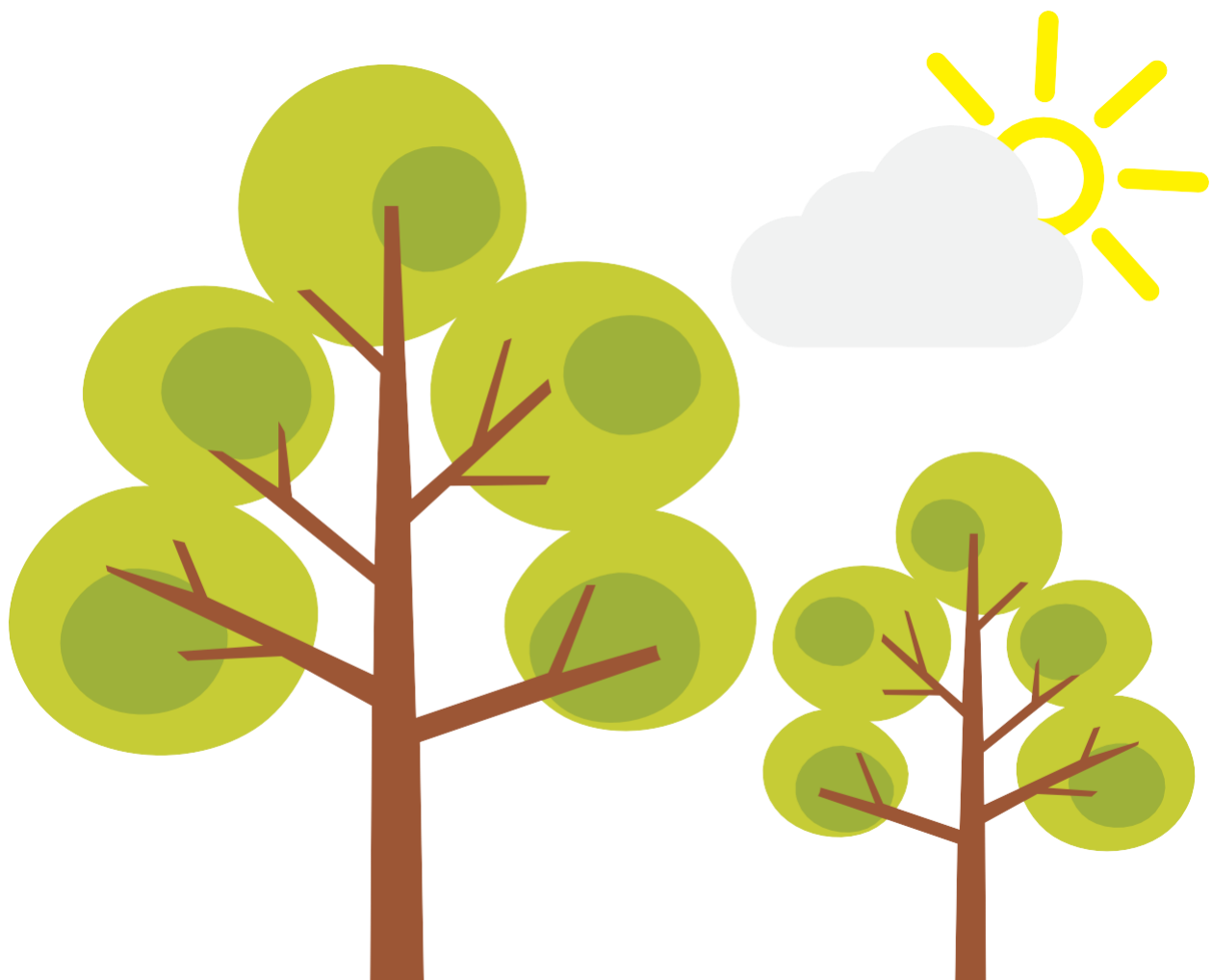
- Silence usually makes things worse.

What do children need?

- Routines which are as normal as possible. Reassurance their own thoughts or behaviour did not cause the death. Opportunities to express how they feel.

How can adult's help?

- Provide opportunities for children to understand what has happened and express how they feel. Reassure children that although grief is painful, it is normal. Provide opportunities for contact with peers for social events. Provide information about the death in language which is accessible.



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