

my
county
council

Helping you to cope

An information booklet for
children and young people
about bereavement and
trauma



Northamptonshire
County Council



Introduction

This booklet has been written to help children and young people understand some of the feelings and thoughts they might have after someone dies unexpectedly.

This upsetting experience only happens to some children and young people, and this means that no-one is ever prepared for all the strange feelings and reactions that take place.

There are special words used when talking about how people react to these situations. A list of these words and their meanings are included in the back of this booklet.

The booklet may be useful for children and young people who have friends who have had this experience, in order to understand what they may be going through, and decide how we can best help them.

Remember that there is no proper way to feel when someone goes missing or dies, everyone reacts differently and this booklet gives an idea of some ways that people behave.

This booklet is made up of lots of different questions and answers. Use it to look for the questions that you are thinking about.



What Happens When Someone Goes Missing and No One Knows What has Happened or Whether the Person will Ever Come Back Alive?

If this happens, it can feel very hard to cope with: especially if the uncertainty goes on for a long time.

You may feel many of the feelings of loss that will be mentioned in this booklet already. But these feelings may be mixed with hope for the safe return of the person, whether or not others around you think this is likely or possible.

You may even wish that the person was found dead, so that you can get rid of these feelings of uncertainty that are hard to cope-with and can begin to grieve. This can lead to feelings of guilt: which may be very troubling for you. It's important to remember that you and others may experience many different kinds of thoughts and feelings. None of

these are wrong but are ways that your mind and body are using to try to cope with an unusual and traumatic event.

All those people who care about that person will feel upset in some way. Some feel hurt, some very frightened, some very angry, some will be numb and others feel great pain.

Everyone feels different – most people are experiencing strong feelings that they have not had before.

How long will you feel upset ?

This changes from person to person. It depends on how long the uncertainty of the loss carries on. It varies from hours to days to weeks, but it will gradually get less unpleasant and less hurtful in time.

How should you behave ?

There are no rules of how to behave. Sometimes people feel embarrassed, and their friends and family don't know what to say to them, and so they often avoid them altogether.

If you do what feels right for you and talk things through with your family, it will probably be the best way to behave.

Why do adults find it difficult to talk about a traumatic incident ?

Remember that the adults around you will feel very upset themselves and may not believe what has happened at the beginning. Most adults also feel that they should 'soften the blow' when telling others (particularly children) and may have decided to give you the information in bits and pieces.

Everyone feels different – most people are experiencing strong feelings that they have not had before

As they are struggling to handle their own thoughts and feelings, they may be afraid that they will be unable to cope with your reactions as well.

What sort of feelings will you have ?

Many young people go through different feelings at different stages when someone dies.

What is unusual is that these feelings may be stronger than anything else you have felt so far in your life.

They will be different from person to person but may include numbness, sadness, real pain in some part of your body, anger at some person or some thing etc.

The other worrying feature of these emotions is that they come and go in waves, suddenly washing over you when you feel better, then going away again. It also gives you a feeling of 'being out of control'.



Remember that the adults around you will also be feeling confused by their own feelings and may not always be able to support you in the best way.

Will it make you feel ill ?

It may do. Some children and young people develop headaches, stomach aches, feelings of sickness and pains in part of their bodies. Although these pains are real (they can be painful and unpleasant) they are likely to be a result of your body reacting to the upset, rather than having a physical cause or being due to being ill.

Do all children feel the same when they find out that someone has died ?

Everyone reacts differently when they hear the news. Some refuse to believe it and feel numb and shocked. Others become really upset and cry for ages. Some behave as though nothing has happened and carry on with what they were doing.

There is no proper way to react – everyone is different and you have little control over your reaction and it is not a measure of how much you care. It is a common reaction to feel frightened that something could happen to you or those close to you.

Why is it that parents and teachers sometimes get very anxious and fussy?

Teachers and parents expect to be able to care for and protect children and young people so when someone dies, they may feel that they have failed in

this task. They then become more protective of the remaining children, without really knowing why.

What about the funeral ?

Funerals are part of all religions, but groups without a formal religion also have some ceremony when people die.

In addition to the religious reasons, funerals and church services are the opportunity for a lot of people to get together and show their affection for the dead person and to share their grief.

The rules and routines of funeral services are helpful as people know how to behave and it may be helpful for people to cry in public.

You may not like being at a funeral but it can be an opportunity of saying a proper and last good-bye.

What if I am contacted by someone from the media ?

In a crisis it is inevitable that the media will want to contact the school. They may also try to contact those involved. You do not have to talk to them if you do not want to and should say no or ask your parents or teacher to talk to them.



Some children and young people have some or all of the following feelings

All these are 'normal' feelings and are a reaction to the loss of someone close to you. Although they can be very strong, usually they lessen with time and with reassurance from adults.

Anxiety

Children and young people can become much more anxious than usual, and you will find that you need constant reassurance from parents, carers and teachers.

You may become concerned about crowds, traffic, heights, thunder etc. often in an apparently 'unreasonable' way.

Vivid Memories

Some children and young people can have very vivid day or night dreams about the person who has gone missing or died and about the events at that time. You may find that these can be very 'real' and upsetting – but gradually fade with time.

Some children and young people can get very frightened as they have a really strong awareness of the missing or dead person (just like a ghost). You can find that you can hear, see, or smell or

even speak to the person. This is due to the fact that some children and young people have very strong imaginations.

Problems with Sleeping

Some children and young people develop disturbed sleep patterns, such as being unable to fall asleep, or nightmares or fears of nightmares. You may wish to have the light left on or the door left open.

Feelings of sadness and longing

It is very common for children and young people to feel deeply sad, and have strong longings to be with the missing or dead person. This sadness usually comes and goes and seems to 'come to' us when we least expect it.

Changes in Behaviour

Some children and young people's behaviour changes and they become unco-operative either at home or more usually in school. This does not usually last very long.



You may find that you keep getting bad tempers and feel 'moody'.

With patience from adults, this behaviour does not usually last too long.

Feelings of anger against people and things

Many children and young people have very strong feelings of anger. You may feel angry towards the following:

- The loss itself (why should it happen to that person?)
- God (for letting it happen – it's not fair)
- Some adults (whom you might blame)
- Other adults (for not being honest with you immediately after the person went missing)
- Against themselves (for letting the person go missing even when they know they could not have prevented it)
- Against the missing or dead person (leaving you or dying)
- All these feelings may lessen with time.

7. Feelings of guilt

It is very common for children, young people and adults to feel guilty. This means that they might:

- Feel that they might have caused the person's death

- Feel that they could have done something to prevent it.
- Feel that the person would only remember bad things about them.
- Feel that they should have been the one to go missing or die.

Regression behaviour

Some children and young people may behave for some time as they did when they were younger. This is called regression and seems initially to help them to deal with some of their strongest feelings. They may need to be cuddled or comforted more by their family.

Changing personality

Some children and young people may seem to change their personality in several different ways. This include:-

- Isolating yourself and wanting to be alone
- Becoming 'very grown up', mature and overly serious
- Beginning to feel that 'life' isn't worth it' and there is 'no point in thinking about the future'
- Retreating into a 'fantasy world' and withdrawing from adults and friends.



School problems

Many children and young people begin to have temporary problems with their school work. It is common to have difficulty in concentrating on what teachers say, or on the work in hand. You may find school work unimportant, or begin to show behaviour problems, or in keeping friends in class.

Your behaviour may change and others may find it difficult to understand how and why their friend is behaving differently.

**Things you can do
which may help you
cope better with your
feelings**

Talking

It is very important to talk about your feelings (however “silly” you may think that they are) to friends, teachers and most important of all, your family. This is the only way that they will be able to understand and possibly help you.

Sometimes it may be difficult to talk to those nearest and dearest to you, and it may be advisable to talk to your friends or teacher to get the help of someone outside the family. This can be a professional counsellor or just an interested adult who is known to you.

Talking over the feelings does ease the pain with time.



Drawing/Art

Some children and young people find drawing and Art can be very helpful. You may prefer drawing your friend doing the things you did together, fantasy pictures, or just neutral themes.

Writing

Other children and young people get a great deal of relief from writing stories or poetry about the person and things that they remember doing together. You may want to write a journal and include your feelings.

Playing games/computer

Sometimes playing games can be enjoyable and also help you feel a little better. This can take the form of imaginary or fantasy play or other competitive or intricate games which allow you to “lose yourself” for a little time.



Physical Exercise

Some children and young people throw themselves into physical activity such as swimming, sport, jogging and find that this gives them some relief for some time.

Hobbies

A hobby can be particularly helpful, particularly one which makes demands of you.

Music

Some children and young people who can play an instrument, or like listening to music say that they find this very helpful. It is probably because music can affect our moods to feel happy or sad, or simply produce nice feelings in us.

Photographs or videos

Having a photo or video of the person who's gone missing or died means that we have a permanent record of them when they were well. It can be a

wonderful keepsake which can give you pleasure when thinking of the good times in the past.

Personal belongings

It may help you to have something personal that the person or their family have given you. Looking at or handling the item may bring back nice memories.

If a person has died, a memorial may help

Creating a permanent memorial in memory of the person is often seen as a very helpful and positive action. Elaborate forms of this are plaques or memorial stones, but it is much easier for small groups to buy a cup and present it to school for prizes, to buy a bench or seat, to plant a tree or bush, to create a memorial flower-bed or pond.



What positive things are you going to do to try and make things better for yourself?

Remember

If you continue to feel upset and you don't think you are getting any better please tell your parents or carers and ask them if you can speak to someone outside the family.

These are some people who could help. These are not in any order of importance, but you should decide who you'd like to speak to:

Doing things for yourself

Your friends

Your family

Your teachers



Children and Young People's Service:

Wellingborough 01933 440289

Your Family Doctor (G.P.)

Childline 0800 1111

This is a telephone helpline which has special counsellors for children and young people.

Child Bereavement Charity

Tel: 01494 446648

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Winston's Wish

Tel: 08452 030405

www.winstonswish.org.uk





If a person has died, recording memories can help

My personal memories – by _____

The person close to me who died was called _____

They lived at _____

They were born on _____

They died on _____

They were aged _____

I first met them on _____

I like them because _____

I like to do this with them _____

I miss this mostly about them _____

My favourite memory of them is _____

**Some words people
use when talking
about loss or death**

Anxiety	“being worried about something”
The bereaved	“the close family and friends of someone who dies”
Bystander	“a person standing near but taking no part in an event”
Counsellor	“a person trained to listen and advise on problems”
Depression	“feelings of extreme sadness or hopelessness”
Emotion	“a very strong feeling”
Fantasy	“imagination”
Grief	“feelings of very deep sorrow”
Grieving	“all the feelings we go through after someone dies”
Guilt	“feeling that you are to blame for something (which may not be true)”
Mourning	“to feel or express sorrow after someone has died ... like wearing black clothes or black armbands”
Regression	“behaving like a younger child babyish, immature behaviour”
Shock	“a sudden violent effect on your mind or emotions which can make you ill or behave in very strange ways”

This information can be made available in other languages and formats upon request including Braille, audio cassette and floppy disk. Contact 01933 440289

www.northamptonshire.gov.uk

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