

December 2020

Supporting Pupils with Bereavement

Grieving is a very individual process and there is no right or wrong way to experience it, everybody reacts to grief differently. For a young person, their reaction may be influenced by many different factors, for example their age, their temperament, their coping skills and their relationship to the person who has died.

Schools, just by providing structure, routine and predictability, can be a source of refuge and solace for young people following bereavement; teachers and school staff can play an important role in offering support and comfort to young people during this painful time.

Secondary school children

By adolescence, death is understood and accepted as a part of life, their reactions may fluctuate between earlier age group reactions and those that are more adult.

Teenagers will often want to spend more time with friends than with family as they seek support. They may find emotions overwhelming or scary and not be able to find the words or ways to talk about them with others. They may want to feel they're coping, and be seen to be, but inside they are likely to be hurting a great deal, and may be putting their emotions on a shelf for a later time.

The impact of a death can affect the way a teenager behaves and some may react with increased risk-taking behaviours. They may use drink and/or drugs in an attempt to block out reality and as a coping mechanism.

Grief affects everyone differently but many young people find that they experience a mixture of:

- Shock and disbelief, even if the death was expected
- Numbness; sometimes they may not feel anything at all initially
- Despair, depression and intense sadness
- Guilt; this is a very common feeling after a bereavement. They may tell themselves that they could have done more, should have done something differently, they often have lots of thoughts that begin with 'if only...' when in fact there was nothing that could have been done to prevent the loss
- Fear, anxiety and worry about how life will be now, what the future will look like and often fears about other people's health and wellbeing
- Anger is a common reaction after losing someone close; anger at the person for leaving, anger at the unfairness of the loved one being taken away, anger at other people for still being alive when the loved one isn't

You might find that the young person:

- Finds it difficult to get out of bed & is not motivated to go to school
- May want to be alone and not mix with friends
- Has difficulty concentrating on anything
- Has difficulty getting to sleep or difficulty staying awake
- Feels anxious and worried
- Finds it difficult to accept that the person has died
- Is preoccupied with thoughts of the loved one
- Thinks they see the person that has died
- Their reactions to the loss of a loved one, particularly in the first days and weeks following the loss, are likely to be overwhelming and intense, but usually over time these feelings become less intense and less overwhelming, allowing them to begin thinking about their own lives again.

HOW CAN I HELP

- *Speak* to the parents/family/carer to see how they feel the child could be best supported upon their return to school. Ensure conversations at school do not conflict with the families wishes and beliefs
- Try not to make assumptions about how the young person should be feeling and behaving. Grieving is different for everyone
- Acknowledge what has happened, sharing your own feelings of sadness if appropriate
- Make time for the young person to share their thoughts and feelings, let them set the pace of the conversation
- Some children may prefer to sit quietly with you and gain comfort from you just being there
- Listen non-judgmentally, showing empathy and understanding
- Answer questions they may have truthfully in simple, unambiguous language
- If faced with a difficult question, rather than answering straight away, ask the child what they think
- Be patient and considerate of the young person's process of grief, it may be many months before they can fully cope with the pressures of school
- Explain to other pupils how the bereaved child may be feeling and encourage them to be supportive
- Consider support from the school counselling team
- Develop a Whole School Approach

TYPICAL REACTIONS AND HOW LONG THEY LAST.

	During incident	Day of incident	First 3 days	First week	Three weeks	Up to 3 months
Accelerated heart rate	X					
Fast brain functioning	X					
Palpitations/Shaking	X					
Cold peripheral limbs	X					
Rapid, shallow breathing	X					
Thinking differently	X	X				
Feelings are shut down	X					
Tiredness		X	X	X		
Breathing difficulties	X	X				
Nausea	X	X				
Diarrhoea		X	X			
Dizziness		X				
Chest pains		X	X	X		
Period problems			X	X	X	
Neck and shoulders ache		X	X			
Headaches		X	X	X		
Irregular eating habits		X	X	X		
Excessive alcohol consumption		X	X	X	X	X
Irregular sleeping patterns			X	X	X	
Dreaming			X	X		
Hypervigilance		X	X	X	X	
Intrusive thoughts		X	X	X	X	
Concentration difficulties			X	X	X	X
Flash backs		X	X	X		
Provoked intrusive recollection		X	X	X	X	
'What if' thinking		X	X	X	X	
Irritability & Anger		X	X	X	X	X
Anxiety		X	X	X	X	
Feeling vulnerable		X	X	X	X	
Guilt			X	X	X	

Red is likely to occur. Black is possible, but less likely or less intense.

