



COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH, AND HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH GRIEF:

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is the name for the painful emotions we feel when someone we love or feel connected to dies. The feelings differ widely but occur in all of us because of the love we feel for others. It is our strong sense of connection to others that enables humans to survive. That is the reason we feel bad when separated from those we love and why the permanent separation of death creates the greatest pain.

We can also grieve for other losses: being separated from friends and family, our pets, or our home; losing access to a familiar place like school, the work place, or our place of worship. And we can grieve for intangible losses: such as our sense of security, our hopes for, and our trust in, the future.

This leaflet is written to help you understand how children of different ages experience loss and grief; how to talk to them about it, and how to help them cope with the death of a loved one during the pandemic.

DO CHILDREN GRIEVE?

Yes, but their reactions to death will vary enormously according to their age, their previous life experiences, their personality and the way life and death is understood within their culture. The following notes show how children's understandings and reactions alter as they grow older. It is only a rough guide as children who have witnessed death and experienced more losses at an earlier age will understand more.

0-2 Years

Any prolonged separation from a loved one is painful for an infant and they are likely to cry, become withdrawn or angry. They cannot understand that death is final, and the longer the separation the greater the distress. They are likely to be more demanding, and clingy with other caregivers.

3-5 years

Small children still do not understand that death is forever and may ask repeatedly if the loved person is coming back. They begin to understand simple explanations like: *Mummy cannot breathe or talk or move any more*. They may also have 'magical thinking'. That is, they believe something that they did caused the death, for example *Daddy won't come back because I was naughty*. They may behave like a younger child, refusing to be separated from surviving caregivers, or soiling and wetting themselves. Alternatively, some children may continue as if nothing had happened, and appear not to care.

6-11 years

Children begin to understand that death is forever, that the loved person cannot return, and that death can happen to anyone, so they may worry that other loved family members and friends will die. Younger children may still have magical thinking but they are increasingly curious about cause and effect, asking concrete questions like *what happens to Granny's body?* They want to understand what happened, and

can show concern for others. Physical aches and pains are very common, as is anger. This can be directed at the loved person who has died and/or yourself. It can be expressed as challenging behaviour. In some cultures, boys may already be learning to hide their feelings.

12-Adolescence

Teenagers understand that death is irreversible, and happens to everyone, including themselves. They are interested in understanding why things happen, have a growing interest in abstract ideas like justice and injustice, and are sensitive to inconsistencies in any information given. At this age they are struggling with the conflicts between becoming an independent person who is making close friendships with their peers, while wanting to stay close to family members they love. Friendships with peers are very important and separation from, and losses among their friends will also affect them. Their reactions vary greatly, ranging from “appearing not to care” to anger, or extreme sadness, poor concentration and a loss of interest in daily activities. They too can feel guilty, they might feel they have not done enough. Some teenagers will feel very responsible and wish to take on the adult role in the family, following the death of a parent.

SHOULD I TELL MY CHILDREN WHEN SOMEONE THEY LOVE HAS DIED?

Yes. Don't hide the truth and don't delay telling the truth.

It is natural to want to protect children from distress, but even very young children will be aware that something unusual is happening, the family are worried and upset, normal routines have changed and people are behaving differently. Relatives and friends may have died in the house or nearby, and they were not allowed to visit. People may have disappeared to hospital and not come back.

Not understanding what is happening causes more distress. What is imagined may be worse than reality and children may be blaming themselves for events beyond their control.

Also, if children are told lies to protect them, and then discover the truth later from someone else, they will distrust those who lied.

All children, including those with physical and mental disabilities, need clear, honest, consistent explanations appropriate to their age and ability to understand, so that they can accept the reality of the loss.

Telling your children the truth will increase their trust in you and help them cope better with the loss.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO TELL MY CHILDREN?

Try to find a safe and quiet place wherever you are living. If you are sharing the living area with many others, ask if they can give you some space and quiet, while you talk with your children.

Make yourself comfortable and think through what you are going to say. It is likely that the children will ask difficult questions and that both they and you will feel distressed. That's natural. If you have very young and older children, you may want to tell them separately if that is possible. The older children will have more questions, and the younger ones may become distracted. Ask other adult family members or friends to take care of the younger children while you talk to the older ones.

Ask the children to sit with you. If it is a young child and they have a favourite object, toy or comforter they like to carry, let them have it. Speak slowly and pause often, to give them time to understand, and to give yourself time to manage your own feelings.

Begin by asking the children what they know already, or what they think has happened.

Then explain what has actually happened in words appropriate to your child's age. Use the word your family uses for death and do not use phrases like *Grandpa is in another country*, or *has gone far away*,

or *has gone to sleep, or is in the clouds*, as this will confuse younger children who may think the person can come back.

For younger children you will need to explain in concrete terms what death means, for example: *I am so sorry but Daddy's body and mind has stopped working completely. He cannot move any more, he cannot breathe, he cannot think or feel anything, he cannot talk or eat or play with you and he won't be able to do so again.*

You will need to give children time to absorb this information. Young children may react by appearing not to listen and playing. Be patient and wait for their attention. Also be prepared for younger children to ask the same questions again and again, both at this moment and over the days and weeks to come.

Curious children may want concrete information such as *where is the body now and what will happen to it?*

Older children may want more details and ask abstract questions such as *why did this happen to us?*

Give honest answers, and when you do not know the answer, say so.

Some children may be shocked and refuse to believe you. They may become angry and shout at you. Remain calm. Explain that you understand, and that you don't want to believe it yourself. But sadly, it is true.

Check for any magical thinking. Some children will be worrying that they said or did something that caused the death. Children of all ages may feel guilty, particularly because Corona virus is a contagious disease (meaning that it can spread from person to person), and they may worry that they caused someone else to get ill or die. So, check to see if they feel responsible in any way. You might ask: *Are you worried that Daddy is not coming back because of anything you said or did?* Explain in simple terms what happened and reassure them that they are not to blame. *You did nothing wrong. It was a germ that made Daddy sick and stopped him breathing. He could have caught it anywhere. There was nothing anyone could do, and nobody was to blame.*

Children may worry that you and others they care about are going to die, and that they may get sick as well. Explain all the things you are doing as a family to make everyone safe: handwashing, keeping as much physical distance from others as possible. You should not promise that no one will die. Everyone dies eventually. You can reassure them that there will always be someone to take care of them.

Ask the children directly if they have any other questions, or if there anything else that is worrying or frightening them. Explain that sharing feelings, fears and worries can help, and that you are here to listen to them, answer any questions and to comfort them at any time.

IS IT ALL RIGHT IF I SHOW MY OWN FEELINGS ABOUT THE LOSS TO MY CHILDREN?

This will be a difficult task and is likely to produce deep feelings of your own. Try to prepare yourself in advance of talking with them so that you are not completely overcome. But do not worry about your children seeing that you are sad and crying. Tell them how you are feeling. Explain that there is nothing wrong with showing your feelings, and telling others how you are feeling. This will help children to show and name their own feelings.

HOW MIGHT MY CHILDREN REACT?

There is no 'correct' way to grieve. There is no fixed order or 'stages' in which different emotions or behaviours 'should' appear. Children's reactions will vary enormously depending on their age, their own temperament, their relationship with the dead person, how that person died, how the family are responding, and the culture and society in which they live.

You are likely to see changes in your child's:

Feelings: they may feel sad, angry, numb, frightened, lonely, guilty, irritated, worried, confused, and show longing for the past. They may experience more than one feeling at the same time, or feel and show nothing at all for long periods, and then suddenly feel overwhelmed by different emotions.

Thinking: they may find themselves thinking constantly about what happened, going over and over the same events. They may find uncomfortable or frightening thoughts or images suddenly appear in their head without warning. They may think about the future and what is going to happen. They may become forgetful and distracted. They may find concentrating and paying attention to normal tasks like school work difficult. They may also have comforting images and thoughts and happy memories.

Behaviour: children may become apathetic and not want to do anything at all. They may withdraw and isolate themselves. Or they may carry on with their normal activities as if nothing unusual had happened. They may 'act out': getting into physical and verbal fights, being naughty or deliberately provocative. They may behave like a much younger child: thumb sucking, bed wetting, demanding that you stay close. They may engage in 'repetitive play' repeatedly acting out an upsetting experience, for example: *Daddy going to the hospital*.

Physical state: children often have less appetite and difficulty falling or staying sleep. They may have nightmares. They may suffer from unexplained aches and pains.

All these reactions vary greatly, between children and within the same child over time, sometimes changing rapidly over the course of a day. At one point a child may be busy with their normal activities, and at the next start weeping or become very angry. This can happen repeatedly.

Grief can continue for a long time when life circumstances are challenging. It can also return unannounced months after a child has appeared to forget or recover. It may be triggered by a reminder, such as an anniversary, or a favourite activity that the child did with the lost person, or a particular song on the radio that they both enjoyed.

All these reactions are natural. However, in a very small number of children the reactions may be intense and prolonged and very disruptive of daily life. Or occasionally a child may express suicidal thoughts, or behaviours such as harming themselves or others. In these cases, do not hesitate to seek extra help from a health worker in your community.

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD COPE WITH THEIR GRIEF?

One of the most important ways all of us, both adults and children, come to terms with losing a loved one is through **Mourning**. Although different cultures and religions mourn in different ways, all mourning processes include ways for accepting the death, celebrating the life of the dead person and making it significant, saying goodbye, and continuing attention towards the dead, while moving beyond it and making a new start.

Different families will have different spiritual beliefs or cultural practices. If you have a faith community it may be helpful to connect to a spiritual leader (over the telephone if available, or keeping appropriate physical distancing) who may support you in explaining the death, and provide comfort to both you and your children.

In normal times it is helpful to allow children to be involved in these processes in any way that they find comfortable, including attending funerals if they wish. Mourning allows children to accept that the death has happened, say goodbye, to share in celebrating the loved person's life, realise their significance to others, and to feel more connected both to the person who has died, and to the loved friends and family who remain. If children are able to mourn it can help in the process of coping with more difficult feelings, somatic symptoms and challenging behaviours. It is very important to give sufficient time to mourning and not try to hurry the process, even in these difficult times.

HOW MIGHT THE CORONA PANDEMIC AFFECT NORMAL MOURNING?

At this time because of efforts to control the spread of the virus, there may be a number of problems that make usual mourning practices difficult:

- Your loved one may have been alone or with strangers in the hospital, and you and your children may not have been able to see them before they died to say goodbye.
- The body may have been kept, or taken away if they died at home, and not be available for burial with a normal funeral.
- The customary treatment of the body after death, for example washing the body, burial in the ground within a certain time, might not be possible.
- Some bodies may be left unattended for long periods, or buried in mass graves
- Your friends and relatives may be preoccupied with their own losses and unable to support you, either emotionally or practically through your loss. You may feel that you do not wish to burden others in any way. Similarly, your children's peers may not be available to support them.
- The normal routines or activities of school and recreation, that might distract or reassure your children and cheer them up a little, are not available.
- Your loss is not given the significance it deserves, because it is one of many occurring in the community at the same time. It feels like 'a number', whereas, for you and your family, this is an individual with personality and a story, someone that you loved and who mattered.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP CHILDREN AND OURSELVES COMMEMORATE OUR LOVED ONES?

Find a way to hold a commemoration in the place you are staying, without a body. Take time to plan and then hold a ceremony involving the prayers or rituals that are important to you. Use the ceremony to celebrate and show how significant that person was for all of you. Find ways for your child to connect to the dead person, show their love and show the importance of that person in the child's life. Children may like to paint a picture, read a poem, or something they have written about that person, or sing a song, or make music. For example, ask the child *Is there a simple game, meal, song or book we could share to honor Grandpa, what do you think Grandpa liked?* This kind of activity can also be repeated on significant anniversaries, like the dead person's birthday.

If you are connected to a faith community, your spiritual leaders may be able to support you in the best way to arrange a commemoration and appropriate rituals to ensure the loved one is laid to rest.

Make a small place in your living space where the family can pause to remember the loved one. Put a picture on a wall and/or objects that remind you of that person. It is important that this place does not dominate the living area, but is a small space where anyone can go to remember and reflect. These

are temporary measures and you can explain to your children that after restrictions are lifted you will be able to create a proper memorial and bring everyone together to remember the loved person.

When a parent dies, many children dream about and talk with the dead parent frequently; feel the dead parent is watching them and keep physical objects associated with them. This is natural and may comfort the child. Help the child to create a 'memory box' where they can place small items that remind them of the person who has died. These can be photographs if you have them, or objects such as buttons from a favourite jacket, or a pendant, or prayer beads. Or help the child create a scrap book in which they tell stories and make pictures of happy times that they remember.

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO TO MAKE MY CHILD FEEL BETTER AND PROTECT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?

The loss of a loved relative can be deeply upsetting for a child especially when accompanied by the loss of the normal structures and routines of daily life. Fortunately, there are many things the surviving family can do to protect their children's mental health.

The most important things to do are to ensure that:

- The child receives loving, consistent care from you, a parent, relative or carer, whom they trust and know well.
- Infants and young children are given security through loving physical contact, singing, cuddling and rocking.
- Normal life routines and structure are maintained as much as is possible. So even if confined to a limited space it is important to have a regular pattern to the day with allocated tasks and times for activities, such as cleaning the space, doing school work, getting exercise and having time to play.
- Challenging and/or regressive behaviour is understood and responses are not punitive.
- Other children in the child's life, at school or in friendship circles, are informed (through their teachers or parents) as to what has happened, so that they can support the child on their return to school.
- The children are given the opportunity to help you, but are not pushed to take on adult roles and responsibilities beyond their capacity.
- You take care of your own physical and mental wellbeing. You are grieving as well. It can be hard to support your children while dealing with your own feelings, especially in a confined place. That is why it is very important that you take time for yourself and take care of yourself. You cannot help your children if you are unwell. It is vital that you get sufficient sleep, eat properly, exercise, take time to relax (for example through listening to music) and also have someone to whom you can turn to for emotional support. Try to avoid harmful practices such as increased alcohol or tobacco consumption.

ⁱ This leaflet was prepared by Lynne Jones for the MHPSS Collaborative, upon request of the Child Protection Area of Responsibility.

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Materials in this leaflet are drawn in part from the following resources:

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