



## Grief and loss

Losing someone or something we love and feel close to is extremely difficult and painful. Grief is our natural emotional response to this loss, and it is a process rather than an event.

Your child, as well as you and other family members, may be grieving because of:

- The death of someone in the family, like a parent, grandparent or sibling
- The death of a friend, or someone they knew at school
- The death of someone by suicide
- An illness, such as cancer or dementia, of someone they are close to
- The loss of a relationship, like someone moving away or no longer being a regular part of their life
- The loss or death of a pet

When a young person is grieving a loss, for example following the death or illness of someone in the family, you are likely to be grieving the same loss. It can be an incredibly challenging time as you juggle being there for your child alongside dealing with your own feelings. Death or illness in a family is likely to affect everyone – and everyone needs time and space to grieve in their own way.

### How do children and young people understand death and loss?

The way a child thinks about loss will depend on many different factors, including their family's culture and beliefs, and the meaning they give to grief and mourning. Children and young people are also likely to understand death and loss differently at different ages.

#### Babies

While they will not understand what has happened, they can react to loss when it affects their daily routines and the way they are looked after. Babies can pick up on unhappy feelings around them and may feel anxious or in need of reassurance.

#### Toddlers and pre-schoolers

They may see death and loss as temporary and reversible, and may want to know where the person has gone or when they're coming back. They may not be able to put many of the things they're feeling and thinking about into words.

#### Primary-aged children

As they get older, children will gradually come to understand more clearly that death is something that happens to all living things, that it has a cause, and that it means permanent separation. They are likely to know that dead people do not see, hear, speak or feel. Some younger children may make sense of what's happened by thinking they are responsible for it, for example thinking that if they hadn't done a particular thing the person might not have died.

#### Teenagers

Teenagers might find it difficult to put their own feelings into words, and may not show their feelings in case they upset others. At this age, young people are going through a time of great change, often balancing their need for independence with their need for family and security. They may react by becoming withdrawn, or they may act out.

## How do children and young people respond to loss?

Every child and young person will react to, feel and express loss differently, and this will change over time. There is no right or wrong way for a young person to grieve. Some will talk often about the person they've lost, while others may not want to. There may be times when they expect to feel sad, or feelings of grief might come suddenly and catch them unaware.

On our Parents Helpline, parents tell us that children and young people who have gone through a significant loss can feel:

- Anxious or worried, including about their own health and the health of those close to them
- Frightened of losing other people they are close to
- Helpless
- Sad
- Low
- Withdrawn
- Isolated or lonely
- Unmotivated or uninterested in things they used to enjoy
- Depressed
- Angry
- Guilty
- Relieved
- Numb – not feeling anything at all
- Irritable
- Physically unwell
- Unable to concentrate or organise things, including at school
- Unable to sleep
- That their moods change quickly
- That they cannot accept the situation
- That they are struggling to cope

It's helpful to remember that it is normal for your child to feel and experience these things after a loss, particularly if they have lost someone they were close to.

## How can I support my child when someone dies suddenly?

When a death is sudden or unexpected, children are likely to feel extremely shocked in both emotional and physical ways. They may find it impossible to believe that it's happened, or feel numb or confused. They may scream or shake, or stop talking, eating or drinking. They may experience tummy aches, headaches and other pains, feel dizzy, sleep for longer periods than normal or have nightmares. They may also act out and feel very angry. These reactions are a normal way of coping with huge shock. In the days and weeks after a sudden death, the most important thing you and other family members or friends can do is provide safety and support by:

- Holding and reassuring them, and letting them know how much you love them.
- Taking care of their physical needs, and guiding them through the daily things that are important for well-being, such as eating, drinking, washing, keeping warm and sleeping.
- Making sure their normal responsibilities, such as feeding or walking pets, are covered if they're worried about them, while letting them continue with these if they'd like to.
- Telling everyone who needs to know what's happened, including someone at their school.
- Providing opportunities for them to start talking when they're ready, letting them speak as often and for as long as they need to.

- Including them in events and decision-making, in an age-appropriate way.
- Making sure they are safe from harm, for example if they are crossing roads while finding it difficult to focus or concentrate.

## How can I talk to my child about loss?

- Explain to your child in an age-appropriate way what's happened, and offer opportunities to think together about what it means.
- Use clear language if you're talking about death. We can find it difficult to say the words 'died' or 'dead' and might want to use softer expressions such as 'gone to sleep' or 'passed on'. These expressions can be confusing for younger children, as they may believe the person will come back or become fearful of falling asleep themselves.
- Remember that it's okay not to have all the answers and to say you don't know. Be guided by your child's questions – these will let you know what they are curious or uncertain about.
- Let them know that it's okay to feel however they feel, whether that's sad, overwhelmed, angry, worried or something else – and that there's no right or wrong way to grieve. Whatever their emotional response, try not to take it personally.
- Be curious, empathetic and non-judgmental about how they're feeling, focusing on listening and providing emotional support. You won't be able to make it all better, but being there makes a huge difference.
- Reassure them that you love them, they're not alone and they can talk to you whenever they need to.
- If your child lets you know that they're blaming themselves, or you're worried they might be, reassure them that guilt is a common thing to feel after a loss – but that it is in no way their fault or responsibility.
- Be prepared for them to repeat the same questions. This can be their way of trying to understand and make sense of what's happened.
- If your child finds it difficult to talk, it might help to start a conversation while doing an activity. You can find our ideas at [www.youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/20-activities-for-20-minutes](https://www.youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/20-activities-for-20-minutes)

Especially with older children and teenagers, it's okay to give them some space if they don't want to talk. Sometimes it helps to just sit together quietly, or to offer a hand squeeze or gentle hug. Make sure they know you are there for them, and that it's okay for them to open up to a relative, family friend or someone else they trust if they want to.

Alongside talking to your child, it might help for you to speak to someone you trust about your own feelings of grief and the impact the situation is having on you. This can help to create the mental space you need to be there for your child.

## How can I help my child to express their feelings?

Encouraging your child to find ways of expressing their feelings can help them to process and make sense of a loss. This could be things like:

- Writing a letter to the person they have lost telling them all the things they want to say to them.
- Writing a letter to you or someone else who is supporting them, so you or they know what they are going through.
- Keeping a diary or journal of how they feel.
- Paintings or drawing pictures.
- Writing songs or poems.
- Creating a memory box full of pictures and items, such as films, clothes and perfume, which remind them of good times they had with the person they have lost.

It's okay if your child needs time to figure out how they want to process what's happened. Some may need space to adjust before they are ready to think about these things, especially older children.

## What else can I do to support my child?

1. Try to keep normal routines going as much as possible to provide a sense of security. Prepare your child for any changes and ease any worries, such as who will pick them up from school.
2. Be open about your own feelings in an age-appropriate way. This can help your child understand that it's okay to find things difficult, and that they don't need to worry about upsetting you.
3. Reach out to your child's school to let them know what's happened and ask them what support they can provide. Ask your child whether there's anything they'd like at school, such as having a particular teacher they can go to.
4. Support your child to say goodbye. Include them in family gatherings and activities such as the funeral or celebrations of life in an age-appropriate way. Prepare them for these events so they know what to expect.
5. Talk with them about other ways they can celebrate the person and say goodbye. This could be lighting a candle, letting off balloons, saying a prayer or poem, writing a letter, planting a flower or tree, or visiting the grave or another special place.
6. Spend quality time with your child doing things they enjoy. This might be drawing, making something, listening to music, playing sport, cooking or watching a favourite film. Doing these kinds of activities can give them a break from the grief and help them feel safe and relaxed, even if just for a little while.
7. Encourage them to keep doing the activities they enjoy. Your child may feel worried that it's wrong to have a good time. Reassure them that it's okay to feel happy and to enjoy something, and that this does not take away from how much they care about the person they've lost.
8. Give older children and teenagers space to be alone or chat to their friends – alongside offering time together and opportunities to talk.
9. Talk about the person who has died or been lost and share your memories together.
10. Acknowledge upcoming anniversaries or important occasions such as birthdays, and talk with your child about ways they might like to mark these.

### Young people's advice for other young people who are grieving:

- Take the next step, the next minute, the next day, one at a time
- There is no one way to grieve
- It's okay to be angry and to express your anger
- It's not weak to feel
- There's no shame in having a big reaction
- It's okay to feel nothing
- It's okay not to be okay
- It's okay to take time out for yourself
- It's okay to reach out for help
- Don't feel guilty for having fun
- Take your time
- You're not alone

### When should I find professional support for my child?

Grief has no set timescale, and it is normal for a young person to feel a whole range of emotions and need extra support after a loss.

Sometimes, however, a young person may feel they are struggling to cope over a much longer period of time. If your child continues to experience some of the following feelings and behaviours over a prolonged period, it is likely that they need some professional support:

- Feeling depressed or anxious
- Withdrawing from family and friends, and/or not doing the things they used to enjoy
- Struggling to sleep
- Refusing to go to school
- Turning to less healthy coping mechanisms such as self-harming or eating significantly more or less
- Talking regularly about wanting to join the person who has died
- Experiencing suicidal thoughts, such as thinking or fantasising about ending their own life
- Acting like a much younger child
- Not believing that the person has died



## Where can I find professional support?

### Pre-bereavement counselling

If you know that someone close to your child is going to die, pre-bereavement counselling can help them to think and talk about their feelings and worries. Some hospices and other charities offer this service, so speak to the professionals supporting your family to see what's available.

### Emotional support services

Let your child know about the helplines, textlines and online chat services that are available to them, which are listed at the end of this guide. Speak to your child's school about what emotional support they can provide – whether that's a space to sit quietly, a teacher they can speak to, or a buddying or mentoring service.

### Counselling and therapy

A counsellor or therapist can provide emotional support and help your child to express and make sense of their feelings. Therapists working with younger children will usually do this through play and arts activities such as painting, drawing and making things. You can access free or subsidised counselling or therapy for your child through a bereavement charity (suggestions at the end of this guide), your GP, your child's school and other local services you might be able to find online. If it's an affordable option for you, you can also find a private counsellor or therapist using the directories listed at the end of this guide.

### Speaking to your GP

If you're worried about your child's mental health or wellbeing, you can speak to your GP (with or without your child) about next steps and finding support. Together you can discuss whether referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and/or an assessment by a mental health specialist is needed.

## How can I look after myself?

Supporting a young person who is grieving can be a very emotional experience, so take time to look after yourself and top up your own batteries. If you are also grieving, things may feel overwhelming at times. Where possible, allow time and space for your own grief – and remember that it's okay to ask for help from family, friends and others when you need it.

If you need more support with your own grief, or you feel you're struggling to cope, it's really important that you get the help you need so you can be there for your child. You can:

- Access online and face-to-face counselling, helpline support and online and in-person support groups via the bereavement services listed at the end of this guide.
- Speak to your GP about accessing free counselling or other mental health support through the NHS.
- Find private accredited counsellors and therapists living near you using the directories listed at the end of this guide.

# Finding support

All resources listed on this sheet are for information only. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, YoungMinds cannot accept responsibility for changes to details made by other organisations.

## Emotional support for young people

### YoungMinds

Information and advice about grief and loss for young people – including from other young people who've been through it.

[www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/feelings-and-symptoms/grief-and-loss](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/feelings-and-symptoms/grief-and-loss)

### Hope Again

[www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk)

Cruse Bereavement Care's website for young people with information, vlogs, podcasts, videos and personal stories.

To access support, young people can email [hopeagain@cruse.org.uk](mailto:hopeagain@cruse.org.uk)

### Childline

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small.

24/7 helpline: 0800 1111

Chat 1:1 with an online counsellor: [www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat](http://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat)

To email: Sign up on the website, so you can send your message without needing to use your name or email address, at [www.childline.org.uk/registration](http://www.childline.org.uk/registration)

### The Mix

[www.themix.org.uk](http://www.themix.org.uk)

If you're under 25 you can talk to The Mix about anything that's troubling you over the phone, email or webchat. You can also use their phone or online counselling service.

Helpline open daily 4-11pm: 0808 808 4994  
Email: [www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/email-us](http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/email-us)

Webchat open daily 4-11pm:  
[www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team](http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team)

Counselling service:  
[www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/the-mix-counselling-service](http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/the-mix-counselling-service)

### Finding a private counsellor or therapist

If this is an affordable option for you, you can find accredited private child and adolescent therapists and counsellors living locally to you by searching the following directories.

Counselling directory:  
[www.counselling-directory.org.uk](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk)

BACP: [www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists](http://www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists)

UKCP: [www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist)

### YoungMinds Crisis Messenger

Provides free, 24/7 text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis.

Text YM to 85258

Texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.

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## Grief and loss services

### Grief Encounter

[www.griefencounter.org.uk](http://www.griefencounter.org.uk)

Provides support to children and families who have been bereaved via phone, online chat and email. You can also take part in group activities with likeminded families at their Fundays, Grief Groups and Remembrance Days.

Phone open Monday-Friday 9am-9pm:  
0808 802 0111

Online chat: [www.griefencounter.org.uk](http://www.griefencounter.org.uk)  
(click on the 'grief talk' banner)

Email: [griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk](mailto:griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk)

### Winston's Wish

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

Provides support to bereaved children, families and any adults supporting a young person through bereavement.

Their helpline and email service offer listening and advice for anyone supporting a bereaved child. Open Monday-Friday 9am-5pm.

Phone: 08088 020 021

Email: [ask@winstonswish.org](mailto:ask@winstonswish.org)

Their online chat service provides support directly to young people. Open Fridays 10am-1pm:  
[www.winstonswish.org/online-chat](http://www.winstonswish.org/online-chat)

They also offer face-to-face support in some areas of the country. You can find information at  
[www.winstonswish.org/face-to-face-support](http://www.winstonswish.org/face-to-face-support)

### Cruse Bereavement Care

[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

Provides support to anyone affected by bereavement – both young people and adults.

Their helpline is open Monday-Friday 9.30-5pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, when they're open until 8pm.

National helpline: 0808 808 1677

Cruse Scotland helpline: 0845 600 2227

Cruse also offer local services in most UK regions, which you can find at:  
[www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/local-services](http://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/local-services)

To find face-to-face support available in Scotland go to [www.crusescotland.org.uk](http://www.crusescotland.org.uk)

### We are Macmillan Cancer Support

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Support for anyone diagnosed with cancer or supporting someone diagnosed with cancer. Open 7 days a week, 8am-8pm.

Helpline: 0808 808 00 00

Email (response time 2 days): [www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/contact-us/ask-macmillan-form.html](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/contact-us/ask-macmillan-form.html)

Advice about preparing a child for loss and making a memory box

[www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/advanced-cancer/relationships](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/advanced-cancer/relationships)

### Marie Curie

[www.mariecurie.org.uk](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk)

Care, guidance and support for people living with any terminal illness, and for their families.

Open Monday-Friday 8am-6pm and Saturdays 11am-5pm.

Helpline: 0800 090 2309

Online chat: [www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support-line/using-online-chat](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support-line/using-online-chat)

### Childhood Bereavement Network

[www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

Provides information for adults supporting bereaved children, including parents, carers and professionals. Their website also lists local services offering bereavement support to children.

For enquiries, phone 020 7843 6309 or email [cbn@ncb.org.uk](mailto:cbn@ncb.org.uk) (please note this is not a helpline service).



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<p><b>Child Bereavement UK</b> <a href="http://www.childbereavementuk.org">www.childbereavementuk.org</a></p> <p>Supports families and children when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying.</p> <p>Open Monday-Friday 9am-5pm.</p> <p>Helpline: 0800 0288 840</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:support@childbereavementuk.org">support@childbereavementuk.org</a></p> <p>They also offer face-to-face support in some areas of the country. You can find information at: <a href="http://www.childbereavementuk.org/Pages/Category/child-bereavement-uk-support-services">www.childbereavementuk.org/Pages/Category/child-bereavement-uk-support-services</a></p>	<p><b>Child Death Helpline</b> <a href="http://www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk">www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk</a></p> <p>For anyone affected by the death of a child of any age.</p> <p>Open Monday-Friday 10am-1pm, Tuesdays and Wednesdays 1-4pm, and every evening 7-10pm.</p> <p>Helpline (calling from landline): 0800 282 986</p> <p>Helpline (calling from mobile): 0808 800 6019</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:contact@childdeathhelpline.org">contact@childdeathhelpline.org</a></p>
<p><b>The Compassionate Friends</b> <a href="http://www.tcf.org.uk">www.tcf.org.uk</a></p> <p>Support for bereaved parents and their families after a child dies. Calls are answered by parents who have suffered the death of a child.</p> <p>Open every day of the year 10am-4pm and 7-10pm.</p> <p>Helpline: 0345 123 2304</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:helpline@tcf.org.uk">helpline@tcf.org.uk</a></p> <p>Northern Ireland (open every day 10am-4pm and 7-9.30pm): 0288 77 88 016</p>	<p><b>Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)</b> <a href="http://www.uksobs.org">www.uksobs.org</a></p> <p>Support for people over the age of 18 bereaved by suicide.</p> <p>Open Monday-Friday 9am-9pm.</p> <p>Helpline: 0300 111 5065</p> <p>Email: <a href="mailto:email.support@uksobs.org">email.support@uksobs.org</a></p> <p>Local support group finder: <a href="http://www.uksobs.org/we-can-help/local-support-groups/find">www.uksobs.org/we-can-help/local-support-groups/find</a></p>
<b>Further advice and information</b>	
<p><b>Barnardos</b></p> <p>Information booklet helping adults explain death to children and young people</p> <p><a href="http://www.barnardos.org.uk/child_bereavement_booklet_explaining_death.pdf">www.barnardos.org.uk/child_bereavement_booklet_explaining_death.pdf</a></p>	<p><b>Sue Ryder</b></p> <p>Advice around talking to children about loss and bereavement</p> <p><a href="http://www.sueryder.org/how-we-can-help/someone-close-to-me-has-died/advice-and-support/telling-a-child">www.sueryder.org/how-we-can-help/someone-close-to-me-has-died/advice-and-support/telling-a-child</a></p>