

# Bereavement



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0845 300 1818

## What is bereavement?

The loss of a close relative is an uncommon experience for younger people and it can present a particularly difficult challenge to caring Leaders.

Grief reactions can also be experienced following the death of friends or distant relatives, the death of a pet, parental separation or divorce, and other life events such as moving house. In a way such experiences act as preparation for the profound bereavements of life.

Bereavement may bring with it many far-reaching changes in a person's material life including loss of friends or a change of housing for example.

## Coping with bereavement

Initially the reaction will be one of shock, which can last from a few hours to some days. The bereaved person may seem to comprehend what has occurred, seem free from distress and act as if nothing has happened. Alternatively, they may be unable to stop crying or to speak about their loss and they may be incapable of organising their daily routine.

Next comes an acceptance of what has happened which can last for days, weeks or a few months. It can be accompanied by severe emotional reactions such as distress, weeping, self-reproach and guilt, helplessness and despair. The bereaved person may be restless and irrational.

Then may come a time of idealisation where the bereaved person looks back with 'rose coloured spectacles'. During this phase underlying anger or guilt may be expressed. Such a reaction may cause considerable difficulties for the remaining

parent in situations where there has been a separation or divorce.

Finally adjustment will follow. After some months the emotional storm begins to subside. The bereaved person begins to take a more realistic view of events.

## Practical Tips

It is important to understand the process through which the bereaved person is passing. It cannot be hastened. Advice to 'snap out of it' or to 'look on the bright side' is worthless.

In the early phases, simple physical presence may be all that is required. The nearness of a sympathetic person is of immense value. It is not necessary to say or do much, just be there offering support. Try to provide a secure situation. Give opportunity for the bereaved person to weep or talk. This needs to be done sensitively, in privacy, away from the mayhem of the normal meeting with minimal fuss.

It is easy to underestimate how long the normal reactions may last. Two years is not an unusual period. Sensitive support at birthdays, Christmas and at anniversaries is helpful. Some young people who have difficulty expressing their emotions verbally may act out their grief by behaving erratically.

Younger children may display their grief in a different way to adults. Emotion may be expressed in short bursts interspersed with normal behaviour. Some adults may find this disconcerting.

The bereaved family may need the support of a number of concerned adults - Leaders can share in this task by visiting and sympathetic listening. A sensitive approach is required. Sympathy should be expressed simply and genuinely.

Sometimes the individual concerned may turn to a Leader they trust to express feelings of guilt, pain, anger or despair. Be available, but do not press them. Respect the need for confidentiality. Allow tears. Do not proffer advice. Listen, comfort and encourage the necessary expression of emotion by the bereaved person.

A bereaved person may find it valuable to maintain their usual contact with the Group. Alternatively they may choose to drop it for a while. Either choice should be accepted without question, although a prolonged absence should prompt a gentle enquiry - the young person may feel too embarrassed to return and need reassurance of their welcome.

It is always hard when a child dies. Where this has been unexpected due to an accident or sudden illness, the period of shock may be the most intense whilst parents of children who have coped with a disabling and ultimately fatal condition may experience different emotional difficulties. Some parents may wish to sever all links with their child's past life whilst others may seek continued involvement. Obviously Leaders need to treat such situations sensitively and supportively.

It may be that the death was expected due to a limited life expectancy or a life-threatening condition. In these situations, other young people in the Group may need help with their inevitable fears.

Supporting the bereaved is a difficult task. Leaders who attempt it need support in turn. It might also be valuable to create opportunities for the adults concerned to share their feelings. Talking about anxieties and emotions with other Leaders, a member of the District team, or a Faith adviser can be helpful.

### **What else do I need to know?**

Even very young children have a pretty clear idea of what death means. All will have encountered a dead beetle or a dead bird. They may not, however, understand the concept of spiritual life associated with physical death.

Children are particularly apt to yearn for the deceased, to fantasise about their return and nourish hopes of reunion. Vivid images may occur. Bereaved children are particularly prone to feelings of guilt. They may blame themselves for the event. Later they may become healthily eager to hear more about the deceased and to amplify their picture of them.

Children's grief is more unlikely to follow the usual pattern than that of adults, because they are less in control of their own lives and have less knowledge of the processes of life and death. They may be misled by figures of speech and platitudes and be less well equipped to express emotions verbally. They live more in the present than adults.

### **Further Information**

A range of factsheets on various disabilities and on the inclusion of young people with specific needs in Scouting is available from the Scout Information Centre on 0845 300 1818, or to download from ScoutBase:

<http://www.scoutbase.org.uk/ps/sneeds/>

### **Support Organisations**

#### **The Child Bereavement Trust**

Aston House,  
West Wycombe  
High Wycombe,  
Buckinghamshire  
HP14 3AG  
Telephone: 0845 357 1000  
Email: [enquiries@childbereavement.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@childbereavement.org.uk)  
Website: <http://www.childbereavement.org.uk/>

**Child Death Helpline**

Telephone: 0800 282986

Website: <http://www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk/>

Every evening 7.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m., Monday to  
Friday mornings 10.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m., and  
Wednesday afternoons 1.00 - 4.00 p.m.

**Cruse Bereavement Care**

Cruse House, 126 Sheen Road

Richmond, Surrey

TW9 1UR

Telephone: 0870 167 1677

Fax 020 8940 7638

Email: [helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk](mailto:helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

Website:

<http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/>

Young People's website: <http://www.rd4u.org.uk/>

**YoungMinds**

48-50 St John Street

London

EC1M 4DG

Telephone: 020 7336 8445

Fax: 020 7336 8446

Email: [enquiries@youngminds.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@youngminds.org.uk)

Website: [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)