



after someone dies

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Suggested reading list

Supporting bereaved children and young people

Grief in children: A handbook for adults by Atle Dyregrov
Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008. ISBN 978 1 84310 650 0

Grief Encounter workbook (Third Edition) by Shelley Gilbert
Grief Encounter Project, 2008. ISBN 978 0 95484 340 3

Remembering by Lorna Nelson and Tina Rae
Lucky Duck Publishing Ltd, 2004. ISBN 978 1 90431 542 9

Supporting bereaved children aged 7 to 13

The forgotten mourners (Second Edition) by Susan C Smith
Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006. ISBN 978 1 85302 758 1

Interventions with bereaved children by Susan C Smith & Margaret Pennells
Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1995. ISBN 978 1 85302 285 3

When someone dies: How schools can help bereaved students
by Dwaine Steffes Cruse Bereavement Care, 1997. ISBN 978 0 90032 110 5

Someone I know has died by Trish Phillips
Child Bereavement Charity, 2009. ISBN 978 0 95216 613 9

What on earth do you do when someone dies? by Trevor Romain
Free Spirit Publishing, 1999. ISBN 978 1 57542 055 4

When someone very special dies by Marge Heegaard
Woodland Press, 1988. ISBN 978 0 96205 020 6

For bereaved teenagers

Still here with me edited by Suzanne Sjoqvist
Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005. ISBN 978 1 84310 501 5

When someone dies: Help for young people coping with grief
by Dwaine Steffes Cruse Bereavement Care, 1997. ISBN 978 0 90032 111 5



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A child's understanding of death

Babies bereaved at 0 to 6 months

The baby at this age does not cognitively understand the concept of death.

The baby does experience grief and can sense the absence of someone close; feelings of separation and abandonment are the primary cause of their distress.

Grief shows as restlessness, prolonged crying and fretfulness, heightened if it is the baby's primary caregiver who has died.

If the baby's mother or primary caregiver has been bereaved, the baby is likely to experience grief and feelings of loss too.

Babies bereaved at 6 months to 2 years

The baby at this age is able to picture the mother/primary caregiver and will protest at their absence with crying and displays of anger and frustration.

They may become withdrawn and lose interest in toys, feeding and interaction.

Bereaved toddlers may actively seek the deceased person.

Children bereaved at 2 to 5 years

The child at this age does not understand that death is final and may think that the person who has died will return.

They don't realise that life functions, like breathing, have stopped and may ask questions: "What if nanny can't breathe underground?" or "Won't daddy be hurt if they burn (cremate) him?"

'Omnipotent thinking' can occur, where children believe the death was directly caused by something they said or did.

They will take literally euphemisms about death such as "Mummy has gone to heaven" or "Your sister has gone to sleep".



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A child's understanding of death (2)

Children bereaved at 5 to 10 years

The child at this age tends to have acquired a broader understanding of death as permanent.

From aged seven, most accept that death is inevitable for everyone.

At this age, widening social networks open the child to information/misinformation about death from peers.

They can empathise with and show compassion for bereaved peers.

They can imitate adult coping mechanisms and hide feelings to try to protect grieving adults.

Understanding of death alters with mental, emotional and social development.

Key points to remember about bereaved babies and children

Facts should be explained in a way they will understand.

'Magical thinking' can occur at any age and they need prompt reassurance that they were not responsible for the death.

Inaccurate explanations about death can open them to accepting misinformation and fantastical explanations from their peers.

Avoid making them feel that their emotions are inappropriate or 'too much'.



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A young person's understanding of death

Young people 11 to 17 years

Adolescents usually have a greater understanding of death and the long-term implications of losing someone close.

Due to developmental changes as they move towards adulthood, reactions to the death of someone close are likely to be intense.

Many will reflect on the injustice of the death, asking why the person had to die, and will consider the notion of fate.

They will generally have a wider social network from which they may seek support, rather than from immediate family, as they try to find an independent identity.

The tasks of grieving are similar to those of an adult but the young mourner with less life experience may be unable to manage the strong emotions.

Some can regress and display child-like behaviour; others may try to 'grow up too fast' and take on adult roles.

They can become involved in risky behaviour in an attempt to manage or block their emotions. Alcohol or drugs may be used to dull pain. They can sometimes self-harm in an attempt to cope.

A normally passive young person may become angry and volatile; similarly, someone gregarious may become withdrawn, and susceptible to bullying from peers.

Key points to remember about bereaved young people

It may look as if they are grieving like an adult but they are not and should be treated as a young person.

They shouldn't be burdened with tasks that a responsible adult can undertake.

They may prefer to talk about the death to friends or people outside the immediate family, and should be encouraged to do so.

Due to developmental changes, emotions related to the death of someone close may be intense.

They should be encouraged to express how they feel.

Regressive behaviour may occur. If they are self-medicating or self-harming, seek professional advice.



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Children and young people: common responses to death

1. Shock

- The primary response when learning that someone close has died.
- Like grief, an individual response that can manifest in many ways.
- A protective state that allows them time to process bad news.
- Some may laugh when first told, indicative of the brain momentarily protecting them from reality. This will cease when the rational mind has processed that the person has died.
- Some behave as if on 'auto pilot', doing mundane tasks like tidying or homework.
- Language that is clear, factual and appropriate to the level of understanding will help.
- Reassure them that feelings of numbness and disbelief are natural and that you are there for them and will listen.

2. Denial

- Can be observed if they want to stay at home or hospital for fear of leaving the person who has died.
- Can be observed in obsessive behaviours, perhaps over their appearance, as if the child wishes to impress the deceased person when they return.
- Can be regarded as a continuing search for the deceased person.
- A useful response, as the child does not automatically have to accept the death and can delay the inevitability of accepting that the deceased person won't be coming back.



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Children and young people: common responses to death (2)

3. Anger

- Can be directed at different people/objects perceived as the cause of the person's death: eg. nurses, carers, or even the deceased person for abandoning them.
- Can manifest in various ways according to their understanding of the death. Younger children may have tantrums and become aggressive towards others; older children may become disruptive at school and get into fights.
- A response that is common among adults and children, but children can find it more difficult to understand their emotions and articulate their feelings.
- If it is causing them to hurt themselves or others, explain to them that it is OK to feel angry but not OK to cause pain.
- Encourage them to vent their anger on a pillow or go for a run, channelling aggression safely. If directed at you, don't take it personally. Being consistent and calm reinforces that you will be there for them regardless.

4. Bargaining

- Can serve as a tool for distracting the young person from the painful reality of the death.
- They may plead for the return of the person who has died in exchange for a promise to act a certain way, abstain from certain behaviours etc.
- Not all will experience this response, but those who do will often beseech a deity or something they see as having power to restore the deceased person to life: "Please God, bring my sister back and I promise I'll be good for mum and dad."
- Should cease as the child moves towards acceptance of the death.



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Children and young people: common responses to death (3)

5. Guilt

- Can be regarded as anger turned inwards towards the self.
- They can be convinced that the death was their fault due to something they said or did.
- Do not underestimate their perception of their responsibility for the death but reassure them they are not to blame and give examples/explanations as to why they aren't.
- Encourage them to talk and explore their guilt.

6. Depression

- Can manifest physically where the child loses appetite, grows lethargic and has no interests.
- Can damage the child's self-esteem so ensure that they feel cared for and their feelings are valued.
- Irrespective of age or cognitive capacity, they will experience some sort of depression as they grieve.
- Commonly occurs when bargaining has failed, anger has proved fruitless and the reality of the death has got through to them.
- As a response to death it is not the same as clinical depression, but the child may not be able to 'snap out of it'. Time, encouragement and patience are needed.

7. Acceptance

- The emotional and intellectual realisation that death is irreversible and final.
- Life will not be the same, but that doesn't mean the child cannot live enjoyably and productively.
- Familiar routines will help by giving a sense of normality.
- Help them understand it's OK to smile and reinvest in life, and not a betrayal.



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Bereaved students: the impact of bereavement

Grief is unique and no two young people will grieve in the same way. Some will want to return to school soon after the death; others may not want to return at all.

They need understanding, compassion and patience from teaching staff and peers.

The familiarity of school and its relationships can encourage them to communicate.

Some may think they are going mad; reassurance that feelings of insanity and losing control are natural reactions to the death of someone close is essential.

Sticking to normal routine promotes feelings of security and normality.

They can be more susceptible to being bullied and teaching staff need to be mindful of this.

Although empathy and compassion are important for staff supporting them, it can be emotionally exhausting. Forming a strong emotional attachment can lead to over-reliance and transgression of teacher–student boundaries.

Organisations like Cruse Bereavement Care exist to support bereaved people and may be helpful in safeguarding both staff and students.

It is useful if schools have resources and literature to help support students and staff. A wide range of titles is available from Cruse Bereavement Care through the website: www.cruse.org.uk

You may want to think about the Cruse awareness in bereavement training for staff, to better equip the school to support bereaved students.

Recognising behaviour changes

Responses to death often depend on the student's age at the time of the death, level of comprehension, relationship to the person who has died and emotional resilience.



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Bereaved students: recognising behaviour changes (2)

Young children may appear sad and withdrawn one minute, absorbed in play the next. They do not have the emotional reserves to grieve continuously and need respite through play.

If the family is grieving too, school staff are often the first to notice any changes in behaviour.

Grief is exhausting for children, and teaching staff may notice they appear tired and listless.

Bereavement can disturb sleep patterns, particularly if students experience nightmares or hyper-vigilance. Problems with sleep, accompanied by anxiety, have a direct effect on the ability to concentrate, and they may even fall asleep during a lesson.

The student may display uncharacteristic mood swings and behaviours. For instance, a confident, academic achiever can become anxious and despondent following a death.

Sometimes they can appear to regress and start thumb sucking or using baby talk. This tends to occur as a response to a grieving student's subconscious need to return to formative years, before the death, when they felt secure. As they move towards acceptance of the death this tendency should go.

They may become more aggressive, with challenging behaviour, particularly if the death coincides with puberty. Although understanding is required, it is important that abusive behaviour is not left unchallenged and staff should ensure boundaries are observed.

Conversely, staff may observe compensatory behaviours such as obsessive engagement in academic or sporting pursuits in a student who is in denial of the death.

Be aware that regressive behaviour may provoke bullying or teasing from peers.

If a bereaved student appears to change behaviour, take some time to talk to them. Reassure them that grieving is normal and that they will need to allow themselves the time to grieve.

Liaise with the family and voice any concerns you may have about behaviour or temperament.

Help the student understand that, although life has changed, their grief will lessen in intensity over time and they won't always feel this way.



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Bereaved students: school refusal

Some bereaved students will not want to return to the familiarity of the school environment; some are resolute that they cannot and will not return to school.

If the school has not been in contact with the family following the death, the student may feel anxious about peers and staff knowing about the death.

As death can be a universally difficult subject to broach, they may be concerned they will be inundated with questions that will mean they relive the death over again. This can be frightening.

They may feel they have changed as a result of the death and may fear that they will be treated as a freak or outsider, or viewed with curiosity by their non-bereaved peers.

If they are feeling particularly emotionally raw and prone to crying, the thought of being viewed as vulnerable by classmates can also be a deterrent, particularly for boys.

A significant number report that they were bullied because of their bereavement. School staff must be on guard for this as, unchecked, bullying can damage mental, emotional and social development.

If the family has asked you to inform other students about the death, ensure you know exactly what information this consent covers.

If it is appropriate, visit the family to explain what support they can expect, what students/staff know about the death, and what measures the school will put in place to help the student when they return.

Explain to the other students what has happened (if consent is given) in language appropriate to age/levels of comprehension, and request their understanding and compassion when the bereaved student returns.

Reinforce that bullying/teasing will not be tolerated.

Be mindful when talking to students about the death that they too may have been bereaved, and that the experience of a newly bereaved student may echo their own loss and even heighten it; others too may need support.

Encourage students to ask questions. It will enable you to convey the facts and allow them to explore feelings and thoughts about death. This will encourage them to empathise with the bereaved student and help dispel rumours.

Try not to be alarmed if some of the students giggle or make inappropriate comments when informed of the death; it is a common reaction when young people are told something serious and may reflect shock or uneasiness.



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Bereaved students: supporting the return to school

There is no set time prescribed for the return to school following a death of someone close. The length of absence will depend on the wishes and cultural beliefs of the family and the student's preparedness to return.

However, if they are absent for a long period this can increase their anxieties and cause difficulties readjusting to school life.

Schools should appoint a staff member (preferably one with whom the student has good rapport and trust) to coordinate the return. This staff member will need to establish the needs and wishes of the student and their family prior to the return.

If possible arrange a meeting with the student and the family so that staff and pupils can be made aware of how they should react on the return.

Every case is different. Some students prefer to be received normally and are able to respond to questions from their peers about the death and how they are feeling; others may prefer the death to be explained in an assembly prior to their return so they don't have to face questions.

School staff should be aware of potential separation anxiety that may lead to feelings of anxiety when the student leaves those they are close to on return to school.

It is important that the bereaved student knows what kind of support they can expect on their return: for example, reassurance that it's understandable if they can't concentrate during lessons, or dispensations if work is not completed on time, or 'time-outs' where they are allowed to leave a lesson without having to ask permission or say why. All teaching staff should be notified if dispensations have been granted.

Involving close friends may help when devising a plan of support. Fostering re-engagement of friendships will further enable the bereaved student to feel more 'normal' and encourage them to talk about their feelings in a safe environment.

Find a private, quiet place if you are listening to a bereaved student.

Look after your own well-being and get support from colleagues and senior staff. Supporting a child or young person who is grieving can be emotionally demanding.



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Bereaved students: violent deaths

A pupil bereaved through violent crime like murder or manslaughter may find it more difficult to understand and process the death.

Violent deaths often attract media attention. Having to grieve in a public arena can be traumatic.

Return to school can trigger rumour and conjecture so it may be useful to hold a special assembly or meetings ahead to let students ask questions and discuss concerns. This should also focus on dispelling rumours and requesting understanding and compassion.

Encourage students and families to inform the school if they have been approached by the media and discourage them from making statements that might prove damaging to the bereaved family.

Police investigations, trials, court attendance, post mortems and inquests may be processes that the bereaved student has to face. A trusted staff member can give help and support.

If there is media interest, the bereaved student may feel they no longer have 'ownership' of the person who has died, who has become public property. This can lead to anger, frustration and withdrawal.

If the media has presented the person who died in an unfavourable light, the bereaved student may feel they must constantly defend them.

If the perpetrator of the death has yet to be found, this can cause understandable fear and panic for the bereaved student. Other students may also feel anxious about their own relatives.

Feelings of vengeance towards the known/unknown perpetrator are not uncommon in people bereaved through violence. Such feelings can be enormous and the emotions overwhelming.

School staff should allow the bereaved student to talk about their anger and any thoughts of revenge, and listen in a non-judgemental and empathic way. Unchecked, such powerful emotions can hinder social and emotional development.

School staff should agree on how best to manage media intrusion and devise an action plan for dealing with media interest on school premises.



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Bereaved students: deaths through suicide

A student can come under enormous emotional pressure if they become entrenched in the belief that the suicide was a consequence of something they said or did.

Feelings of intense anger towards the suicide can be common if they feel abandoned or unloved by the person who has died.

Students bereaved through suicide often struggle with questions about why the person took the decision to end their life.

The school should liaise closely with the bereaved student and their family to ensure that facts regarding the death are clearly understood by staff, who must be aware of how much the bereaved student knows about the death.

Reassurance that the bereaved student is in no way to blame for the death must be prompt and constant. Explore with them why they feel responsible so that you are able to gently challenge their reasons and demonstrate that they are not to blame.

Death through suicide can lead to social stigma and many families affected by suicide can feel isolated. Similarly, students bereaved through suicide can feel excluded from school life and may feel embarrassed or ashamed about the nature of the death.

It is difficult for families to understand why the person they were close to ended their life and this can fuel conjecture in social circles, communities and schools.

A death through suicide can unnerve a community, as it may be wrongly viewed as an unnatural and selfish act. There will be those who view suicide as a moral transgression, depending on their faith and cultural beliefs. If the bereaved student is burdened with the opinions of others this can be unhelpful and potentially damaging.

Let the bereaved student know that staff are there to support them and that you will be available if they need to talk or vent their feelings.

Be alert to bullying. Students bereaved through suicide can be extremely vulnerable.



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Bereaved students: death of a student

The death of a fellow student can be traumatic for the school community; it can unnerve other students and challenge feelings of security.

Students will want to know details and will have questions that staff should try to answer in an open, clear and honest way.

Staff may notice disruption in lessons as students can become restless and unable to concentrate. There may also be more behavioural problems and deterioration in academic achievement.

If the death occurred on school premises some students may not want to return to school for fear of dying in a similar way or in the place their peer died. Students who witnessed the death (irrespective of whether or not it occurred on school premises) may need to be referred for specialist bereavement support.

If you have to inform students, first ensure that you have the permission of the family and only explain the details/circumstances of the death that they have consented to be made public.

Inform in a sensitive, truthful way and encourage students to ask questions as this will help to dispel rumours and misinformation.

Ensure that students who are upset or feel uneasy are supported to talk (in private). It can be useful to have one or two colleagues present when you break the news so they can care for distressed students.

It is a good idea to allow group discussion so that students can communicate their feelings and feel reassured.

If students wish to attend the funeral, their wishes should be respected. If the family consents to it, explain about funerals/cremations and what to expect.

Discuss with the school community a memorial service, planting a tree or erecting a plaque in memory of the deceased student. Involve those students who want to participate and invite the student's bereaved family.

The school could open a dedicated book of remembrance where the community can write and put pictures, poetry, memories etc. This can be cathartic for bereaved students, who may decide to give the completed book to the deceased student's family.

Reassure students that staff members are there to listen to them and support them while they grieve.



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Bereaved students: death of a staff member

If you are the first school staff member to be notified of the death of a colleague, ensure you inform other staff immediately. A meeting may have to be called, reducing the day's staffing levels.

Once staff have been informed, a school assembly should be called to inform the students and allow them to ask questions.

Answer all questions honestly but be mindful to give out only facts that the family has consented to be made public.

If there are students who want to say something in tribute, encourage them to do so, and to talk about their feelings and share memories of the staff member within their form groups.

There are likely to be students with a special relationship with the staff member, and school staff should monitor these students for any signs of distress.

Members of staff are likely to be grieving and mourning the loss of their colleague too, and they also may require support and/or time off.

If the staff member taught a particular class, another teacher with whom the students are familiar may wish to introduce any new teacher when appointed to the class.

Consideration should be given to how best to support staff and students particularly affected by the death, and support may be needed for the new teacher taking over.

Open a book of remembrance or hold a memorial service, so the community can remember the person who has died.

For students particularly affected by the death of a staff member, liaison with their families may help.

You can contact your local Cruse Bereavement Care branch (details at www.cruse.org.uk) for help and advice. Cruse can provide support to staff and students irrespective of who has died, through one-to-one sessions or in groups.



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Handling a school crisis

A serious accident or crisis, either on school premises or a school trip, needs rapid response from staff and good communications to safeguard students and avoid further deterioration of circumstances.

Try to establish what has happened, what needs to be done to safeguard students and staff, and what the consequences are likely to be. Once you have clear and accurate information, senior staff should be contacted at the first opportunity.

Families and other staff should be quickly notified of an incident. Schools should have special communication systems for relaying news, information and emergencies efficiently, with a database of recipients and independent of the usual reception numbers, which are likely to become overloaded with inward calls.

Ensure staff members speaking with families, either face-to-face or by telephone, have up-to-date information. If a student or member of staff dies, staff members at the school should be informed and aware they should not inform the families concerned by phone.

If the news is tragic, ensure that families involved are informed in private. Offer assistance to those needing transport and hospital contact numbers or emotional support. Don't leave people alone in their distress.

The media should not enter the school premises or accost distressed students, staff members and families. Where possible, appoint a member of staff to manage the media.

Hold a debriefing session with school staff following the incident.

Ensure all students and staff are supported while they grieve.

Call an assembly when appropriate, to express the school's sense of loss and sympathy for the families and people involved, and to decide on a form of memorial.

Continue to keep families of the students affected aware of what is happening in the school, and of the need to watch out for signs of distress in their children/young people in the months to come.



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Creating a school bereavement policy

A school bereavement policy can provide a framework for staff members to address death and its consequences. A policy will help them feel more confident when working with bereaved students and support them more efficiently.

Such a policy should also include concise guidelines for those supporting a bereaved student, and help staff to deal with a sensitive and often difficult subject.

The creation of a policy will require input from all members of staff teams and governors, and you may wish to contact your local Cruse Bereavement Care branch for advice on how best to support bereaved students. Details are on the Cruse website: www.cruse.org.uk

During the consultation stage you may want to think about including the following in your policy:

- designated members of staff to provide support to bereaved students
- how to inform students/staff/colleagues about a death and what to do when staff have to tell a student that someone close to them has died
- what support will be offered to staff/students if they are bereaved
- what to do in a crisis or disaster situation on school premises or on a school trip
- how to recognise common symptoms and behaviours associated with grief
- contact details of local and national support agencies specialising in bereavement, such as Cruse Bereavement Care
- how to deal with media interest surrounding a death and designating two/three members of staff as media coordinators.

It is important that the staff members appointed to provide support to bereaved students have appropriate training and are in turn supported by senior colleagues. Cruse Bereavement Care provides training and consultancy for school staff to enable them to support students and safeguard their physical, emotional and mental well-being.

It might be useful for the school to stock bereavement resource packs for children and young people of all ages. Cruse has a catalogue of titles to help them through the grieving process.



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Please return this form to:

England

Cruse Bereavement Care Unit 0.1
Victoria Villas
Richmond
Surrey, TW9 2GW
Tel: 0208 939 9547
Email: training@cruse.org.uk

Wales

Cruse Cymru
Ty Energlyn
Cwrt Llanfabon
Caerphilly, CF83 2TP
Tel: 029 2088 6913
Email: wales.cymru@cruse.org.uk

Northern Ireland

Cruse Bereavement Care
Graham House
Knockbracken Healthcare Park
Saintfield Road
Belfast, BT8 8BH
Tel: 028 9079 2419
Email: northern.ireland@cruse.org.uk

You can order additional schools packs for £3.95 each; discounts are available on bulk orders



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Register your interest for further training

The enclosed information is designed to give you an overview of ways in which you can help your pupils cope with bereavement, and Cruse hopes that it proves useful.

If you feel that you and your staff might require further training around these issues, then please complete this form and send it back to us; one of our team will be in touch with more information.

Cruse provides information and support to thousands of children every year. If you would like to help Cruse provide this care, or you want more information on our course for new volunteers: Awareness in Bereavement Care for Children and Young People, please indicate below.

Name
School
Email address
Phone number
No. of people interested
Areas of interest: One day course Bespoke training (suitable for inset days) Creating a bereavement policy Volunteering*
Other requests / questions:
<p>*Cruse Area offices may make a charge for volunteer accredited training Please find addresses overleaf</p>