

## **Coping with grief - Helping children cope with a death in the family:**

We do want to know whether this booklet has been helpful to you, whether it describes correctly the kind of feelings you have and whether the advice it gives to try to help you to cope, has been useful.

### **Coping with grief**

*Losing someone you love is a very special kind of agony and if this happens as a result of a road crash, it is particularly painful because it is so sudden and unexpected.*

*This booklet may help you to understand some of the ways in which such a loss could affect you. Others who have had a similar experience have found that there are ways to help you to cope and you may find it useful to know about these too.*

S.C.A.R.D. wishes to express its gratitude to the late Dr David Sheppard of Bournemouth Polytechnic who prepared the text of Coping with Grief.

### **Normal Grief Patterns**

Those who grieve as a result of bereavement find that there are several stages. At first, the shock of hearing about it may make you feel numb or dazed. Later, you may feel that it has not really happened - you feel that the person you knew well will walk through the door or ring you up - all these are natural, normal reactions which most people feel. Sometimes the next stage is to feel acutely depressed and sad. You may not be able to cope with your job or to keep the home tidy - there is a sense of apathy - none of the things that had given you pleasure seem to matter anymore. It may all seem unfair - why me?

You may feel angry - angry with the doctors, or the police because you wanted them to do more; angry with the driver; even angry with the person who has died for letting you down. If you are a person who does not usually get angry, this may seem strange, but is a natural and quite common feeling.

Those who mourn often feel guilty - "I asked him to have another drink"; "I helped him buy that motorbike"; "I should have met him from school", are things that many people say after road tragedy. Some say they feel guilty for still being alive - "Why couldn't it have been me?"

As a parent, one can feel particularly responsible for one's children's mistakes, and "If only" is a usual and especially hurtful feeling.

There can be physical effects - they may take the form of tiredness, sleeplessness, dizziness, diarrhoea, headaches or menstrual disorders. Nightmares can occur. It may be difficult to be in the usual way, or to do your work properly, because you feel unwell or hurt, and even your everyday contacts with friends and relatives may prove difficult and awkward.

### **Special problems with road tragedies**

The unexpected nature of road accidents raises special problems - there may not be time to say "goodbye" and no chance to prepare oneself for your loved one's death. Often the victims are young, leaving the parents hurt and feeling cheated. Plans for the future will be wrecked. Feelings of guilt are often strong and particularly so if you gave the person the vehicle, or if they were hurrying because you had asked them to do so, perhaps because you wanted them not to be out late.

You may feel the accident would never have happened if someone had not been drinking or had been just a little bit more careful.

You may think that the police or the doctors seemed unfeeling or that a driver involved in the crash did not care and was only out to defend himself when the case came to court.

### **Things to remember**

You are not going mad because you have strong feelings - these are normal with bereaved people. You need time to get through these physical feelings and these strong emotions. Work can be useful, but you will also need some time to be away from it while you do your 'grief work'.

Do not make hasty or large decisions until you are sure you can cope - maybe for a year or eighteen months - you may not be able to make decisions completely sensibly and it is no time to put yourself under further stress.

### **Things to do**

After the death, there will be a lot to do. You will need to decide if you wish to see the body. Some who do not do this regret later that they did not do so. Relatives or officials may advise you about this, but do not let other people make up your mind for you.

Those bereaved by road crashes often seem to want to know details about how the tragedy occurred and worry later if they do not know quite how it happened. You may want to ask about this. You will have to arrange the funeral. An undertaker will usually be able to advise you about arrangements that you need to make. A useful leaflet published by the Department of Social Security is available and can be obtained from any local office. It is called 'What to do after a death' (Publication Number 049).

A post-mortem is necessary to determine the cause of death. Accidental death normally involves a post-mortem followed by a full inquest after the police enquiries have been completed. This process can take a considerable time.

Try to express your feelings; it can help a lot to cry. Do talk about what has happened; it will help to do so, though others may be shy about raising the subject with you. Just holding someone, cuddling up or being in someone's arms can help all those concerned immensely.

Try to be patient with others. People may be tactless when they really meant to help. Many people are afraid of death and will stay away even when you felt they should have been around. People may expect you to be 'over it' much too soon; this can be hurtful too.

Your partner may seem depressed or angry when you feel just the opposite. One person may want affection, or sex, when the other wants to be let alone.

Bereavement does not affect everyone in the same way. Be as sympathetic as you can. Children may need help too. Do not try too hard to shield your feelings and encourage them to express theirs - through play if they are young or they may want to be held in your arms. But allow yourself time to think things through and to express your own grief - in private if you wish.

Do not be afraid to look outside your immediate family for help and for comfort. Friends, relatives, your doctor or the church can all help at such times.

Be careful on the roads yourself and take care at home too; it has been shown that those who are bereaved are more likely to have accidents.

This booklet may be helpful to you. Many other books have been written about bereavement and how people feel about it and it may be helpful to read those too. Some of them are listed at the end. You might wish to look further for more personal sources of help.

There is no time limit for how long your grief will last, or how you should feel after a set time. After twelve months it may still feel as if everything happened yesterday, or it may feel like it all happened a lifetime ago.

The loss of a loved one affects people in different ways, our experiences and responses to this loss are totally individual to us, so here is no right or 'normal' response to grief. Also, some people may want help and support during their grief. **SCARD** may be able to arrange for you to see one of their skilled counsellors to help you through your grief.

### **Coming through**

People who have lost someone through a traffic accident do not 'get over it', but they can learn to cope again.

There will be bad days when sad memories reappear. Christmas and anniversaries can be particularly painful times, but there will come a time when the happy times are remembered and the joys which you had will arise in your mind and not just the sadness. Try to let happiness in - it is not being disloyal to do so.

You may meet other people because of your loss whom you come to like - perhaps because of a similar shared experience. Some find it helpful to use the knowledge they have acquired to benefit others. Doing voluntary work in a hospital or voluntary work related to road user training, or joining a road safety campaign such as CADD (Campaign Against Drinking and Driving) are some possibilities, once you are sure that you are able to manage without being too hurt by such reminders.

You will never forget the person you have lost, but you will '*come through it*' in due time. Your life may seem to have a deeper meaning. Do all you can personally to achieve this; and do seek help from others when you need it.

### **Helping children cope with a death in the family**

*Children will grieve if someone they love dies. It is important that they are helped through the various stages of grief and they will need adult support to do this.*

*Those who look after them will not want children to be hurt. They may want to avoid talking to the children in order to protect them from unnecessary pain. Yet in practice, this is unlikely to be possible, for children will soon notice that the surviving adults are behaving strangely, and that something is wrong.*

*Children, like adults, differ widely in their reactions to death. It is best, if possible, to bring the news of the death to them individually. This makes it possible to choose the best words for each child. It may help those who care for children to know how they view death, and how this varies with the age of the child. Religious beliefs and the relationship with the deceased person will also be important factors.*

### **Infants and Toddlers**

Children aged two can sense loss, and suffer the feelings that go with loss, but cannot

understand what death is. They will notice that people are upset, and will need to be held or cuddled. Explanations, however, will not be understood. Children of this age understand that someone is present or not present. Before about the age of 18 months, they will not be affected by the loss of a person, unless that person was someone very important in their life, such as a mother. An older infant will show grief by anger, crying, searching, lack of appetite, and finally quiet resignation. Two year olds need to feel sure that someone will be there to feed them, pay attention to them, play with them, and talk to them. At this stage, they are able to let someone take the place of the person who has gone. What one does is far more important to a child at this age than what one says. Generally, it is best done by showing how you love them - holding, cuddling and stroking.

### **Ages 4 to 6**

At this age children believe that anything that is active is alive. A wind-up toy seems alive when it moves, and they may cry when it stops. They cannot accept that death is for ever, and will clearly expect the person who died to be alive again soon. So they may accept the news in a rather matter of fact manner. They may talk of the death of the person in the same detached way that they would talk of the death of a pet. This may upset the adults around them, which reaction may puzzle the children. They know that adults do not cry or whisper when a pet dies, as they do when a person they loved has died. It may frighten children to receive no explanation they can understand. They may cry more because they are upset by the way people they know are behaving, rather than due to the death itself.

For children of this age, death may best be explained like this. "His heart stopped beating and no one can make it start up again. Therefore, we won't be seeing him moving and talking anymore. We will put his body in the ground because he is not able to do or say anything anymore."

A six year old lost his brother and sister in a drink driving crash. For months after, his parents or the police would find him lying on the road trying to be hit so he could join them. At this age, he still had difficulty in separating fact from fantasy. He might have been satisfied by a description of how the crash caused them to die and their bodies to be buried, instead of being told that his brother and sister now lived in heaven. Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen's book, called "Lifetime" (*Bantam 1983*) is helpful for use with children of this age.

Only if the person who died mattered a lot to a child (such as a parent, grandparent, brother or sister) will the child feel extremely sad about the loss. This may be because they feel abandoned. A child may conclude that the person they loved left them because they were bad. They have learnt that bad behaviour is punished and good behaviour is rewarded. It is helpful to point out over and over again that the loved one did not choose to leave or abandon them, and that it was something else that caused the death.

### **Ages 7 to 11**

Around the ages of seven or eight, a child feels that there is life where there is movement in nature. A cloud is alive as it blows across the sky. Water is alive when it gurgles and runs in the stream. As children can now accept that some things are dead, they may begin to take an interest in what happens after death. Seven or eight year olds may become fearful of death because they realise for the first time that it is real. They may feel very worried by the thought

of losing a parent. Death can now be seen as something that attacks you and takes life. Children are now able to accept that death is final. It is important for children of this age to show their sadness, anger, fear and guilt.

At this age children often feel guilty, and this is partly because they still believe in magic. Almost all children at sometime wish to eliminate their parents and siblings, and they may even dream about different ways to do it. Children of seven to nine may believe that their 'death wish' actually caused the death. They are much more likely to think this than adults, for they are not yet wise enough to realise that this could not happen.

Because children of this age are concerned with understanding death, they may search to find a 'cause' for it. They will then direct anger towards the someone or something that 'caused' it. In the case of car crashes, it is best if the child feels angry about the driver of the car, so that they do not have to search for other causes.

Children of this age may fear that death is a punishment for bad behaviour even more than younger children. They may fear that their naughty behaviour has brought about the death of a loved one, and that they are likely to be punished for it. They may fear that their other parent or they themselves will be the next to die. Because children simply cannot understand death like adults can, it is more difficult to rid themselves of feelings of anger and guilt than it would be for an adult.

More adult ideas about life and death develop roughly between the ages of nine and eleven. By this age, children have learned that only people, plants and animals are alive. They know that something has happened which cannot be explained or understood. Children of this age are not only sensitive to their own feelings, but can also share the feelings of others, and better understand what the loss may mean to them. Children aged nine to eleven need comfort and support, but can be a source of support and comfort to others, if they are given the chance to be helpful to others during the crisis. This can help them cope with their own feelings.

### **Adolescents (12 to 16)**

Adolescents are moving towards independence. They are much concerned with status and peer pressure. They are still immature, socially and emotionally.

Adolescence can be stormy, but it is not like that with everyone.

Young teenagers often reject their parents' standards. Twelve and thirteen year olds may not get on well with their parents because they are moving towards being independent.

Therefore, when death comes to a parent, there may be strong feelings of guilt. A teenager aged 14 to 16 is less self-centred and may well start thinking about their own death when faced with the death of another.

Death is unusual, sudden and violent to adolescents. It is something they simply do not want to think about. Most teenagers feel insecure. Moving fast and keeping the music loud can be an escape from having to face the fears.

When they have to cope with the loss of an important relationship, this may cause them great fear, guilt, anxiety and anger. They feel that no one has felt the deep and powerful feelings they now feel. No one has ever loved as they love or grieved as they grieve. The older adolescent will also be upset because others are grieving, so the pain is doubled.

Because adolescents form closer relationships with others of their own age than with their parents, it helps if there are others like themselves around who can give support. Adolescents

often respond well when other adults are willing to listen to them, and who can react as a parent would do. They may well respond to a clergyman, school counsellor, or another adolescent who 'understands'. Their families should not be upset if they look elsewhere for support. That is normal at this age.

### **Some things not to do**

There are a number of explanations of death which, though well-meant, may create confusion, doubt, guilt and fear, rather than understanding.

#### **These should be avoided:**

**1 "Your daddy has gone away for a very long time"** Without further explanation, children will just think they have been deserted. They will then go on to view the desertion as punishment and react with strong feelings of guilt and resentment. They must know that the deceased has not chosen to go away, but has really died, been killed.

**2 "Your mummy is now in heaven"** seems impossible for a young child when they know that the mother is buried in the cemetery. Under seven or eight, they will have a difficult time understanding a concept of heaven. It is wisest to explain death in terms of a body's lack of ability to function. Children may be told that a mother's soul is in heaven, although this may be difficult to grasp. But, that the mother's body is buried in the cemetery should be made clear. They will eventually find out and feel deceived if they have not been told where the body is.

**3 "It is God's will"** can cause children to be extremely angry at God and to question his goodness and love just at the time when they need all the support they can get. It is better to explain that it was probably God's will for the deceased to live a full and happy life.

However, someone was irresponsible, and caused the death to happen before anyone else was ready.

**4 "Granddad died because he got sick"** seems like an acceptable explanation on the surface, and yet without further explanation, children may assume that everyone who gets sick dies. Therefore, they may become extremely fearful of any kind of illness. "Likewise, saying that "Grandma went to the hospital and died" can make it easy for children to conclude that hospitals make people die.

**5 "To die is to go to sleep"** is easy to say to children. If this is all they are told, they are likely to develop sleeping problems because they are fearful of their own death. A clear distinction should be made between sleep and death.

**6** Sending children off to be with other relatives or friends when a person dies makes it more difficult. It is best if they know what is going on. Parents should not prevent children from learning that they can cope with such an experience.

#### **Suggestions for helping children cope:**

**1** Respond to children's feelings. Obviously younger children are less able to describe their feelings. However, the person caring for the child should give them plenty of attention and

do a lot of touching and holding, to help them feel secure. Children who are older and can talk more freely should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and fears. Their grief and anger should be accepted. The best way for children to talk freely about their feelings is to be with adults who are comfortable talking about their own feelings.

**2** Reassure children when they talk about their fears. Many of these fears will be unreasonable but nevertheless real because they are young. Only when the person who cares for them understands what a child's level of development is, will they be able to help the child. Responses to fear should be direct and simple. Children should be touched or held. They can usually accept explanations when they know an adult is trying to help.

**3** Spend time playing with children under ten. Children often show their deepest feelings through their actions. Respond to their feelings with actions. After the first few weeks following a death, those caring for children should take time to sit down and play with them, allowing them to express whatever they wish through their toys. Try saying "Your doll got angry when his Daddy left"; "Your doll or teddy is crying in the bed. What is she sad about?"

**4** Missed events can matter a lot. If Dad has been teaching his son to cast a line, or pitch a tent, and then died, the child may seem that he is more upset over fishing and camping than over the loss of his father. This is not really so, but it is the way a young child is most able to express his loss. He needs sympathy and support for his feelings and not criticism because he expresses them that way.

**5** A family crisis should be shown, but do protect children from seeing someone on whom they depend as being very upset. They can usually handle the feelings of sorrow, loneliness and anger but to witness people on whom they depend when they are too upset will make them more anxious than they need be.

**6** Allow children of seven or older to attend the funeral. This will ensure that they really know the person has died, helps with the reality that death has occurred and enables them to acknowledge their loss. Children of this age should be given time prior to the funeral to view the body and say goodbye in their own way. They will, therefore, find their place as an important member of the group of mourners. Children should be given a detailed explanation of what to expect at a funeral. Perhaps they will want to visit for a time with the funeral director who can answer their questions. Whilst children should be encouraged to attend the funeral, they should never be forced to do so. Likewise, they should never be forced to kiss or touch the deceased, although it is all right for them to do so if they wish.

**7** Children may giggle or laugh at things that are not funny. Understand this and do not condemn them for reacting in a way that helps them.

**8** Allow children to share memorial services and to visit the cemetery. Going to the cemetery helps to prevent avoidance, denial and repression of painful feelings. The sadness felt in that place may help children to work through their grief.

**9** Do not worry if children cry, and don't be in a hurry to stop the flow of tears when they start. It is natural and normal for children to wash away grief with tears.

**10** Talk about the death when the child wants to talk about it. There is no need to answer questions that are not asked. The answers should be both honest and adequate for the questions asked, depending on the child's level of development.

**11** Encourage children to write a goodbye letter to the deceased. If this can be done before the burial and placed in the coffin with the body, it will be most reassuring to them. If this is not possible, encourage them to write the letter anyway. It will help them to be able to express their feelings.

### **Where to seek professional help**

#### **S.C.A.R.D.**

(Support & Care After Road Death & injury

RCM Business Centres

Dewsbury Road

Ossett

Wakefield

West Yorkshire

WF5 9ND

**Tel;** 01924 56 2252

**Helpline** (9am to 9pm 7 days per week) - 0345 1235542

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