Information for Parents and Carers on Supporting a Young Person Grieving

For more information please contact
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Dear Parents & Carers,

Whether sudden or expected, few life events have a greater impact on families than the death of a close friend or family member. The ways in which families make sense of, and cope with their grief vary greatly. Everyone’s bereavement journey will be unique.

This is a brochure to assist in equipping you with information, tools and strategies for supporting a young person who is grieving. The information has come from various sources. Much of the literature has come from The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement www.grief.org.au. With support and information, young people can be helped to understand what has happened and can slowly learn to live with their loss. We hope you find this information useful.

Grief is not always visible.

Grief comprises the many *thoughts and feelings* experienced because of loss, while mourning is the *outward* expression of grief. As adolescents are in the process of becoming more independent of their parents and other central figures in their lives, they can feel reluctant to show signs of mourning as it reinforces a sense of dependence and vulnerability. Even so, all adolescents grieve when someone they love dies.

*Strategy – Be available*

It is when we are truly listened to that we feel most understood. Provide adolescents an accepting, open, communicative environment in which to grieve. Convey to them that it is okay to feel the emotions that they feel, and that you will be there for them if they need to talk.

When individuals grieve they often notice some of the following feelings. They might not feel all of them, and might not feel them in the same order. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

- **Denial, shock or disbelief** – “It hasn’t really happened”, “This isn’t real”, “I must be dreaming”, ”He will be back”. This is like a temporary relief and helps them to avoid getting completely taken over by grief.

- **Guilt** - Might be related to feelings of “Why didn’t I?”, “If only I had …”, “I should have…”

- **Confusion** – “What’s going on?”, “I don’t understand?”, “What happened?”.

- **Anxiety** – Loss can be frightening – You might think about your future. “What will I do?”, “How will I cope?”, - or fear losing control – “I’m going to lose it…”, “I can’t stop it…”, “What else might I lose without me being able to stop it?”

- **Avoidance** – is a common reaction that young people have to the anxiety grief brings. (“I’m leaving if you mention Susie again”, “I can’t talk I’m off to footy”)


• **Anger** – Anger comes from other feelings, like feeling abandoned, hurt or scared. Young people might express anger in lots of ways. They may direct anger at people they think caused the loss. “Why did you do...?”, “You always...”, “You never cared”

• **Hopelessness** – “I couldn't stop it”, “I can't change anything”, “I can't cope”.

• **Crying, sobbing, depression** – Sadness might feel like a black cloud over your whole world. Young people might long for what they have lost. They may have lost interest in life – don't want to go out, or see or do things they usually do. They might feel loneliness, or feel they have no one to turn to. Powerlessness ('What can I do?') and worthlessness ('It should have been me who died') are also common responses.

• **Reality and acceptance and adjusting to new life patterns** – Young people often come to realise what has happened and the pain does not hurt so much. Everything is different but the struggle is not so huge. Life goes on with the memories and experience of knowing what was once had. One starts looking toward the future.

• **Physical Symptoms** like headaches, feeling sick in the stomach, aching muscles, feeling run down, trouble sleeping, feeling tired, having no energy. Young people might find they get sick more easily.

These feelings can happen at any time and for any length of time. Your young person might have more than one at once. They may feel really good one day and awful the next. Special times like Christmas, birthdays or anniversaries can be difficult. Young people may return to a feeling and go through it again. Sometimes it can feel worse in the morning, or as they are about to go to sleep. Sometimes they may wonder if they will ever feel 'normal' again.

**How can I ‘fix’ the pain associated with my young person’s grief?**

It’s difficult to bear witness to the pain of children and young people. This means that as bystanders, we may want to take away or fix the pain of those who are grieving. Don’t try to ‘fix’ the pain associated with the grief. This can manifest itself by avoiding talking about the loss or the person who has died, modifying information about their death, or trying to accelerate the adolescent through their grief. While these responses may ease the discomfort of the carer, they can result in the adolescent concealing their grief, withdrawing from loved ones, or expressing their feelings in destructive ways.
Strategy – Talk about the loss

Invite the adolescent to talk about their loss and / or the person who has died. Should the adolescent not want to talk, respect their choice to do so. Ask specific questions and answer their questions honestly and clearly. Don’t tell half-truths, and if you don’t know the answer to something, say so. Share your memories, thoughts, and beliefs with the adolescent without pressuring them to adopt your perspective. If the young person does not wish to discuss it with you, leave the subject alone for a while but allow them to open up at another time if the opportunity and need arises.

Grief does not proceed in orderly, predictable stages.

Young people grieve in doses. That is, they often break grief up into bearable amounts and these can manifest in intense outbursts. It’s likely that they will experience a multitude of emotions that may come and go in waves. While they can seem out of character and unpredictable, this is a common response to grief. These responses can be heightened at milestones in the person’s life when they may feel the absence of the person more acutely.

Strategy – Allow for adjustment, but be aware of the danger signs

Because grief is not linear or forward moving, carers need to understand the range of emotions that can surface for the grieving adolescent. Allow teenagers some leeway as they adjust to their loss, while providing a secure, consistent environment. For example, young people will often want to be around their peers and will choose this over their family. Allow this space but also be there when you are needed. Where able, maintain routines. Be aware of danger signs such as chronic depression, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, or dramatic changes in personality and seek professional support when necessary.

Consider the nature and centrality of the loss.

The more sudden or unexpected the nature of the death, the more likely the adolescent is to mourn in doses, holding back the pain at first. The more significant or central the role the person had in their life, the deeper the loss and mourning will be.

Strategy – Do things together

Set aside your thoughts and feelings while you try to consider the young person’s experience of the world through their eyes. Think about the nature of the loss, and closeness of the relationship the adolescent shared with the person for whom they are grieving. Acknowledge the depth of their loss. Set aside your time, attention, and availability for the adolescent.

Model healthy grief.

Like all of us, adolescents learn from the behaviour they sense and observe. Therefore, they pick up on implicit and explicit messages about how to grieve from those around them. How those around them grieve can often be an indicative of how they feel they should behave, or are expected to behave.
**Strategy – Mourn together**

Be aware of the messages adolescents may be receiving from those around them about how to grieve. The more adolescents observe healthy communication and the appropriate expression of the many feelings associated with loss, the more likely adolescents will understand and accept the breadth of emotions they may feel. Educate others about the needs of grieving adolescents but don’t teach young people how to grieve; let the young person show you how they grieve.

**Ways of encouraging young people to help themselves**

**Privately and Personally**

At times young people may prefer to keep thoughts and feelings to themselves. Encouraging them to do some of the following activities alone might be useful in assisting them process their grief.

- Keep a diary or journal
- Create a memorial – do or make something to honour your loved one or friend
- Develop rituals – light a candle, listen to special music, say a prayer, make a special place to think
- Encourage them to express thoughts and feelings privately. Write a letter or poem, draw, collect photos, cry...
- Exercise – do something to use pent up energy, walk, swim, cycle, run
- Draw on religious and spiritual beliefs
- Read about other people’s experiences
- Do things that are relaxing and soothing (e.g meditation, distractions, relaxation, breathing exercises etc)

**Some important reminders**

- At a time when you are experiencing your own grief at the death of someone close, it can seem overwhelming to offer support to your child or children. Acknowledge when you are in need of support and care from others.
- Remember that super parents don’t exist. Just do what you can, when you can. Be gentle on yourself
- There is more than one way to support your children. Choose the things that you feel most comfortable choosing
• Accept that some things just can’t be ‘made better’ in a short space of time

• Show young people how you are feeling: It helps to know that it is ok to show their feelings too.

• Answer questions openly and honestly and simply; and be willing to say “I don’t know”

• Trust yourself and your instincts – you haven’t forgotten how to parent your child

• Look after yourself too.

**Useful numbers and websites**

Lifeline Telephone Counselling 13 11 14
Beyond Blue Info Line 1300 22 4636
Headspace Hobart (03) 6231 2927
Bereavement Information & Referral Service 1300 664 786
Kids Helpline | Phone Counselling Service | 1800 55 1800

[www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)
[www.beyondblue.com](http://www.beyondblue.com)
[www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)
[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)
[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

**Other useful contacts:**

General Practitioner (GP) / Family Doctor
Parish Priest or Church Leader
A counsellor, social worker or psychologist
For more information please contact a College Counsellor

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