



Psychology
for Flourishing

Resources

Loss, Bereavement & Critical Incidents

The death of a loved one, a friend or teacher is something that many children and young people encounter. Some may experience the death of a person involving a traumatic incident such as an accident or suicide.

It can be difficult for the adults around the child/young person to know how best to help. This resource offers some advice to support older children through these difficult times. This is based on the work of the Bereavement & Critical Incident Team, Telford & Wrekin & Shropshire County Council Educational Psychology Service.



Loss, Bereavement & Critical Incidents

Listen sympathetically

The young person will need access to a familiar, trusted adult(s) who are able to support them to talk about what has happened and how they feel.

Directly acknowledge the young person's loss

This way, the young person knows that you are aware of what has happened. It also gives him/her permission to talk about his/her grief.

Quickly supply accurate information about what has happened

This will help to dispel rumours. Answer questions honestly, this includes saying “you don't know” if you don't. What young people are not told, they will imagine, which could be much worse. They will also try to find out from friends or others.



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Do not feel that you cannot reveal your own feelings in front of the young person

Young people can be self-conscious about expressing their feelings. It is likely to be helpful for him/her to see that it is normal to be upset by death and that there is nothing embarrassing about crying or showing emotion.

Remember that this may be the young person's first experience of death

Young people will look to the adults around them as a guide as to how they should behave.

Be mindful of those young people who may be particularly vulnerable

Remember those young people may have had difficult experiences of their own that the current event may bring back to the surface.



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Support the young person to express grief whilst maintaining usual structure and routine

This will provide some sense of normality and security. A balance is needed between modelling emotionally healthy ways of dealing with what has happened and offering security by maintaining familiar routines.

Adjust your expectations around the young person's academic performance

The quality and quantity of work may be reduced for quite some time. Make allowances and if needed notify exam boards. Ask the young person about whether to record what has happened in his/her school records so that information is available for other schools/colleges as appropriate.



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Liaise with the young person around possible contributions to memorials

Adolescents may find it helpful to generate ideas for a memorial and/or to contribute to a memorial service. With permission from the family, they may like to help to organise a collection.

If a young person has witnessed a traumatic event

A traumatic event is one where an unexpected death has occurred, or where a person has been afraid they may die.

Reactions are likely to be strongest in those closest to the incident (i.e. were directly involved, directly witnessed the aftermath and/or were involved in the immediate care of victims).



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Common reactions to traumatic events

The following responses are normal and to be expected in the first few weeks:

- Emotional reactions such as feeling afraid, sad, horrified, helpless, overwhelmed, angry, confused, numb or disorientated
- Distressing thoughts and images that just pop into your head
- Nightmares
- Disturbed sleep or insomnia
- Feeling anxious
- Low mood

These responses are the mind's way of trying to make sense of, and come to terms with, what has happened. These reactions should subside over time.



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Support the young person to cope

- The most helpful way is for the young person to be with those he/she feels close to and normally spend time with.
- It can be helpful for some people to talk to someone they feel comfortable with.
- The young person should be allowed to talk as much as he/she feels is helpful and at his/her own pace.
- Support the young person to take the time needed to grieve and cry if he/she need to. Letting feelings out is helpful in the long run.
- Encourage the young person to seek emotional and practical support if needed (e.g. from friends, family members, the community or religious groups).



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- Continuing with everyday routines and habits can be helpful. Support the person to continue with every day self-care such as eating, sleeping, exercising and relaxing.
- Encourage the young person to some time doing something that he/she enjoys.
- Let the young person know that you understand their feelings.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Try to keep them from seeing too much of the frightening pictures of the event.



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Seek more help if needed

Many people recover naturally from these events and professional psychological help is not usually needed or recommended. However, some people may need additional support; young children, people who have had other traumatic events happen to them and people with emotional health difficulties may be more vulnerable. It would be advisable to seek further advice and support, if after one month, the person is experiencing the following:

- Feeling upset and fearful most of the time
- Acting very differently to before the trauma
- Not being able to resume typical daily activities such as school work and self-care



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- Worsening relationship difficulties
- Feeling very jumpy
- Finding it difficult to stop thinking about the event
- Not being able to experience any enjoyment at all

Other sources of help

Young Minds: Death and Loss

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families: Self-Care

Winston's Wish: Hope Beyond the Headlines

Winston's Wish: Beyond the Rough Rock





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