

# R6

## CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING AND REACTION TO DEATH ACCORDING TO AGE

(This may be used with various groups and individuals)

Children's understanding and reaction to death will depend on their age and their developmental stage. The following are guides only as children will differ in their reactions and grasp of events for a range of reasons other than age alone.

### AGES 0-2 YEARS

- Infants do not understand the meaning of death
- They may display anxiety when separated from a loved one
- They may appear upset, subdued and uninterested in their surroundings.

### AGES 2-5 YEARS

- No understanding of the permanency of death
- May search for the missing person from a loved one
- May feel responsible for the death in some way
- May become apathetic and depressed
- May regress to an earlier stage of development e.g. thumb sucking, bedwetting, tantrums or may become clingy
- May develop fears of going to sleep
- May worry that other loved ones may die.

### — HOW YOU CAN HELP -----

- **Continuity of normal routine e.g. mealtimes and bedtime**
- **Offer physical comfort**
- **Explain the death in clear, simple language, using words like "dead" and "died" - Do not use terms like "gone to sleep" or "passed away"**
- **You may need to repeat the same information again and again**
- **Permit them to ask questions and be consistent in your answers**
- **Reassure them that they had nothing to do with the death and of the wellbeing of other family members.**

### AGES 5-9 YEARS

- Beginning to realise the permanency of death, but their idea of life after death is still vague
- May have concerns about how the deceased is feeling or what he/she is thinking in the grave
- May have a lot of questions about aspects of the death e.g. how the person died, what they looked like, the funeral, heaven, coffins
- The reaction of their peers is important, they may feel 'different' to them
- Their peers may be awkward about the death and avoid contact
- They may become the target of bullying.

### - HOW YOU CAN HELP

**Encourage the child to talk and cry about the deceased if they wish to, otherwise respect their silence**

**Answer questions and provide as much factual information about the death as possible**

**Reassure them that thinking and feeling ceases after death Be vigilant in relation to bullying.**

## AGES 9- 12 YEARS

- Understand the finality and universality of death
- Awareness of their own mortality and may worry about their own death
- May display psychosomatic symptoms i.e. physical complaints like tummy aches
- May wish to stay at home close to parents
- May display anger.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP -----

- **Dispel fears about their own health or the health of other loved ones by offering reassurance**
- **Encourage them to go to school**
- **Allow them to express their anger, offering appropriate ways to do so.**

## ADOLESCENTS

- Fully understand the finality, universality and inevitability of death. Their experience of death is similar to adults
- May have a range of feelings: guilt, regret, anger, loneliness etc.
- Death adds to the already confused array of emotions experienced by adolescents
- May appear to not care about the death
- May seek support outside of the family.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP -----

- ◆ **Offer them time to listen**
- ◆ **Allow them to express their grief in their own way**
- ◆ **Be prepared for mood swings**
- ◆ **Don't feel left out if they seem to value their friends more than their parents**
- ◆ **Children's use of social media should be monitored and supported by parents.**

If parents are grieving themselves, they may be emotionally unable to support their other children. In this instance, another supportive adult in the child's life, e.g. other family members, friends, neighbours may need to offer emotional support.

It should be remembered that for children with special educational needs, their understanding of what has happened will be in line with their developmental age.

# R 7

## STAGES OF GRIEF

(This may be used with various groups and individuals)

Grief is a normal, healthy and predictable response to loss. Although there are distinct phases in the grieving process, people go through these stages in different sequences and at different paces. Generally the grieving process in adults is

thought to take about two years, while with children and adolescents it may be over a more extended time-frame with different issues arising as they go through developmental milestones.

### **Denial, numbness, shock (up to 6 weeks)**

- Death of the person may be denied
- Emerging feelings may be suppressed
- Refusal to talk about the death
- Bereaved keeps very busy to avoid thinking about the death
- Bereaved may show signs of confusion and forget everyday routines
- Children in shock may display either silent withdrawal or outbursts of crying.

### **Acute grief/searching and longing for deceased (6 weeks to 4 months)**

- Acute sadness - crying
- Physical pangs of pain including loss of appetite and disturbed sleep
- Emotional pain accompanied by dejection, hopelessness, lack of concentration
- Fears of life after death, nightmares, ghosts
- Disorganisation
- Strong guilt feelings and questioning of self and others, particularly in the case of a sudden death
- Feelings of anger at the departed for leaving them
- Bereaved may reject offers to comfort them.

### **Adaptation to life without the deceased (6 months to 18 months)**

- People begin to adjust to their lives without the person who is gone
- Sense of isolation
- Fearful of forgetting the deceased
- Less crying and irritability
- Exacerbation of existing personality problems. Children with low self-esteem may be at a greater risk of emotional/behavioural difficulties.

### **Normalisation of life**

- Getting on with life
- Returned sense of humour and play
- Able to participate emotionally in new relationships
- Changed relationship with the deceased - able to think of the deceased without pain
- Reduction in physical/emotional symptoms
- No more guilt.

# R8

## **HOW TO COPE WHEN SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENS**

Reach out - people do care

Talk to your friends, family and teachers - talking is the most healing medicine

Remember you are normal and having normal reactions - don't label yourself as crazy or mad

It is acceptable to cry

It is acceptable to smile

If your feelings and reactions seem different from those of your friends, remember everyone reacts differently

When the stress level is high there is a temptation to try to numb the feelings perhaps with alcohol and drugs, this complicates matters rather than bringing relief

Some people find that writing or drawing is helpful. What about writing a note or letter to the family of the person who died or the person themselves?

Spend time with people who have a positive influence on you

Make as many daily decisions as possible. This will give you a feeling of control over your life, e.g. if someone asks you what you want to eat - answer them, even if you're not sure

Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal - don't try to fight them - they'll decrease over time and become less painful

Make a special effort to take care of yourself during this time. Try to get some extra sleep, eat nutritious foods and get some exercise, even if it is just a walk

Sticking to your "normal" routine helps. Structure your time - keep busy Take time out - go for a cycle or kick a

football

Provide some balance to the negative things that have gone on by doing something special or fun for yourself. Think about something that makes you feel good. Then make it happen - like going to the cinema, listening to music, calling a friend, etc. Laughter is good medicine. Watch a funny movie or play a silly game with younger children to lighten your spirits

Use of social media can help but do not rely on it as your only source of support Useful websites:

**[www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie);[www.youth.ie](http://www.youth.ie);[www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)**

Above all, realise that what you are experiencing is normal following a traumatic event. Be understanding of yourself and others.

# R9

## REACTIONS TO A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Following the recent sad event, you may now be experiencing some strong emotional or physical reactions. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to feel but here is a list of difficulties that people sometimes experience following such an event.

### FEELINGS

Fear  
Guilt  
Shame  
  
Regret  
Anger  
  
Tearfulness  
  
Loneliness  
Anxiety

Insecurity  
Mood swings  
Shock  
  
Yearning  
Numbness  
  
Confusion  
  
Isolation

### BEHAVIOURAL

Nightmares  
Social withdrawal  
Over reliance on use of social media  
  
Irritability  
Loss of concentration/forgetfulness  
Physical/Verbal aggression  
  
Missue of drugs, including alcohol

### THOUGHTS

Tiredness  
Sleeplessness  
Headaches  
Stomach problems - Bowel/Bladder  
problems  
Loss or increase in appetite

Disbelief  
Denial  
Sense of unreality  
Preoccupation with images of the  
event/person