

Southwark Educational Psychology Service

Loss and bereavement during Covid 19

This document has been written within the context of the corona virus pandemic and is intended to supplement the existing Southwark Educational Psychology Service critical incident response protocols.

The Covid 19 pandemic is an unprecedented and highly unusual situation, affecting our everyday lives. Individuals will be affected and respond differently to the current circumstances but it is likely that uncertainty and increased stressors, including loss and bereavement, will impact us all.

It remains the case that most people will not require professional counselling or other services to cope with life stressors. Many who experience loss will also experience a period of heightened anxiety. However, the supportive measures ordinarily available and recommended are now more restricted, such as meeting up with friends and family or offering practical help. The closure of schools, social distancing measures, increased isolation and the impact of altered living/working arrangements are just some of the challenges affecting children, their families and the wider community.

The following information has been developed to guide adults in supporting children and young people who have experienced loss and bereavement. It also includes information to support adults who may themselves be grieving whilst caring for children.

Free support and advice from a range of services can be accessed online or via telephone consultation. Online resources can be found at the end of this document.

For further advice please contact Southwark Educational Psychology Service (EPS) via your link EP or on 020 7525 5798 or by email SEN-EducationalPsychologist&EHO@southwark.gov.uk

This document has been compiled by Southwark Educational Psychology Service based on multiple sources, including British Psychological Society publications, ELSA materials and with acknowledgements to Educational Psychology services nationally for sharing resources.

Principles for supporting bereaved children

- Grief is a normal reaction to loss & bereavement
- Experience of loss is unique, so consider the young person's perspective
- Also consider the child's age and understanding of what has happened
- Most children will not require professional grief counselling. Normally what is needed is the support of family, friends and the school community. This may need to be accessed in more creative ways during the time in which measures are in place to combat the Covid19 pandemic

Talking with bereaved children

- Don't brush questions or conversation aside.
- Apply the Goldilocks Principle i.e. tell the child what they want to know, not too much and not too little.
- Use language that the child can understand.
- Avoid being shocked by blunt enquiry. You may be asked some blunt questions about what happens to the body. This is not callous, but based on a need to understand.
- Be sensitive to differing spiritual beliefs. Phrases like, 'some people believe that...' can be useful.

Responses to grief and loss

Responses are very individual and often it is not helpful to make comparisons between children or with your own feelings. However, it is common for children to show changes in their behaviour as a normal part of grieving. Look out for

- Increased emotionality and irritability.
- Social withdrawal, school refusal, friendship difficulties – in the current context this might be more difficult to observe but could include children avoiding social contact online, not engaging with home-school opportunities or isolating themselves further within their own household (the key point is about change to usual behaviour, albeit in the present unusual circumstances)
- Sleep difficulties.
- Headaches, stomach aches.
- Reduced concentration & attainment.
- Fear of being alone/separating from parent.
- Anxiety re: safety of self/others.
- Developmental regression (e.g. thumb sucking, bed wetting, seeking out teddies or other comforters).

If a child is still struggling after about one month then consider seeking professional advice and support. The period of 'watchful waiting' is a helpful guide but may need to be adjusted for children with additional vulnerabilities.

Activities to support bereaved children

The need to 'do' something can be a helpful way to support the grieving process. Engaging in a practical activity gives the opportunity to talk, without requiring the youngster to do so until they are ready. Activities could include:

- Looking at photos
- A balloon release
- Stories about loss
- DVDs and videos
- Lighting a candle
- Saying a prayer
- Writing letters and poems
- Drawing pictures
- Making a display e.g. photos and paper flowers
- A memorial (for example, planting a tree)
- Memory box
- Listening to the pupils and checking their understanding

Children with special educational needs may need extra help with their understanding and ways to express feelings. Please contact Southwark EPS for advice if needed.

There are also a number of charities and support networks who offer educational packs and guidance on helping pupils, including those with learning difficulties, to cope with bereavement (please refer to list of resources on page 5).

Supporting bereaved children back to school (if attending during the pandemic)

Advice may need to be adapted according to evolving circumstances, such as potential daily changes in peer & staff groups in school, children possibly attending an emergency hub less familiar to the child etc. Where possible, a trusted, familiar adult would support the child's reintegration to school.

- Talk to the family and child, if age appropriate, to see what s/he would like to happen when they return to school.
- Talk to the child's current peers attending school about how people are affected by grief and encourage them to share their own feelings. Ask about how they have coped with bereavement in their own lives and what has helped.
- Discuss how difficult it may be for the bereaved pupil to come back to school. Ask how they would like to be treated if they were returning to school after a death. Acknowledge that people will have different preferences as to how they are treated. Some people may want to discuss what has happened, while others may want to be left alone. In general bereaved students say that they would like others to treat them as before rather than being 'over-nice' to them. However, it is a delicate balance as they don't want people to behave as if nothing has happened at all.

- Allow them access to a 'quiet room' where he/she can go to be alone and agree a way to communicate this (e.g. signal or exit card).
- When they return, acknowledge their loss "I'm sorry that (name of deceased) died. I know that you are sad. It is ok to cry".
- Please refer to activities above to support the child.

Looking after yourself and each other

Experiencing intense emotions and high levels of stress can make it difficult to think straight. Everyday thinking skills are affected, like being able to plan, prioritise and make decisions. Seemingly minor or illogical issues may be overwhelming. Concentration and memory are often compromised. Many of the behaviour changes listed above are applicable to adults as well as children. This is normal.

Those staff in direct contact with bereaved families will need support around them to debrief and process their own feelings. In particular, Headteachers will be holding and containing levels of anxiety from across different parts of the school community, and will need to think about where they get their own emotional support. This is all the more challenging if a number of staff are supporting others whilst also grieving themselves.

It is important for adults to look after their own mental health and well-being in order to support others effectively. In-flight safety advice is to 'put on your own oxygen mask first before helping others'. This is just as relevant for mental health. You may find the following helpful:

- Be active - get some fresh air or sunlight each day - even opening a window can help
- Do some exercise around the house if you are able
- Keep to a regular routine of getting up and dressed and eating meals at the usual time, whether you are on your own or part of a family group
- When you have more energy, you could find some jobs to do around the house or garden (if you have one). It is normal to move between intense grieving and looking to the future after someone dies, and there may be some things you can achieve even if you cannot go out
- Isolation can make the grieving process harder so connect with friends and family by whatever means are available to you – telephone, skype, face time
- If you are struggling then try not to feel guilty but instead ask for support. Seek practical help from friends, family or neighbours
- Reach out to others who might be finding it difficult too, you may be able to help each other
- Avoid setting unrealistic goals about what you can do under exceptional circumstances, especially if you are working at home and caring for young children

It can be difficult to know what to say when others are bereaved. Often talking helps but be guided by individual wishes. The important thing is to stay in contact and let others know you are thinking of them.

Resources

Grief Encounter

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/>

Support for bereaved children and their families

Child Bereavement UK

<https://childbereavementuk.org/>

Support for families when a child dies. There is also information for schools.

Resources to equip pupils with coping skills for bereavement, now and in later life

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/pages/category/elephants-tea-party>

Winston's Wish

<https://www.winstonswish.org/>

Support for children and young people after the death of a parent or sibling

[How schools can support children and young people](#)

[How to tell a child or young person that someone has died from coronavirus](#)

[How to say goodbye when a funeral isn't possible](#)

CRUSE

<https://www.cruse.org.uk>

Support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies.

There's a section for schools <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-schools>

Candle Project

<https://www.stchristophers.org.uk>

Compassionate Friends

www.tcf.org.uk

NCSCB Guidelines for responding to the death of a student of school staff

<https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/ncscb-guidelines-responding-death-student-or-school-staff.pdf>

NEPS Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/National-Educational-Psychological-Service-NEPS-/Critical-Incidents.html>

Other resources

<https://www.samaritans.org/>

[https://papyrus-uk.org/-for those affected by suicide](https://papyrus-uk.org/-for-those-affected-by-suicide)

