

Guidance for School Staff during COVID-19 Supporting Pupils Experiencing Loss and Bereavement

Pupils are likely to be experiencing lots of different losses during the covid-19 outbreak including loss of how life was before lockdown, the loss of being able to physically contact family, friends (or even school staff!) and loss of expected experiences such as the ending of a school year. Sadly, many pupils will also have experienced bereavement. This Covid context will significantly impact on their bereavement.

The process of grief can leave pupils feeling a range of emotions including numbness, denial, sadness, anger, guilt and anxiety. Young people seem to express grief in a different way to adults, often moving through different emotions and reactions very quickly and experiencing many of them all in one day. This is sometimes referred to as 'puddle jumping'. Whereas adults may wade through 'rivers of grief' or become stuck in 'oceans of distress', it is natural for children to be extremely upset one minute and then wanting to know what is for tea the next. It is overwhelming and confusing for them to sit with that level of distress for too long so they need distraction.

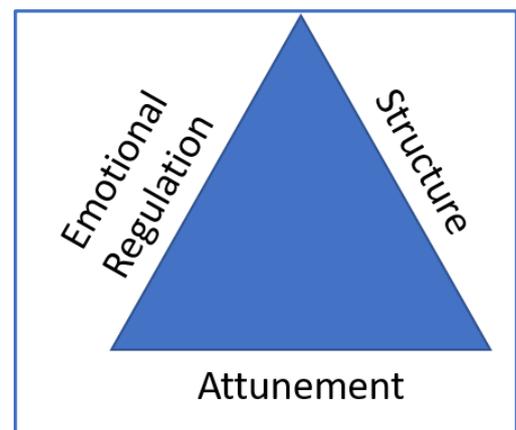
Healthy Minds Framework

When supporting a pupil who has experienced bereavement, it is important to ensure that the pupil has a good balance of all 3 elements of the Healthy Minds framework:

Structure – ensure that you try to maintain some sort of structure, predictability, routine and familiarity for the student as this will help to offer some containment

Attunement – remembering that having healthy, attuned relationships with others is a major protective factor when someone is experiencing grief or loss

Emotional regulation – when life suddenly becomes quite unpredictable, it can put many pressures on our emotional ability and ability to cope. Giving pupils the opportunity to offload and teaching them strategies to regulate can support them to get back into their thinking brain



Strategies for supporting pupils

- **You do not need to be an expert to provide effective help** – the relationship is the most important part! Although it can be incredibly difficult to bear, children need to go through a process of bereavement which means that they will experience lots of difficult emotions. At this time, it is not usually specialist help that is needed, but support from the child's system around them. It is only much further down the line if a child is struggling to adjust and it is impacting on their functioning that we may think about whether specialist services are needed.
- **Acknowledge what has happened and how the child is feeling** - it is ok to talk about the person who has died. Help the child understand that what they are feeling is to be expected. Truly listen and acknowledge how the pupil is feeling - hold back any temptation to rush in and fix problems or reassure.
- **Use clear language** – as well as it being OK to talk about the person who has died, use clear language for example use the word 'death' rather than phrases such as 'loss' or 'gone to a better place'.
- **Difficult questions** - if you are faced with a difficult question, rather than answering straight away, ask the child/parent what they think.
- **Check out the facts** - talk to the family about how they are addressing the situation with the child and make sure that what you say will not conflict with the family's wishes.
- **Keep connected** - offer scheduled points of contact with a member of school staff that the child has a relationship with. For pupils who are known to be vulnerable, offer additional opportunities to check in with a key member of staff and keep in touch with parents and carers especially if you are concerned about their child. Recognise the times they do not want to talk, as well as the times they do.
- **Puddle Jumping** – Children may feel overwhelmed at unexpected times. If you see a child looking lost, alone, struggling to concentrate or becoming agitated it could be that the wave/tsunami of grief is starting to pull them in. Help the child to go somewhere quiet with a trusted adult (where possible) where they feel safe to cry if they need to.
- **Keep an open mind** – they might be feeling upset or frustrated due to other reasons. They may have normal day to day concerns that can easily be resolved or they may be struggling with more complex concerns which are due to the impact of the loss including parental mental health issues, financial concerns on the family, alcohol or substance misuse, feeling out of step with friends, people being awkward around them.

- **Make a plan with the pupil** – ask the pupil what they may need to help them to cope with their grief whilst they are in school. It may be that having a safe place that the pupil can retreat to in school will be helpful or for older pupils, it may be that it is helpful for them to leave lessons early or to attend for shorter days.
- **Give pupils an item that offers them comfort** – suggest that the pupil brings an item in from home that they can carry in their pocket that they may find soothing, such as a piece of fabric, a stone or a small toy.
- **Provide opportunities for the pupil to communicate how they are feeling in school** - for pupils who may struggle to verbalise how they are feeling, it may be useful to give them a diary to fill in whenever they need to that they can share with you at an agreed time in the day. Or for younger pupils, you could use a paper plate to create emotion faces by drawing a face that depicts 'feeling sad' on one side and a face that depicts 'feeling ok' on the other side for pupils to use as a means of signalling that they are struggling.
- **Be proactive and arrange regular check-ins even if things seem OK** – even if someone seems to be coping, it means a lot to still have a regular check in with them, even if just for 5 minutes. Knowing that someone is thinking of them is very important in the grief journey.
- **Think ahead re trigger points**– it is not always possible but try to hold in mind that some pieces of work/topics may trigger strong emotions for the pupil. For older pupils, it may be worth asking them what may be difficult so that you can think about whether a pupil may need to be warned in advance about certain topics/areas covered in school.
- **Supporting the pupil's peer group:** Let the pupil know that it might be helpful if their peer group knew more about what was going on for them and if they agree then plan a time when they can talk about it in a small group where you facilitate a conversation so the pupil can let their peer group know what support they would like. Check in with the peer group too to see if they need any further support
- **Talking to and supporting peers**
 - It can be sad to see your friend so upset, but by just listening to them you are really helping them to feel better
 - Your friend might want to talk about the person that died. Even if you didn't know them it will help if you can listen and let your friend tell you about their memories. These memories might be happy as well as sad.
 - It may seem that your friend doesn't want to join in the same way that they used to. That's ok. You can just support them by letting them know that however they want to join in is ok.
 - Make sure that those children who are supporting their peer also have someone they can talk to. It can be a lot for one child (or group) to manage and contain between them

- **Understanding the wider impact of bereavement on the child** - It could be an opportunity for some whole schoolwork, as grief and bereavement will be affecting a lot of children and staff in a lot of ways.
- **Share your own feelings with colleagues and friends if needed** – supporting a bereaved child can be incredibly difficult and it may bring up lots of difficult emotions for you that can be hard to contain. It may also be that you have experienced a recent bereavement, or you are reminded of a past bereavement. It is perfectly normal to experience a strong emotional reaction when supporting bereaved pupils, however it is important to prioritise your own wellbeing so that you are able to help others.
- **Professional boundaries** – it is inevitable that there may be times when you become over-involved when supporting a bereaved child. However, it is important that you notice and are able to acknowledge when this is happening and that you talk to a trusted colleague.
- **Gather information on resources and organisations** – there are many resources and support mechanisms out there, especially related to supporting others during the COVID-19 outbreak
- **Support colleagues** – try to organise an opportunity for staff to come together to discuss their shared experience of supporting pupil bereavement and allow opportunity for mutual support and reflection.

When a child needs more support

There are no limits to how long grieving should last or what it should look like, however most children will go through a process that leads to them adjusting to life without the person that they have lost. However, a small number of children may struggle to cope with the emotional impact of their grief and possibly develop unhelpful ways to cope that may mean that they may need a little more support.

Children that develop a prolonged reduced interest in daily activities, appear withdrawn, are not sleeping or eating or have started to engage in behaviours such as self-harm or are getting into lots of fights may be a cause to worry. If you do become concerned about a pupil in your school, please speak to your school designated safeguarding lead and/or your school designated mental health lead who will be able to advise further action and make contact with the pupil's family.

Recommended links

- ▶ <https://www.cruse.org.uk/schools>
- ▶ <https://www.winstonswish.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ww-0163-schools-info-pack.pdf>
- ▶ <https://childbereavementuk.org/for-schools/>
- ▶ <http://hopeagain.org.uk/hope-again-talking-about-it/>
- ▶ <https://www.samaritans.org/deal>
- ▶ [Young Minds](#) Supporting your child with Grief and Loss

Helplines

- ▶ **The Listening Ear – 0800 048 5224 Monday to Friday 110am – 5pm is a regional service**
- ▶ [Child Bereavement UK](#) - 0800 028 8840 Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm
- ▶ [Hope Again](#) - 0808 808 1677 Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 5pm
- ▶ [Winston's Wish](#) - 0808 802 0021 Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm