

Bereavement and Loss

Grief is a natural response to the death or loss of someone close.

Children can experience feelings of loss due to family breakdown (e.g separation from families due to divorce, care proceedings or through parents going to prison) or due to the death of someone close to them (including extended family, siblings, parents/cares and also pets).

Some children experience multiple losses and bereavements. Everyone will experience grief in a unique and individual way.

It is, of course, a fundamental loss and adjustment for any child to lose someone or something important to them – particularly a close family member. But with the right support most children will be able to find a way to move forward. There are no limits about how long grieving should last and what it should consist of; it is a process that everyone goes through while they adjust and begin to cope with life without the person who they have lost or who has died.

But, if a bereaved child struggles to cope with the emotional impact of their grief or feels unable to move forward, they can become 'stuck'. This is sometimes known as complicated or chronic grief. When children get stuck, this can result in them developing negative ways to cope with their thoughts and feelings about loss. It can also predispose them to mental health problems if unsupported.

Spotting the signs of complex grief

Children's feelings of loss and grief can be complicated by a number of factors, including:

- The relationship they had with the person who has died. Complicated grief is more likely to occur if the person was the child's parent, sibling or best friend.
- The circumstances of the death. Particularly if it is sudden and unexpected or as a result of suicide or violence.
- If they have experienced several losses in a short period of time.
- How resourceful or resilient a child is and whether they have good coping skills.
- If they have a lack of access to appropriate support systems and networks, or if a child is poor or exposed to substance abuse, domestic violence etc.

Find out more about loss and grief

MindEd is a free educational e-learning resource for professionals on children and young people's mental health. This session aim to help staff better understand how grief impacts on children and young people's mental health:

- Loss and grief: looks at the loss of parents or others by death or separation/divorce.

Top Tips:

- **Communicate with the family to make sure what you say doesn't conflict with their wishes.**
- **Don't move too fast.**
- **It may be many months before a bereaved child can fully cope with school work pressures. Remember that the loss will always be with them.**
- **Encourage others to support.**
- **Explain to other pupils how the bereaved child may be feeling and encourage them to be supportive.**

Resources from Anna Freud.

For more information, please see: www.annafreud.org – bereavement & loss.