

# EVERYDAY LEARNING ABOUT GRIEF AND LOSS AND CHILDREN

All unexpected change causes stress. When this change is significant, and lasts more than a week, it becomes distress and involves a sense of loss.

Distress impacts deeply on several levels and children are particularly vulnerable to its damaging effects. Death, social dislocation, prolonged absence of loved ones and unexpected change that lasts causes stress to children.

## Preparing children for loss

- Avoid over protecting children from uncomfortable real-life experiences
- Learn how to reassure individual children
- Learn what soothers work for each child
- Read stories to children that show about loss, death and recovery
- Have pets that tend to die – build a pathway of expectation
- Use real words around death not “going to sleep” or “passing over”
- Have conversations about sad events that happen in children’s films
- Create an expectation that when everyone (including pets) dies they continue in some form, somewhere special

## When a significant loss or death occurs

*“The difficulty when a death occurs in a family is that all the key players in a child’s life are all struggling to meet their own needs at a very difficult time.”*

- Children need lots of rest, sleep and good nutrition
- Ensure comforting and soothing mechanisms are always with them
- Perhaps get a new soft toy as a special soother
- Keep them informed, however, be mindful of exact details if potentially confronting – share age-appropriate information
- Surround home with people who are part of child’s inner circle
- Consider the “bunk down” option in the early stage of a crisis
- Amid the tears and the angst, keep things happening as close to normal routines
- Safe, soothing touch and distraction with favourite games and DVDs can help young children
- Avoid taking them away from key carers during the first week
- Try to allow rather than squash down emotions
- Children like to be able to help – prepare food, make drinks
- Be aware of separation anxiety returning – and the same symptoms can return from bedwetting, being clingy, being easily upset

- Suppressed emotion can come out as inappropriate behaviour, tantrums, fighting, “freezing” or “numbing”
- Shock can cause a child to split from their body...
- Irrational fears can frighten young children – who else may die or leave?
- Without reassurance, children can develop an oversensitive stress response system
- Only reassurance and soothing can ease the cortisol levels and trigger oxytocins, and other “feel good” endorphins
- Creating time out from the reality of the loss is helpful especially when in nature as play helps to diffuse emotional energy
- Children can blame themselves for painful events
- Emotions shift quickly for young children ... and it may appear inappropriate.

## What helps?

- Soothe babies and toddlers with stroking, sucking, warmth and movement
- Pets can help provide comfort
- Head holding technique
- Magic tapping on fingers
- Magic eye scramble
- NLP hiding traumatic images – framing techniques
- Use of positive pictures/stories/laughter/letter writing/simple prayers
- Sometimes a familiar piece of clothing can comfort
- Plenty of water ... glucose replacement
- Avoid talking too much, asking too many questions, and doing too much
- Watch familiar old favourite films together
- The imagination protects children – stars, rainbows, angels, wishes, magic balloons and butterflies can all be helpful metaphors
- An imaginary safe place ... [magic yellow cloud](#), magic garden, special beach
- Involvement in funeral – letter, gifts, photos, favourite chocolates, games
- Helping make the final journey special ...
- Continue to speak of loved one positively – especially at special family events.

***Time alone is not a healer***

## Suicide – the impact extends well beyond the school grounds

- Family and friendships at other schools
- Community groups including faith communities
- Sporting, dance, music and art groups
- Bus, train commuters
- Social media and online conversations and groups
- Staff wellbeing

### **The losses that can occur after a death by suicide:**

1. Loss of the sibling
2. Loss of a friend or friendship group
3. Loss of a confidante
4. Lots of familiar things – habits, things they used to do and say
5. Motivation
6. Sense of innocence
7. Feeling safe
8. Trust
9. Respect for self and others
10. Laughter and lightness
11. Enthusiasm for the future

### **Some more specific reactions in adolescents that can appear after a suicide:**

- Dwell on and struggle with more questions about the meaning of life, e.g. “Why did they do it?”
- Strong feelings of guilt and shame, e.g. “Why didn’t I prevent it? It’s my fault.”
- Heightened feelings of being abandoned, followed by anger. “How could they do this to me?”

Essentially, those who wish to support adolescents following a suicide need to focus on identifying those young people who have been significantly impacted by grief – to then legitimise and normalise the reactions and responses that can occur.

### **Other things that can help are:**

- **Validation of their grief – reassuring them that everyone grieves in their unique way**
- **Give them an unconditional, non-judgemental safe space to have a voice**
- **Help them build a supportive network of both peers and other (a lighthouse can make a huge difference)**
- **Help them to create ways of securing good memories**
- **Give them opportunities to be messengers of hope**
- **Promote help-seeking behaviours by providing online and telephone support details**
- **Help them work out constructive ways of honouring the deceased person though the arts, nature or digitally.**

**Check out my e-book/book [Death & Loss Through the Eyes of a Teen](#) for more information and support specific to adolescents and loss.**

## Help for teens

**If you need someone to help you feel safe, accepted and heard, please call or visit:**

Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800 or [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

Life Line: 131 11 44 or [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

Suicide Callback Service: 1300 65 94 67 or [www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

**The following sites also have some fantastic information and resources to help teens navigate a range of issues. Some offer email or web counselling and live chat.**

[www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)

[www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)

[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

[www.youthfocus.com.au](http://www.youthfocus.com.au)

## More resources on grief and loss...

**Visit [www.maggiedent.com/common-concerns/death-loss/](http://www.maggiedent.com/common-concerns/death-loss/)**

**Here you will find a range of articles, videos, video blogs, books, audios, interviews and other resources pertaining to grief and loss, including:**

["Death through the eyes of a child"](#) article

[The Magic Yellow Cloud](#) audio track to help children understand and process grief and loss.

[Death and Loss Through the Eyes of a Teen](#) book

Maggie's [video blogs](#) on the subject of death, grief and loss.

This article from Katherine Schafler, a psychotherapist, writer and speaker, published at Thrive Global, is a particularly interesting reflection on: [The One Thing No-one Ever Says About Grieving](#)