



A guide for parents and carers

Are you a parent or carer of a child or young person who is struggling following a bereavement? This guide explains traumatic bereavement and helps you to consider if this is what your child is experiencing.

Typical grief

After someone important to a child or young person dies, they will probably experience many difficult emotions and have some days that feel really bad. Over time, most children and young people learn to adjust and their grief subsides as they learn to live with the loss. They may continue to feel very sad at times, but they begin to have some good moments, or even good days when they can enjoy things and get comfort from their memories of the person who died.

One way to think about a more typical grieving process is to imagine a child or young person stepping in and out of puddles of grief. When they step into a puddle, they remember all the sadness of the death. When they step out of the puddle, they find they can still have some fun and connect with the people around them. The sadness hasn't gone, they are just not in the grieving puddle all the time.

Traumatic bereavement

For some children and young people, the way that they understand or think about a death leaves them feeling very unsafe – they experience their loss as a trauma. The trauma gets in the way of the grieving process and blocks their ability to adjust. This is a traumatic bereavement.

If a child or young person experiences a traumatic bereavement it will be even more difficult for them and their emotions will be overwhelming more of the time. As well as feeling very sad, they might often feel unsafe, angry, worried, guilty or frightened. What happened and how they understand it may be so hard for them to think about that they spend a lot of time and energy trying not to think or talk about it. This can get in the way of doing things they used to enjoy. It might be hard for them to have better days, or even better moments.

Instead of a puddle of grief, traumatic bereavement can feel more like a well and the child or young person is stuck in a deep place with lots of difficult thoughts and feelings. You might notice that they are struggling to get on with people, to manage strong feelings, to cope at school or that they are feeling very low or anxious.

Being stuck with overwhelming and difficult feelings makes everyday life really tough and can impact mental health. It can be hard for children and young people to get out of the 'well' without extra support.

What makes a bereavement traumatic is very individual. It is not because the person died in a particular way or at a particular time. It is what the death means for the individual and how this meaning affects their life. Although everyone in a family might be grieving for the same person, their grief may be very different. While some in the family might need extra support, others might not. It is not your child's fault if they find this especially difficult and need support.

If you are also struggling, you can seek help from services including:

- **Child Bereavement UK**
- **Winston's Wish**
- **Childhood Bereavement Network map of local services**
- **NHS mental health services**
- **Your GP**

Where can I find out more?

If you are worried about your child and feel that they are struggling to manage a lot of the time, you should not try and cope with this on your own.

Look for extra support from a local bereavement service or make an appointment with your child's GP. Ask them to make a referral to NHS mental health services (sometimes known as CAMHS) who can help if the difficulties are impacting on your child's mental health.



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