**When Something Distressing Happens**

***A practical guide for parents and others***

This document has been put together from a variety of sources to provide some straightforward advice for parents and others who may have to support children through distressing experiences such as the loss of a parent, friend ro sibling. It is based on what we know about children’s usual reactions and, although of course every situation and every child is difference, we hope this information will help towards understanding how others have coped in similar situations.

***How people feel***

**Adults**

When something distressing happens everybody is affecting. Grieving children are being looked after by grieving adults. Everybody reacts differently, but there is usually a fairly common succession of feelings that adults have. It takes different amounts of time to work through these stages, and it is very common to feel from time to time as though you are taking one step forward and two steps back!

*Shock, disbelief and denial:* ‘It can’t have happened . . . it’s not true’. People sometimes find themselves acting as though the dead person is still around – laying a place for them at the table, for instance.

*Growing awareness:* waves of sometimes quite savage feelings of anger, depression, guilt, panic and/or anxiety.

*Gradual acceptance:* You never, of course, ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one. But what does happen is that the changed situation gradually becomes the normal situation.

The above summary doesn’t attempt to five any timescales. It is ‘normal’ to go through many of the stages quite quickly and it is also ‘normal’ to spend a long time in any one stage, or to revert to an earlier one. The new life should probably start to settle down after the first anniversary of death – but everybody’s reactions are different.

**Children**

***Understanding death***

Even young babies react to loss. They cannot however understand the difference between a permanent and a temporary loss, and pre-schoolers, having had the death explained, may ask when the dead person is coming back. This can be very distressing. Not until middle childhood (*very* roughly age 7 – 10) do many children understand the permanence of death. Once they do, they may be concerned about a range of issues as well as the actual death: the possibility (whether it is real or otherwise) of moving, losing friends, who will look after them and so on. Teenagers (usually) have an adult understanding of death, but will also have the normal teenage worries and anxieties. Their relationships with friends can be affected, and they may feel the need to try to replace the lost parent or sibling.

Other children or young people are often unsure how to react to a friend who has experienced bereavement and older children or teenagers may try to live up to what they think people expect from them. Showing emotion can often be difficult.

***Common reactions to death***

**Fear:** fear of another death, of being separated, of distressing others by showing their own feelings, fear of dying himself or herself, fear of what they feel may be new responsibilities.

**Guilt:** guilt that the death is a punishment for their misbehaviour, that the death happened because the child did not love the dead person enough, or because at some time they have said that they wished that they were dead, or that they should have done or not done something.

**Anger**: anger that they feel abandoned, helpless, or that someone else is to blame for the situation.

**Confusion:** confusion about what is said about the dead person and their memories of the, confusion about God and religion, about how to respond to their own grief and the grief of others.

Frequently children may respond to these feelings by becoming more babyish, being challenging or argumentative or disinterested. A change in behaviour is normal.

**How can adults help children?**

***Keep things going***

When you yourself are in the early stages of grieving, try to keep as many of the normal routines going as possible. Simple things like mealtimes, bedtime routines, school and so on are all important in helping children to see that life does go on despite it all.

***Allow them to take their minds off it***

If they want to help or be useful, let them – it’s better than just sitting and feeling sad or anxious. If they can from time to time do an activity that allows them to forget or reduce their feeling of grief for a short while, this helps the healing process. It is normal and healthy for people to ‘forget’ their grief for a while – this does not mean that they have forgotten the dead person!

***Be a good listener***

Try not to give advice when your child talks, but try to understand how they are making sense of what has happened. Let them know you are listening to them. Don’t be upset if your child doesn’t want to talk about it at all. Sometimes they will communicate better through play, or by telling how Teddy feels, than directly.

***It’s OK to have feelings***

Sometimes you will want space by yourself to be alone with our feelings, and this can be true for children as well. It’s OK for children to see that adults are upset, and with some children you may want to explain that it is OK for both you and them to cry. Don’t be upset if your teenager doesn’t want to talk to you, but chooses someone else – this is normal.

***Be honest***

Answer questions at the child’s level as honestly as you can. It’s not good to keep secrets. Teachers can often help with suggestions as to how to explain things in a way that children can understand.

***Treatment as usual***

Tragic events can make parents over-protective. This is a natural reaction, but it can make children insecure and lengthen the normal healing process. Try to treat them as you would normally.

**Finally . . .**

Although it doesn’t feel like it at the time, almost all children and adults can live through such events and come through them all right. The feelings of distress do fade as everyone adjusts to what has happened.

It is very common for both adults and children to worry about whether their reactions are ‘normal’. They almost always are – it is the situation that is abnormal. What people experience are **NORMAL REACTIONS TO AN ABNORMAL SITUATION.**

**Further help**

Family and friends are the people who can give the most support at such times. However, external help is available. GPs, priests and schools either have knowledge or have other services they can draw upon. Libraries usually hold phone numbers for voluntary services such as CRUSE Bereavement Care and Compassionate Friends who can offer a listening ear as well as practical advice.