

HELPING A BEREAVED YOUNG PERSON

*This document has been produced by Clyst Vale Community College's
Counselling Service.*

*This is not intended to be a definitive guide, but does hope to provide support to families
with a young person who has suffered a bereavement.*

Bereavement, the death of someone close to us, is one of the most painful events any of us are likely to deal with.

For a young person this can be especially difficult as they may lack the emotional and/or mental ability to process the loss. There is a saying that people handle grief in their own way, meaning it can be difficult at times to understand someone else experiencing grief. Research and theory suggests that there are similarities to people's grieving process, understanding this may help you to support the young person.

THE GRIEVING PROCESS

The following stages of experience make up what is known as the grieving process. There is no way to predict how a young person will journey through the process. Some people will travel faster than others, some may even get stuck at a particular stage. There may be some overlap, and at times people can skip a stage, or return to a stage. Professionals who work with the bereaved say a major loss can take anything from one to two years to process, though young people tend to move more quickly than adults.

SHOCK

This can be experienced as a feeling of numbness. It may seem that everything has been put on 'hold' while our brain and heart try to get a handle on what has happened. Someone in a state of shock may appear to be coping, but in fact they may merely be going through the motions.

SEARCHING

Despite knowing a person has died, searching for them, even believing you have seen the dead person, is not unusual. It seems as a species, we have difficulty letting go. People report hearing the loved one's voice, sensing their smell, hearing them walk up or down stairs in the house, that they've seen them sitting in their favourite chair, and some people have conversations with the deceased before remembering the person has died. This can bring comfort or distress. Let the young person know this is a very common experience. They may need reassuring they are not going mad.

ANGER

A very common stage of grieving is a sense of anger. This may be directed at a person or circumstance, or be more vague and come out in all directions, making the young person seem angry with the world in general. A sense of anger with themselves is also not unusual. The young person may even be angry with the deceased, for letting them down and going away. Help the young person to vent and express their anger at this stage by encouraging them to talk. Once again, let them know this is a very common experience when people grieve and give them permission to be angry.

DEPRESSION

A widely experienced stage of grieving is a period of depression. Often, the greater the importance of the person lost to the young person translates into a longer or deeper period of depression. Depression may manifest as difficulty sleeping, greater irritability, crying, loss of appetite, fatigue or a sense of despair.

Some people may need support or treatment from a doctor and/or a counsellor at this stage.

RESOLUTION

A person grieving reaching this stage usually now has a sense of being more comfortable with their loss. The pain of the loss may now be dull, rather than sharp. They may now be able to enjoy remembering their loved one, and laugh at memories of shared, funny times, as well shed a tear. In order to reach the resolution stage it is thought necessary to travel through the other stages first.

OTHER WAYS OF HELPING

Try not to exclude the young person from any funeral rituals. These rituals can serve an important purpose in helping grieving people recognise the person they love has really died.

In our desire to protect a young person from any further distress, we can try to hide our own grief. This may teach the young person that grieving is somehow wrong, or not to be expressed, which can delay their journey through the grieving process.

Sometimes, setting up an area in the house for your child to hang a picture of the loved one, or burn a candle to them, or provide fresh flowers can be a very therapeutic exercise.

Planting a shrub, or flowers or a fruiting plant like strawberries in your garden, in memory of the loved one, can help the young person feel they are honouring them.

Above all, allow the young person to talk about the deceased when they want to, how they feel and think about them. Remember, they may be feeling angry. Try to allow them to express this.

Remind the student the school provides counselling if they want it.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

One aspect of loss is the need to feel a sense of completion. This process can be blocked if the young person feels there are things still unsaid between them and the deceased, or issues are unresolved.

Perhaps the last time they saw the deceased there was an argument?

This can lead to feelings of guilt and / or anxiety. A counsellor can help someone work through this difficulty.

USEFUL WEBSITES

http://hcd2.bupa.co.uk/fact_sheets/mosby_factsheets/Bereavement.html

<http://www.bereavementsupportcentre.co.uk/the-grieving-process/index.php>

<http://www.rd4u.org.uk/index.html>
(Cruse web site for young people)