Best practice guidance

Supporting families following sudden bereavement

This report highlights research and best practice as presented at a seminar run by Brake through its Sudden initiative in December 2016. This seminar was sponsored by Thompsons Solicitors.

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Brake’s work supporting suddenly bereaved individuals and families

Ellie Pearson, Professional Engagement Manager, Brake, the road safety charity

Brake is an established and respected UK-wide provider of support services to people who have been bereaved or seriously injured in a road crash, as well as the family, friends and professionals supporting them.

Brake’s support is provided via a freephone, quality-accredited telephone helpline, staffed by trained and professionally supervised specialists, and through highly acclaimed support literature, which is updated regularly in consultation with experts and handed to families by police after every fatal road crash in the UK.

We also provide training for professionals, including police family liaison officers.

In addition to support services for victims of road crashes, Brake also operates a project called Sudden. Sudden is a global charitable initiative sharing best practice, research and resources among professionals across the world working with people who are suddenly bereaved. Sudden aims to increase awareness and understanding of the suffering of suddenly bereaved people and their support needs, and does this by offering free e-bulletins for professionals; online guidance and research papers; seminars, training and webinars; and support literature for bereaved children and adults.

For more information, visit suddendeath.org.

Sudden death and the impact on children and families

A sudden death is devastating for children and their families. There is no time to prepare or say goodbye. In many cases the death is violent and horrific, such as when someone dies in a road crash, or takes their own life. In many cases the person who dies is a parent, brother or sister, leaving behind a bereft family.

Children affected by sudden death and injury need loving support and information. It is generally believed to be better to tell children things through honest discussion and involve them in decision making, rather than keeping them in the dark and leaving them excluded in an effort to protect them from the truth.

During the first few days and weeks after someone dies suddenly it is normal to suffer from shock. Children and young people respond to shock in a similar way to adults, but they may express their emotions differently, depending on their developmental stage as well as their experience of dealing with traumatic situations.

All people grieve in different ways at different times. They may cry, get angry, be quiet, be noisy, talk about the person who died, not talk about them, and play or behave as though nothing has happened. They may suddenly switch from one reaction to another. All these reactions – and many more – are normal responses following sudden bereavement.

The types of reactions children may experience include:

- Difficulty comprehending death – depending on the age of the child, it can be hard to understand the finality of death and the fact they will never be able to speak to their loved one again.
- Denial – it’s not uncommon for someone suddenly bereaved to wake in the morning and forget their loved one has died, only to have to remember and re-experience it all over again. This is part of the shock response.
- Shock and physical symptoms – given children’s limited life experience, particularly young children, they are less likely to have experienced shock to this degree, which can make it even more frightening. Feeling cold and shivery, having no appetite, or feeling physically sick are all ‘normal’ responses but can be very distressing and feel very abnormal to a child.
- Need for information – just as adults often want to know the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘when’ and ‘why’ surrounding a death, so do children. This is why clear and open discussions with children are so important following a sudden bereavement.

Support literature

Books for children

Brake produces two children’s books and an accompanying guide for each featuring the characters Amy and Tom. The first is a road crash-specific book aimed at children who have lost a loved one in this way. Someone has died in a road crash was developed to help include children in the grieving process by providing them with their own ‘support guide’. Following an overwhelmingly positive response, this was then adapted into a book for children affected by any type of sudden death, Someone has died suddenly.
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Through the story of the central characters Amy and Tom – two children who have been suddenly bereaved – and using simple illustrations and plain, straightforward language that young children can easily understand, the books introduce the themes of death, shock and sadness.

They encourage frank discussion and honesty within families. They provide opportunities for adults to share information and for children to share their thoughts and feelings. The books suggest ways in which children and their parents or carers can support each other, and give practical tips for ways children can help themselves to feel better and remember the person who has died.

The accompanying guides for adults explain the content of the children’s books and offer suggestions on how to support a grieving child.

Someone has died in a road crash and Someone has died suddenly are both available from the Brake shop at https://shop.brake.org.uk/collections/support-literature.

Coping with grief
Coping with grief is a free resource adapted from Brake’s long-running road crash bereavement packs and is appropriate for adults and young people bereaved through all types of sudden death. It explains common reactions following a sudden death and helps to normalise the way people feel.

The booklet also provides practical advice on how to cope. Although not designed for children, it can be a useful tool for adults supporting children to help them understand the emotional impact of sudden death.

Coping with grief is available from the Brake shop at https://shop.brake.org.uk/collections/support-literature.

Support for road crash victims
Brake provides a wide range of specialist help and support to families and professionals working with road crash victims. Our support packs for bereaved families are handed out by police following every UK road death and can be accessed at brake.org.uk/support.

Helpline

- Brake’s helpline for road crash victims is a quality-accredited Freephone support service providing information, advocacy and emotional support. This includes:
  - providing a listening ear, so callers can talk about what they are going through;
  - providing advice on how to cope with shock and trauma;
  - helping callers understand procedures, such as how to seek legal help and what happens in a court case;
  - liaising with officials on a caller’s behalf;
  - helping callers access face-to-face support and counselling from appropriate experts;
  - putting callers in touch with other support groups (both national and local); and
  - advising professionals working with bereaved and injured road crash victims, to help them ensure they are supported.

Although we mainly talk directly to the adults affected, a lot of our calls are from bereaved adults seeking help and advice on how best to support children.

For more information, visit brake.org.uk.

Other specialist bereavement charities
To find details of other organisations that provide support after bereavement, please visit http://suddendeath.org/guides-for-suddenly-bereaved-people/bereavement-directory
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The impact of sudden bereavement on children

Richard Stafford, Director of Bereavement Sector Support Scotland, Child Bereavement UK

About Child Bereavement UK

Child Bereavement UK was founded in Buckinghamshire in 1994. Initially known mainly for training provision across the UK but with one local service, the organisation has now expanded greatly, with staff based in Cheshire, Glasgow, London, Cumbria, Milton Keynes and Saunderton, Buckinghamshire. Child Bereavement UK can provide support to any young person up to the age of 25 who has been bereaved, and also to any adult who has been bereaved of a child of any age.

The organisation runs a helpline, which can be reached at 0800 02 888 40, and is open from 9am to 5pm during weekdays. This helpline provides support and guidance to both families and professionals. Further information, and a variety of resources and guidance papers can be found on the Child Bereavement UK website, www.childbereavementuk.org.

Work in Scotland

Child Bereavement UK has received funding from the Scottish Government to develop bereavement initiatives across a variety of locations in Scotland. Through the project, we are also able to offer numerous free, or heavily subsidised, training opportunities. We also received funding to open our first Scottish office in Glasgow.

Why bereavement support is so important

Bereavement support can come in many different forms, depending on the individual circumstances. The following statistics highlight the importance of effective bereavement support, and how many people are affected:

- Every 22 minutes in the UK, a child is bereaved by the loss of a parent; around 24,000 children suffer the loss of a parent every year.¹
- Statistics compiled for Childhood Grief Awareness Week 2016 reveal that one in 29 children have been bereaved by the loss of either a parent or sibling.
- Many more children experience the loss of a grandparent, sibling or friend – it is believed that 92% of children and young people will experience a ‘significant’ bereavement before reaching the age of 16.²

Further evidence for the necessity of bereavement support

Unresolved grief has been connected to a number of wider issues, as detailed below.

Academic underachievement

A number of studies have shown that following a bereavement, children’s school results often decline.³ There is also evidence that levels of truancy and disruptive behaviour in the classroom may be higher among bereaved schoolchildren who have not received support for their grief.⁴

Behavioural challenges

Although the extent of challenging behaviour and mental health issues can be mitigated if early, tailored support is offered, these issues can be very difficult. The extent to which behavioural challenges occur can also be affected by a number of factors, including a child’s social circumstances and prevalence of any other ongoing issues, such as exposure to domestic violence, or a family member’s substance misuse. Personal factors, such as a child’s personality, can also affect the way a child expresses grief.

Teenage pregnancy

The risk of teenage pregnancy is far higher among individuals who were bereaved as a child. Studies have found that teenage girls who have been bereaved of a parent are six times more likely to become pregnant than their non-bereaved teenage peers.⁵

Crime and youth offending

Research⁶ has identified that populations of prisons and young offenders’ institutes suffer disproportionate levels of bereavement. Studies have also found that members of the prison population are far more likely to have been traumatically bereaved than the general public. One study found that as many as 91% of prison occupants had suffered a significant bereavement. Within this group, 75% had been bereaved traumatically, and around two-thirds had suffered multiple, significant losses.⁷ Levels of unresolved and complicated grief are far higher in this population.

Although grief has traditionally been viewed as ‘hierarchical’, with the bereavement of a parent identified as most debilitating, it is essential that those supporting a bereaved young person are aware of the significance of the relationship between the child and the person who died. The loss of an important relative, such as a grandparent, or close family friend, can be just as distressing as that of a parent.
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Factors that can affect the grieving process

Circumstances and cause of death
The circumstances of the death can have a major impact on an individual’s experience of grief. A sudden, unexpected, or traumatic death can be particularly difficult for a bereaved child to process. Some deaths unfortunately remain stigmatised, and bereavement from causes such as suicide, murder or substance misuse may be difficult for a child to discuss. It is important that schools, support workers and the wider community are able to talk honestly and non-judgementally to children about stigmatised forms of sudden death. Those providing support must also be sensitive to the ‘family narrative’ around the death.

The relationship with the person who has died
People supporting a child who has been suddenly bereaved should be aware that the significance of a family member may differ from case to case. It is possible that a grandparent may have played an important role in a child’s development, particularly if a parent was not present. Alternatively, the person who has died may have been abusive towards the bereaved child, which can lead to a particularly complicated grieving process.

The personality of the individual, and the recovery environment
Social factors and level of support available are other important aspects to consider. Genetic factors can also play a part, and some people may be more predisposed to mental health challenges such as depression. Levels of individual resilience differ from person to person, and a positive and safe recovery environment is generally beneficial for bereaved children and young people. Permission and honesty are essential: a young person must be able to express his or her feelings and ask questions, while adults must be honest with the information they provide.

Children’s development, and the bereavement experience in different age groups

0–2 years (Bowlby’s attachment theory)
Research has highlighted that even very young children may be aware of difference and change after a bereavement; there is an awareness if a main caregiver is no longer there.

Bowlby’s attachment theory highlights three main stages: protest, despair and detachment. In cases where a very young child has been bereaved, ensuring that good substitute care is provided is essential. If substitute care is not offered at a young age, this can have a very challenging impact in later life. Substitute care is particularly important if a child has been bereaved of a parent.

Lower primary (Piaget’s preconceptual stage)
During this stage, children remain highly egocentric. Following a bereavement, particularly a sudden, unexpected death, a child may believe that they were responsible.

Issues around responsibility, guilt and blame can be very challenging, and it is important that children are supported, and helped to understand the real causes of a death and that they are not to blame for what has happened.

Children may also struggle to comprehend the concept of ‘finality’. Many children’s first experience of bereavement will be the death of a pet, which offers a family a good opportunity to help develop understanding of death and the rituals surrounding it.

Upper primary (concrete operational stage)
As children get older, their understanding of the permanence of death, and concepts such as ‘finality’ and ‘foreverness’ may be improved; however, emotional and intellectual development across this age range may vary widely. Children may understand the permanence of death, but the experience will still be very unsettling and upsetting – particularly among children who have additional needs.

Puberty and adolescence
This is a very difficult transitional stage in general day-to-day life; the challenge of a bereavement can add further complexity. Adolescents experience increasing change and pressure, and it can sometimes be hard to differentiate between grief and ‘normal’, hormonal teenage emotions. If in doubt, it is best to validate the grief and address emotions.

The dual-process model and puddle jumping
The dual-process model states that a grieving adult will oscillate between two spheres, loss orientation, and restoration orientation, during their day-to-day life. Activities associated with loss orientation include grief work, alongside yearning for the deceased. Restoration refers to actions that may provide a distraction from grief, attending to life changes, gaining confidence and doing new things.

In non-complicated grief, the process should develop so that the dominance of loss orientation declines and an individual addresses their grief. People experiencing complicated grief will find themselves stuck in one sphere for an extended period of time, and will be unable to move on from this.
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The puddle jumping theory has been developed following studies that have identified that although both children and adults will experience similar transitional phases, the oscillation between these will often occur much faster and more frequently in children.1

As children develop, they may express concern and guilt about the frequency at which their grief may have previously oscillated; it is essential that adult support workers ensure them that this is completely understandable.

Common reactions in children:

Regression is a common response from children, following a sudden bereavement. This could include issues such as bedwetting, which have not affected a child for a long time prior to the death. Separation anxiety is also frequently reported, as are other challenges such as difficulties with sleeping, and eating problems, which adults may also experience following a bereavement. A child’s academic achievements may be affected by several factors, including difficulty with concentration, and issues with confidence. A range of emotions may be experienced, including sadness, anger, fear, guilt and passivity.

Talking and listening about loss with children

Consider the following when discussing bereavement and loss with children:

- Listen actively and engage with children when they are discussing their feelings or asking questions.
- Allow for repetition, and recognise that a grieving child may not be able to fully process information immediately.
- Be honest. If you do not know the answer to a question, admit it – and then try and seek out the information. Not knowing can be a device to engender discussion.
- Answer at a child’s level, and in direct response to their query. It is important to make sure that you answer the question asked. If they require more information, the child will ask you.
- Allow a child to change the subject, if they need to. However, you must avoid changing the subject without the child’s lead, as this can send a very powerful message that the subject isn’t up for discussion.
- Normalise grief symptoms. Let children know that their actions, or feelings, are understandable in the aftermath of a bereavement.
- Recognise when it is necessary to refer a child for further support, and identify when the child’s reactions are no longer normal.
- Empower children by allowing them to be directly involved in processes and decision making.

Resilience

Building and developing resilience is key. It is essential to ensure that children are fully supported and protected, but it is important not to overprotect, and to allow young people to address their grief. Developing confidence and allowing children to feel positive about themselves is critical to the process of them gaining resilience and...
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Moving forward successfully from their bereavement. Giving reassurance, understanding vulnerability and allowing routines to continue can help to develop resilience.

**Supportive interventions**

- Knowledge is power for bereaved young people; ensure that they are given accurate information.
- Keep children involved in processes, and allow them to feel that they have an element of control.
- Help them to meet other bereaved children and young people; this can be very beneficial, particularly in a peer-group setting.
- Provide details of literature and other practical resources.

**Supporting the supporter**

Whether you are a support worker, parent, carer or educator, it is essential that you look after yourself, and ensure that you are in a condition where you are able to give your best. This work is tough and can be very draining, so you owe it to yourself and the people you support to have ‘time out’, and keep yourself healthy.

For further details and resources, please visit the Child Bereavement UK website childbereavementuk.org.

**Sudden bereavement from a multi-faith approach**

**Stuart MacQuarrie, chaplain, University of Glasgow Chaplaincy**

While it is important to treat bereaved families and individuals equally and honestly as human beings, regardless of faith, there are a number of customs, beliefs and practices that it is important for support workers and bereavement counsellors to be aware of. This section will cover some of the main customs that members of the Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu religions may wish to be respected and carried out prior and during a funeral, that may impact support workers.

**Autopsy and treatment of the body after death**

**Hinduism**

Autopsy is generally accepted within Hinduism, although the process may cause distress to the grieving family. There are no religious grounds to restrict organ donation, although medical professionals should be aware that preference is for an early funeral, which organ donation or autopsy may delay. After the autopsy, the body should be bathed and presented in a plain white sheet.

**Islam**

The Islamic faith is opposed to the use of autopsy. Customs hold that an autopsy is a desecration of the deceased individual’s body, and unless it is legally unavoidable, Muslims prefer that an autopsy is not carried out. If an autopsy must take place, there are a number of steps that medical staff can take to reduce the impact on a family.

Grieving relatives will appreciate if an autopsy can be undertaken as soon as is possible, to allow for an immediate and quick burial afterwards. Autopsies should be undertaken as respectfully as possible, and should be carried out in a private room by medical staff who are of the same gender of the deceased. Any parts of the body that are not being examined should be covered, to preserve dignity. In some cases it may be possible for a digital autopsy to be undertaken, thereby avoiding damage to the body.

**Judaism**

Attitudes towards autopsy among conservative and Orthodox sects of Jews are similar to those of Islam, although Liberal and Reform movements may hold a more permissive attitude to autopsy or organ donation. However, it will be appreciated if medical examination can be limited to only the relevant body parts, and in some cases it may be requested that a Rabbi be present during the autopsy.

**Sikhism**

There are no religious restrictions on post-mortem in Sikhism; however, practitioners should be careful to ensure that no hair is removed through the investigation. If the 5Ks (Kakkars) are present on the deceased, these should not be removed. As with Hinduism, medical professionals should be aware that customs within Sikhism hold that funerals should be held without delay.

**‘Virtopsy’ – virtual autopsy**

Virtual autopsy is an increasingly used alternative to a traditional post-mortem. This method involves non-invasive methods such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanning or computed tomography (CT) to identify cause of death, and was introduced in the UK in 2013 as an option for pathologists.
Funeral

Repatriation
Some faith groups prefer for the body of the deceased to be repatriated; any support that professionals can provide to ensure that this is a quick and efficient process will be greatly appreciated.

Religious customs in many faiths may call for a funeral to be undertaken as soon after the death as possible.

Hinduism
Although in India customs hold that funerals are held within 24 hours of the death, due to the more extensive administration process in the UK, it is more common for a funeral to be held between five and eight days after a bereavement.17

Funerals will be held and arranged at a crematorium, although some sects may prefer burial, and children under 5 years of age will be buried. Grief is usually expressed openly at a Hindu funeral, and wailing and crying are not discouraged. Members of other faiths are allowed to attend a funeral. Women are permitted to attend, but it is customary for men to stand in front of women at the crematorium.

Islam
In Islam, religious practice is for funerals to occur as soon after the death as possible, and often within a 24-hour period. If a post-mortem is required, it will be greatly appreciated by the family if the body can be released from this process as soon as is possible. Cremation is generally strictly forbidden in Islam, although it may be permitted in a very limited number of cases where it is required to protect a community from the spread of contagious diseases.18

Expression of emotion at funerals is normally more restrained; weeping is accepted, but wailing or loud crying is generally not permitted. It is common for funerals to be private and closed to non-faith members; it is advisable to contact the family to enquire whether women will be able to attend.

Judaism
Customs in Judaism are similar to those in Islam, and if a post-mortem or autopsy is not required, then families will aim to ensure that a funeral takes place within 24 hours of the death. Burials will not occur on the Sabbath (Saturday), or other holy days.19 Traditionally, Jewish people bury the dead; Orthodox Jews still don’t permit cremation, although it is becoming increasingly popular among more liberal sects.

Emotional expression at funerals varies across different Jewish sects, but open expression of emotion is generally encouraged and weeping, crying or wailing are permissible. Funerals are open to all faith members, but the role of women may differ between progressive and Orthodox sects.

Sikhism
Funerals in Sikhism also tend to be arranged soon after the death. Custom dictates that the mouth and eyes of the deceased be closed, limbs straightened and body covered with a plain white sheet. Burial is permissible in circumstances where cremation is not possible, but the vast majority of Sikh funerals are cremations. Funeral attendees are expected to keep their emotions controlled, and crying and wailing are generally frowned upon. Funerals are open to people of all faiths and women are permitted to attend.

Grieving
The four faiths covered have very different mourning periods; in some religions, mourning begins immediately after death; in others, it may not start until after the funeral.

Hinduism
In Hinduism, the mourning period follows the funeral and cremation, and lasts for 13 days. Because Hindus believe in reincarnation, excessive mourning is not encouraged or permitted. During the 13-day mourning period, the grieving family will avoid festive occasions, including weddings. This may continue for up to a year among some sects.20

Islam
Traditionally, the mourning period in Islam lasts for around three days after the funeral. An extended grieving period, known as ‘Iddah’ or ‘Iddat’, is normally undertaken by a bereaved widow, and this lasts for four months and ten days.

Judaism
A period of mourning known as ‘Shiva’, which lasts for seven days, will normally follow a Jewish death. During this period, the grieving family will gather at home, and friends and members of the community will visit to offer support. On their return from the funeral, the family will light a Yahrzeit candle, which will also be lit on each subsequent anniversary of the death. A separate ceremony to unveil the tombstone is held at a later date.

Sikhism
As in Hinduism, the process of mourning in Sikhism is shaped by belief in reincarnation. Grieving generally lasts for ten days after the funeral, and during this period the grieving relatives will stay in the family home, reading the holy Guru Granth Sahib scripture. The period of formal mourning ends when the book has been read in its entirety.
About Sudden

Sudden is a charitable initiative developed by Brake, the road safety charity. Brake has extensive frontline experience of delivering support services for people bereaved by road crashes – one of the main causes of sudden death – and providing professional development services for carers of people bereaved by road crashes.

To find out more, visit suddendeath.org

References


Brake is a registered charity, number: 1092244

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