



Institiúid na gComhairleoirí Treorach  
INSTITUTE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS

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# Allowing Young People Grieve

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## When Your Child Loses A Friend

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## A Guide For Parents

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Allowing Young People Grieve  
When Your Child Loses A Friend  
A Guide For Parents  
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## 1. What is Grief?

Grief is a strong, sometimes overwhelming, range of emotions we experience when we suffer a loss. We can find ourselves feeling numb, shocked, angry, guilt, sad, and unable to carry on with normal life while saddled with a strong sense of loss. Grief is a normal and natural reaction to loss. Grief is both a universal and a personal experience. Individual experiences of grief vary from one person to another and are strongly influenced by the nature of the loss. Dealing with death takes time – not just days, but weeks, months and maybe even years,<sup>1</sup> but generally the pain is tempered as time passes and as we adapt to life without the person who has died.

Grieving is a unique experience for each of us and is not a task with definable, sequential steps, and should not be compared with the grief of others. Grief is not an illness that needs to be cured. It's not a bridge to be crossed; it is not a burden to bear, or an experience to 'recover' from. It is a normal, healthy and predictable response to loss.<sup>2</sup> Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity; it is the price we pay for love. In other words, if we wished we were not grieving would mean the deceased did not mean so much to us, or had not been in our lives. The only way to deal with grief is to grieve.<sup>3</sup>

When people are grieving they do not need to be *fixed* nor do they need to be *taught* how to grieve, but rather, be *allowed* to grieve and to make their own meaning of their new world without the deceased. There is no set schedule for grief<sup>4</sup> and no timetable for how long it will hurt. Grieving does not go in a straight line and sometimes it does a U-turn. Grief is a

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<sup>1</sup> *When a Friend Dies*, Marily Gootman, (U.S.A: Free Spirit Publishing, 2005) p 11.

<sup>2</sup> *The Club No One Wants to Join, A Dozen Lessons I've Learned from Grieving Children & Adolescents*, Donna L. Schuurman, The Dougy Center.

<sup>3</sup> *Straight Talk About Death For Teenagers*, Earl Grollman, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) p 6.

<sup>4</sup> *When a Friend Dies*, Marily Gootman, (U.S.A: Free Spirit Publishing, 2005) p 11.

process not an event<sup>5</sup> and mourning our loss is hard work - hard emotional work.<sup>6</sup> We need to walk through grief, not run.<sup>7</sup> Everybody experiences grief in their lifetime and we eventually learn to adapt to our new and different life without the physical presence of the deceased.

The way we respond when someone dies depends upon several factors with the most dominant factor probably being the nature and strength of the relationship with the deceased. The closer the connection the more devastating our loss can be. It is worth noting that a close relationship can also have been a difficult relationship and the grieving process can be just as difficult in such a situation. Young people may have to mourn a difficult relationship in that they may mourn the loss of the possibility of a relationship they wanted to have.<sup>8</sup> The age of the deceased and the circumstances of the death, our gender and our individual personality are also factors that can influence our response to a death. Other factors may include family and community circumstances and their response to the death, and our life experiences to date, both positive and negative, and whether or not we have religious beliefs or none.

Parents should remember the following when a young person suffers the loss of a peer/friend. When any individual loses a close friend or loved one, it is normal to share the grief with others who knew the deceased equally well. In the past, the young person may have experienced the loss of an aunt, uncle, or grandparent. Because the young person's parent/s knew the deceased equally well and are experiencing the same grief, it is normal for the young person in such situations to share their grief with their parent/s. The situation where a young person loses a friend can be different. When young people suffer the loss of a friend they

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<sup>5</sup> *Healing A Teen's Grieving Heart*, Alan Wolfelt, (Colorado: Companion Press, 2001) p 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Living When A Young Friend Commits Suicide*, E. Grollman & M. Malikow, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) p 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Straight Talk About Death For Teenagers*, Earl Grollman, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) p 129.

<sup>8</sup> *Talking With Children About Loss*, Maria Trozzi & Kathy Massimini, (New York: Penguin Book, 1999) p 39-40.

may turn to their peers more than their parents, sharing thoughts and feelings with them because they are mourning the same loss.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, when a young person loses a friend they are more likely to want to spend time with, and talk more to, their peers rather than their parents. In doing this, they are not trying to shut their parents out, they are simply surrounding themselves with others who are going through the same experience and who knew deceased as well as they did. Young people may also believe that their peers have a greater understanding than their parents of what they are going through particularly if the parent/s did not know the deceased. This is perfectly normal and the young person needs to be given the space to do this and parents should not feel rejected if they seem to value their friends more than their parent/s at this time.<sup>10</sup>

## **2. The Feelings**

### **2.1 Shock & Denial**

In the immediate aftermath of a death we can sometimes refuse to accept or believe the news. This can manifest itself in numbness, disbelief, shock or we may feel as if we are in a daze. This shock can be particularly acute if the death was unexpected, or occurred because of a horrific accident. Indeed, if there were young people involved in, or witnessed the accident, the sense of shock can be profound.

We can wake in the morning forgetting for a brief moment that the death has occurred, only to remember again and retreat back into a state of numbness. When some people use the term '*numb*', it is used to describe the fact that they are feeling nothing. In actual fact, *numbness* is a feeling in itself. This state of numbness/disbelief/shock can be viewed as the mind protecting itself from the enormity of what has happened. It gives us time to get

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<sup>9</sup> *Helping Children & Adolescents Cope with Death & Bereavement*, D. Adams & E. Deveau, (New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1995) p 141.

<sup>10</sup> *Responding to Critical Incidents – Resource Material for Schools*, Dept. of Ed. & Science, Dublin, 2007 p 14.

ourselves ready<sup>11</sup> and to prepare ourselves to feel the intense pain of the loss. This is nature's way of protecting our mind so that we are not overwhelmed.<sup>12</sup> It helps us prepare ourselves so everything sinks in when we are ready.

In the immediate aftermath of a loss, denial can also be used as a defence mechanism to protect us from the intensity of the loss and the reality of the situation, in the long term this denial is unhealthy.<sup>13</sup> We need to let go of the numbness, disbelief and shock and allow ourselves to accept the reality of what has happened. The reality of what has happened does hurt, and hurt a lot, but denial hurts for even longer.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2 Guilt

Following a death we can sometimes experience a great deal of guilt. We may feel guilty about what we did or did not do in the past, or what we may have said or not said to the deceased. We might say to ourselves over and over again, '*if only*', or '*I should have*'. Feelings of guilt can be intensified over past relationship problems or rows between us and the deceased and not having had a chance to make amends. If the death was as a result of an accident, for those grieving who witnessed or were involved, the sense of guilt over their own survival can be profound.

Guilt can also manifest itself in having taken the relationship for granted and not appreciating

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<sup>11</sup> *Living When A Young Friend Commits Suicide*, E. Grollman & M. Malikow, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) p 4.

<sup>12</sup> *When a Friend Dies*, Marily Gootman, (U.S.A: Free Spirit Publishing, 2005) p 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Grief Matters. Managing Bereavement & Trauma in Schools*. Educational Psychology Service, WELB, p 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Straight Talk About Death For Teenagers*, Earl Grollman, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) p 92.

it at the time. Our guilt can sometimes be irrational. For example, we can feel guilty about not having done something to prevent the death. Even though this may be totally irrational - in that there was no way we could have influenced the outcome - the guilty feelings can be very real and intense.

As time moves on, the stimulus for our guilt can change. We can feel guilty about laughing, having fun, or enjoying ourselves without the deceased being with us. We may feel guilty about returning to normal daily activities and getting on with our lives. Sometimes, we can try to get rid of our feelings of guilt by blaming others. In the short term this blaming of others helps us avoid having to deal with, feel, and work through, our guilt.

Whatever the source of our guilt we need to allow ourselves feel it, process it, and understand it so that we can give ourselves permission to begin to feel something different. Remember, it is normal to feel guilty about the past, to feel guilt about moving on, as much as it is normal to keep going on with our lives. After all, it is what happens everybody on the planet who has experienced a loss.

### **2.3 Anger & Blame**

The pain of the loss of the deceased can be excruciating. To avoid this pain we can replace it with anger. We can be angry at God, angry at the world, angry at the medical profession or angry at the deceased for not looking after themselves. We can even be angry at the deceased for putting us through this pain and/or past pain (this may eventually require us to forgive those who inflicted this pain on us). Sometimes our anger can be irrational<sup>15</sup> and directed at blaming others simply because there is nowhere else to put our anger. Sometimes this blaming of others gives us some sense of control over a situation we have no control over.

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<sup>15</sup> *Living with Bereavement*, Sue Mayfield, (London: A Lion Book 2008) p 55.

We can even direct our anger at ourselves for not doing enough for the deceased or indeed for caring so much about the deceased and now it hurts, and hurts bad. Also, sometimes our anger can be used to mask our own feelings of guilt. Is anger easier for us to handle than guilt? We need to realise we are angry, realise and understand the source of our anger and let ourselves feel the anger. We need to think it through, express it rationally, feel it, and if needs be, feel it again, and let it burn itself out.

## 2.4 Sadness

One of the key components of grief is a feeling of intense sadness.<sup>16</sup> Sadness can mean different things to different people. For some, it can feel like our heart is tearing in two, or we can feel an intense pain within us, or a strong sense of emptiness, or a piece of us is missing,<sup>17</sup> or we can feel a sense of inward desolation. Our sadness can even be intertwined with and re-ignite sadness from previous losses causing us to re-grieve previous losses, not just a death, but the loss of a relationships or a break-up.<sup>18</sup> Sadness occurs when we realise we have lost someone and there is nothing we can do about it. Sadness turns our attention inwards so that we can take stock and adjust to our loss. Sadness promotes personal reflection, turns our attention inwards, and promotes resignation and acceptance and helps us accept and accommodate the loss.<sup>19</sup> Feeling sadness, allows the realisation of what has happened to sink in.<sup>20</sup> Or is it the other way around? Is it because we are beginning to accept what has happened, and accommodate our loss and adjusting to it – that we feel sad? If so, is sadness a necessary emotion sign that we are moving into a different phase of our lives accepting that the deceased will not be physically present.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Other Side of Sadness*, George A. Bonanno, (New York: Basic Books, 2009) p 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Sadness & Grief*, George A. Bonanno, (New York: Teaching College, Columbia University) p 3.

<sup>18</sup> *The Other Side of Sadness*, George A. Bonanno, (New York: Basic Books, 2009) p 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Living After Death*, Mary Paula Walsh, (The Columba Press, Ireland, 1995) p 73.

<sup>20</sup> *Talking With Children About Loss*, Maria Trozzi & Kathy Massimini, (New York: Penguin Book, 1999) p 184.



## 2.5 Other Feelings

Following the death of someone who was a big part of our lives we can experience a myriad of other feelings. We can feel a sense of abandonment and rejection<sup>21</sup> or even betrayal because we expected the person who we relied upon to be there for us. We can feel frightened about the future without the deceased or frightened<sup>22</sup> about forgetting about the deceased or indeed frightened about our own mortality because we now realise we too will eventually die.<sup>23</sup> Also, because we had no control over what has happened to the deceased, we can experience a sense of hopelessness or loss of control<sup>24</sup> over what has happened. This sense of hopelessness can be particularly acute if we feel we could have done something to prevent the death.

The feelings brought on by grief are not just like a roller coaster, but like a roller coaster, merry-go-round and a bungee jump all in one. Some feelings can stay with us for a while, then be replaced by another feeling and then return to hit us like a train. Each feeling needs to be felt, understood, and processed, and if needs be, felt, understood, and processed again and again for as long as it takes. In the words of Winston Churchill, *'if you're going through hell – keep going'*.

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<sup>21</sup> *Parenting Positively Helping Teenagers to Cope with Death*, Family Support Agency, Barnardos 2009, p 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Suicide Prevention in the Community, A Practical Guide*, H.S.E. (Dublin: 2011) p 18.

<sup>23</sup> *Healing A Teen's Grieving Heart*, Alan Wolfelt, (Colorado: Companion Press, 2001) p 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Helping Children & Adolescents Cope with Death & Bereavement*, D. Adams & E. Deveau, (New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1995) p 137.

### 3. Change In Behaviours

Grieving is very much associated with *internal* feelings such as loss, anger, regret, guilt, and sadness etc. While these emotions are internal, they can display themselves *externally* through our behaviours and words. For example, when someone has died we feel we have no control over what has happened and no control over how we feel. Because we all need to feel in control of what is going on around us, and in order to gain a sense of security,<sup>25</sup> we can sometimes behave in a childlike way because childhood was a time when we felt secure and protected.

Similarly, if we have feelings of guilt we may seek to punish ourselves, for example, denying ourselves something or being punished by others to get rid of the guilt. We may also be tempted to withdraw and isolate<sup>26</sup> ourselves from the world or those around us. In the short term this isolation is beneficial in that withdrawal helps us to avoid exposing and exploring our feelings and facing up to our feelings. To engage with others and the world means we will have to face our feelings – so let's hide away. However, in the long run this tactic can add to and make our difficulties worse by (i) delaying the day we experience our feelings, and (ii) the isolation itself adds to the feelings it is intended to reduce.

Sometimes the enormity of emotions and feelings around loss can impact and influence other behaviours. We can become forgetful about everyday things, lose our appetite or comfort eat. Grief can make us need more or less sleep than normal, or have mood swings<sup>27</sup> or snap at others. Grief can sap from us the energy and passion for things that used to give us pleasure, like hobbies.

Another physical manifestation of our feelings is crying. Sometimes, depending on how we are feeling, we sob, cry, scream, wail or sometimes stay silent.<sup>28</sup> With so much emotional

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<sup>25</sup> *Parenting Positively Helping Teenagers to Cope with Death*, Family Support Agency, Barnardos 2009, p 9.

<sup>26</sup> *Living When A Young Friend Commits Suicide*, E. Grollman & M. Malikow, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) p 47.

<sup>27</sup> *Responding to Critical Incidents – Resource Material for Schools*, Dept. of Ed. & Science, Dublin, 2007 p 14.

<sup>28</sup> *When a Friend Dies*, Marily Gootman, (U.S.A: Free Spirit Publishing, 2005) p 15.

turmoil it can be hard for us to cope with everyday things and crying relieves some of the strain and tension that builds up inside us and helps us let go of pent-up emotions.<sup>29</sup> Remember, we all need to cry now and again - it is natural to cry and unnatural not to.<sup>30</sup> *'What soap is to the body, tears are to the soul'* –Jewish Proverb.

The intense feelings brought on by grieving can be absolutely draining, both physically and emotionally. While we can replenish our physical tank of energy with sleep each night, replenishing our emotional tank of energy tank takes more time. If our tank of emotional energy is depleted or empty, it can cause us to become angry and frustrated at minor issues that, if our emotional tank was full, we would be able to cope with normally. For example, we may get angry at everyday issues like having to do homework or chores at home or getting overly angry at simple everyday things like missing the bus or getting caught in the rain. In these situations it is important to identify the real source of our stress. If we are feeling cranky and narky when we miss the bus or get caught in the rain, we need to realise that it is not missing the bus that is causing us to feel that way. Our crankiness and narkiness is more likely due to the fact our tank of emotional energy has been greatly drained by trying to deal with our grief.

Furthermore, we can *displace* our feelings onto another person or situation. Getting angry at the late bus is an example of displacing our anger from one situation to another. Getting angry at a sibling or parent over, for example, our guilt at what we did or did not say to the deceased, is an example of displacement onto another person. In these situations it is important to identify the real sources of our feelings. We need to ask ourselves, are we (i) displacing our feelings caused by one situation or person onto another situation or person, and/or (ii) are we displacing our feelings at minor issues or other issues when the real source of our stress is a bigger issue.

In the long term it is important for us to realise how our behaviours and interactions with others are driven by our emotions. Such self-analysis is a healthy part of the grieving process

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<sup>29</sup> *Straight Talk About Death For Teenagers*, Earl Grollman, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) p 104.

<sup>30</sup> *Living When A Young Friend Commits Suicide*, E. Grollman & M. Malikow, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) p 49.

and allows us to analyse our thoughts and feelings. Such self-exploration is necessary to allow us to begin a new and different phase in our lives with the deceased not in our presence – but in our mind and heart.

#### **4. Processing Feelings**

What can be done with all the feelings? What needs to be done is very, very simple, but very, very difficult. We need to process our feelings. What is processing?

It involves labelling our feelings. Understanding them. Naming them. Analysing them. Breaking them down. Sorting them in our head. Dissecting them. Interpreting them. Examining them. Scrutinising them. Explaining them. Evaluating them. Sifting through them. Processing our feelings involves doing this over and over again, and if needs be, over and over again.

It is often said '*it is good to talk*'. It is the talking that is the good part? Or is it that, to talk, we have to order our thoughts, analyse them, dissect them, evaluate them, and sift through them. In other words, talking to another person encourages and prompts the processing of feelings. Care needs to be taken when selecting who to talk to. Make sure that the motives of that person are in interests of grieving person, and not their own. Make sure, when talking, that the conversation does not just focus on events or people. Make sure the conversation is not about solutions or fixing things. Make sure the talking is about feelings. If you have heard people say '*talking does not help*', is it because they focused on events, or people, or solutions, rather than on the processing of the feelings? When helping young people cope with difficulties, we can get caught up in trying to fix things, trying to make things better and telling them how to think and feel and trying to make the pain go away. This does not address their needs<sup>31</sup> at this traumatic time.

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<sup>31</sup> *When a Friend Dies*, Marilyn Gootman, (U.S.A: Free Spirit Publishing, 2005) p 15.

Processing feelings can be painful, very painful. When grieving we need to experience this pain. This is positive as it is a form of processing them. This processing may also make us cry. Do you know why humans cry? Humans cry because *we need to*. Crying is natural and normal. Crying is another form of processing.

The basis for such a feelings based conversation lies in the ability to recognise emotions in young people i.e. “*empathy*”. Empathy can be defined as: a *continuing process* whereby one person lays aside their own way of experiencing and perceiving reality, preferring to sense and respond to the experiences and perceptions of the other person.<sup>32</sup> Put simply, empathy is the ability to feel and respond to the emotions of others. To establish empathy we first have to do something that is really difficult, *listen properly* and *listen actively*. Normally we tend to listen to another person for the factual content in what they are saying. However, to establish empathy we need to listen, not just for content, but for the emotions behind the content. For example, are the words expressed with shock, denial, anger, guilt, fear, sadness or hopelessness? As well as listening to the emotions being expressed, a keen eye needs to be kept on the body language. Do they break eye contact, do they clasp their hands, is their leg shaking? These observations can also help in determining the feelings behind what is being said.

Listening for the emotional meaning requires the full attention from the listener. This means while listening, the listener needs to avoid being distracted by their own views and avoid trying to formulate a response while the other person is still speaking. If, while the other person is still talking, the listener is thinking about how they will respond, they are not listening fully and completely. Also, we need to avoid interruptions. We tend to interrupt<sup>33</sup> someone speaking to satisfy our own needs by, for example, give an opinion, correcting what

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<sup>32</sup> *Living When A Young Friend Commits Suicide*, E. Grollman & M. Malikow, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) p 49.

<sup>33</sup> *The Trainee Handbook, A Guide For Counselling And Psychotherapy Training*, Robert Bor and Mary Watts, (London: Sage Publications, 1999) p 174.

is said, or offering solutions. Therefore, it is important to stay *out of their way* <sup>34</sup> by not interrupting and wait until they are finished.

During the conversation the young person may wish to constantly talk about the deceased. They need to do this and use the deceased's name.<sup>35</sup> However, at some point it might be useful to ask the young person how *they feel* about the deceased or how *they feel* about what they are saying about the deceased. The aim of this is to shift the conversation from being about the deceased to being about the young person themselves. This is important because it allows them express their emotions so that they themselves can understand what they are feeling and why.

Sometimes young people find it difficult to find the correct words to describe how they are feeling. If this is the case, help them by making suggestions, e.g. *it sounds as if that is causing you pain, sadness, anger, etc.* By doing this we are helping them process their feelings.

Once you feel you have understood the grieving person's perception of their world, it is now necessary to acknowledge these feelings to them and for them to feel such acknowledgement. This can be achieved by reflecting back to them what they have said by using, if necessary, the same words they have used or paraphrasing, reframing, reflecting, and summarising what they have expressed. As well as using the appropriate words, it is also important to mirror the emotions and feelings behind the words used. This should be used without adding to, or decreasing, the emotional feeling expressed by them. Reflecting back

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<sup>34</sup> *Client Centred Therapy*, Carl Rogers, (London: Constable 1999) p 27.

<sup>35</sup> *Talking With Children About Loss*, Maria Trozzi & Kathy Massimini, (New York: Penguin Book, 1999) p 40.

means that you accept how they feel. It does not include your evaluation or casting judgment on their feelings. What is said back should be heavily emotions based and not dominated by factual content. Acceptance of their feelings is essential to allow them understand and accept their feelings.

When interacting with a person in this way try to avoid using closed questions, i.e. questions that require yes/no answers. Instead, clarify emotions<sup>36</sup> expressed using open ended question<sup>37</sup> that are asking about feelings and emotions as opposed to asking about facts, for example, *'how does that make you feel'*, *'what do you think about when that comes into your head'*, *'why are you angry?'*, *'tell me about your feelings of guilt?'*. Try to avoid asking *'how are you?'*, you will nearly always get *'I'm okay'* -you can't do much with that response. Try to avoid telling them *'you will get over it'*<sup>38</sup> or *'be strong'* or *'don't cry'*. One person can never tell another how to feel.<sup>39</sup> Remember there are no magical words and if you are searching for them while they are talking to you, you are not listening properly. It's very, very simple, but very, very difficult, - the emotions behind what they are saying should drive your responses.

When listening for the emotions of others, we should not try to hide our own feelings.<sup>40</sup> Let the other person see and feel your own reaction. It allows the young person to see what grief

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<sup>36</sup> *Client Centred Therapy*, Carl Rogers, (London: Constable 1999) p 27.

<sup>37</sup> *The Skilled Helper*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Gerard Egan, (California: Brooks/Cole, 2002) p 121.

<sup>38</sup> *Responding to Critical Incidents – Resource Material for Schools*, Dept. of Ed. & Science, Dublin, 2007 p 18.

<sup>39</sup> *Living When A Young Friend Commits Suicide*, E. Grollman & M. Malikow, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) p 75.

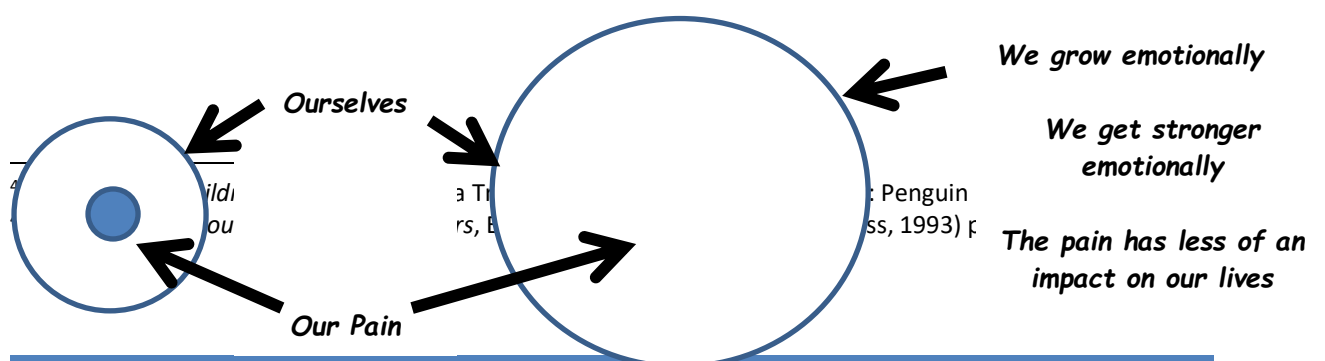
<sup>40</sup> *Parenting Positively Helping Teenagers to Cope with Death*, Family Support Agency, Barnardos 2009, p 11.

looks like<sup>41</sup> and allows them to see it is normal and that it should not be feared. This can also help them learn healthy coping skills for future losses and can also help to underline the need to share our feelings. However, be careful, the listener's feelings should not get in the way or interrupt or prevent the other person from expressing theirs.

This processing of feelings allows the young person to work through their emotions, process them, understand them, and accept them. This allows healing and the strength of the human spirit to take hold. Remember, unexpressed grief can cause a war within us – and if it is held in - it can be like a time bomb ticking underground.<sup>42</sup>

This processing of our feelings may not get rid of them. But the processing can make them more manageable. This processing can make them easier to carry. This process can make it easier to get on with our lives. This processing can help us prevent these feelings from holding us back. Remember, sometimes we cannot change the events that have happened. All we can do is learn to manage the feelings.

The diagram below shows the outer circle on the left representing ourselves and the inner circle representing our pain. We instinctively want this inner pain to get smaller and go away. However, this may not happen. Instead, we should strive to enable ourselves to grow emotionally, and get stronger emotionally so that they have less of an impact on ourselves and our lives. We should strive to strengthen ourselves emotionally so that we can carry these feelings more easily and manage these feelings so that they don't hold us back and that we can get on with our lives.







## 5. Other Ways To Express Emotions

While sorrow needs expression, it may not always be with words. The more tools and permission we provide for a grieving person the more likely they will find their own form of expression. Give sorrow words, yes, but also paint, glue, hammers and nails, long walks, music, sport, play, yoga, mindfulness, looking after someone else or a pet, writing to ourselves, writing or talking to the deceased, storytelling, belting a slither against a wall, and silence<sup>43</sup> or whatever activity allows us to process our feelings is the right one for us. However, make sure that these other forms of expression are not used to entirely replace verbal expression. Instead, they should be an addition to the use of words, not an alternative.

## 6. Why?

One aspect of death that can become very prominent for those grieving is *why*. ‘*Why did this happen?*’, ‘*Why didn’t someone stop it?*’, ‘*Why did God let this happen?*’, ‘*Why does the rest of the world keep going, do they not realise what has happened?*’, ‘*Young people are not supposed to die. It’s against the rules of nature. It’s not right. It’s not fair.*’<sup>44</sup> These questions are particularly pertinent when the deceased is young.

Sometimes some of the questions we want answered do not have an answer. To continue to search for such answers can intensify our grief. We might just have to accept that sometimes there are questions in life we will never be able to answer and accept that we have to let these questions go. In other words, grief is one of life’s experiences that makes us realise that

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<sup>43</sup> *The Club No One Wants to Join, A Dozen Lessons I’ve Learned from Grieving Children & Adolescents*, Donna L. Schuurman The Dougy Center.

<sup>44</sup> *When a Friend Dies*, Marily Gootman, (U.S.A: Free Spirit Publishing, 2005) p 1.

some questions cannot, and do not, have answers.<sup>45</sup> Acceptance of this may be a sign that we are adjusting to and processing our grief.

These points are particularly important when a suicide may have happened. If this is the case it might be worth pointing out to your child the consequences of suicide. If appropriate, you might point out that; suicide is like letting a grenade off in a family and those left behind have to carry the shrapnel embedded in them for the rest of their lives. In other words, suicide doesn't get rid of the pain, it just passes it on to family and friends who are left behind, and who have to live with the pain for the rest of their lives. You could also make the point that maybe people who take their own lives don't want to kill themselves, they just want to kill the pain.

## **7. Previous Issues**

Some young people, through their past experiences, may be less prepared than others for the psychological and emotional challenges of dealing with loss.<sup>46</sup> Previous difficulties may result in the grieving process being intensified. Prior to the death, a the grieving person may have been struggling with others issues. This struggle may have depleted their emotional tank of energy making them less able to cope with the emotional turmoil of grief. In such a situation,

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<sup>45</sup> *How Teenagers Cope With Grief, Something I've Never Felt Before*, Doris Zagdanski, (Australia: Hill of Content Publishing, 1994) p 54

<sup>46</sup> *Helping Children & Adolescents Cope with Death & Bereavement*, D. Adams & E. Deveau, (New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1995) p 48.

the grieving person will more than likely present the issues they are dealing with to be around the death that has just taken place. Allow them to express this and talk it through for as long as it takes. However, be open and alert to clues in what is being said regarding other previous issues. Once they surface, they should be dealt with accordingly.

One other issue that may surface when a person is grieving is a past loss, including, not just a death, but also a parental separation, or the termination of an important relationship. When talking about the current loss the past loss can complicate the picture<sup>47</sup> and the emotions from one story can become interwoven into the other. This is more likely to happen if the past loss was not dealt with effectively. Be attuned to this when listening and help the grieving person clarify where their emotions are rooted and which story they are coming from.

If a young person will simply not talk, the question needs to be asked, was the young person reluctant to talk prior to the death. If they are not talking now, and if they did not talk in the past is there another adult they might talk to e.g. uncle, aunt, or teacher. If they are unwilling to talk and there were previous issues, it may be time to seek professional help.

## **8. Numbing The Pain**

Because the processing of our feelings is hard, difficult, and painful and can take a long time people look for alternatives. They look for short cuts or indeed, alternatives to processing. These alternatives can be unhealthy. For example, we can bury our feelings by burying ourselves in our work or even avoid our work. Or we can bury our feelings by keeping fit to

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<sup>47</sup> *Living with Bereavement*, Sue Mayfield,(London: A Lion Book 2008) p 9.

an obsessive degree or partying excessively. This will result in the feelings eating away at us inside or popping up elsewhere in our lives. We can also make things worse by taking our feelings out on events or people around us. We can even try to destroy those relationships.

If the pain is too much we can self-medicate by overdoing it with drink or by resorting to things like gambling or taking drugs<sup>48</sup>. We can develop an unhealthy relationship with food. Watch out that your child is eating because they are hungry, rather than eating for emotional comfort. We can even let our emotions become displaced to such a degree that we do not eat enough. Restricting food intake is a symptom of something wrong, rather than cause and is driven by an emotional need.

## **9. Talking/Seeking Professional Help**

Sometimes those grieving may need to seek professional help if some of the following persist for a period of time after the death.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Living When A Young Friend Commits Suicide*, E. Grollman & M. Malikow, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) p 46.

<sup>49</sup> *Adolescent Grief*, The Irish Hospice Foundation, Leaflet, 2008.

- A prolonged loss of interest in daily activities
- A prolonged change in appetite and sleep patterns
- Persistent self-blame or guilt
- Withdrawal from friends, hobbies, school activities
- Risk taking behaviour, such as reckless driving, alcohol, or drug abuse (seek help immediately)
- Self-destructive behaviour (seek help immediately)
- Suicidal thoughts (seek help immediately)
- The death was unexpected or sudden or as a result of an accident
- The relationship with the person who died was troubled
- The relationship with the deceased was particularly close and dependent
- There are a lot of other stresses in the person's life
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Have the courage to get professional help. Reaching out for professional help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength and determination to manage the situation. Seeking out professional help is a statement to yourself that you do not want to continue like this. It is a statement to yourself that you are determined to work on this and get on with your life.

Some of the above issues may also be mixed up with other issues that may have been present prior to the death. If this is the case, mention this to the professional. Withholding this additional information can greatly hinder the help provided. If the grieving person recoils at the suggestions of seeking professional help, it might be best to back off for the moment. If they feel they are being pushed, with repeated suggestions, into talking to a professional, they are less likely at a later stage to ask for help or indeed engage with that help if it is forced upon them.

## **10. Future Triggers**

The myriad of feelings encountered in grief can resurface at particular times, for example birthdays, Christmas, and anniversaries. Other, more subtle, experiences such as songs, smells, places, words, jokes, sporting fixtures, and journeys, can also trigger our minds to re-

experience the pain of our loss. These events can suddenly and unexpectedly bring our feelings back to a level of intensity that occurred immediately after the death. This is normal and to be expected and can be seen to be an important phase in the grieving process and indeed necessary to adapt to our new life without the deceased. If it is possible, planning ahead for these events can help. Can some traditions be kept, some altered, and some dropped?<sup>50</sup> The grieving person should be consulted at all times and reminded that it is Okay to enjoy the event without the deceased and indeed normal to feel guilty about doing so. In the long run it is the best thing to expose ourselves to the pain the event will bring about rather than avoid it forever.

## **11. Social Media**

Following a death social media can help individuals to share their grief. However, if this is not balanced with actually spending face-to-face time with friends and engaging in activities, or talking with a person they trust about their feelings and worries, then this may need to be addressed.<sup>51</sup>

Also, if the person who died is a non-family member, it might be useful to remind those using social media that the family of the deceased may be reading what is on social media, and therefore to be careful and sensitive about what they might write. It might also be useful to ask them to remain vigilant to inappropriate comments or images that may be posted on social media and be prepared to tell an adult. This may help prevent further pain for the family.

## **12. Normalising Activities**

It is important for those who are grieving to return to normalising activities. This may include

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<sup>50</sup> *Coping With Christmas When You Are Bereaved*, The Irish Hospice Foundation, Leaflet 2012.

<sup>51</sup> *Parenting Positively Helping Teenagers to Cope with Death*, Family Support Agency, Barnardos 2009, p 19.

hobbies such as sport, drama, scouts, music or socialising. It is also important to return to normal school/college life. Try not to persuade the young person to return to school because they are missing out on algebra or Hamlet. Algebra and Hamlet do not matter at this time and can wait. Indeed, returning to school for academic reasons is not why they should return. The young person should be persuaded to return to school because the schedule and routine of school life is a very helpful part of emerging into a new phase of the grieving process. School provides us with an activity that makes us feel normal, helps us see life is still going on, and helps us engage in an integral part of normal everyday life. Indeed, returning to school helps us begin to develop a new and different normal without the deceased.

There may be a number of anxieties about returning to school. These may include, (i) being singled out, (ii) being treated differently, (iii) being 'crowded out' by mates, (iv) breaking down in public, (v) being asked emotional questions in public. Talk to the school. Schools can put in place systems to relieve these anxieties and, if necessary, someone from the school can visit the home to give the necessary reassurances. In the turmoil of grief it may be tempting to make big decisions like giving up a hobby or changing school. It needs to be asked, will the difficulties being faced now still be there if hobbies are ceased? Will the difficulties encountered in the current school still be there if they change school? Are 'other issues' prompting hobbies being dropped and/or a desire to change school? Are the hobbies or the current school being used as a displacement to dump the 'other issues'?

Following a bereavement some people engage in a new activity. These activities can include fund-raising, finding ways to memorialise the deceased, volunteering for a charity, helping others or even getting fit. These activities can be a wonderful thing to do if they are helping us process our grief. However, engaging in these activities *only* can become an *outward* distraction and prevent us being *inwardly* self-reflective - which is necessary for us to do when grieving. If we are using these activities as a distraction and these activities are preventing us from working through our grief, in the long run, this is not helpful particularly if these activities become very dominant or even obsessive.

### **13. A Different Normal**

It is worth repeating the following. Grief is not an illness that needs to be cured. It's not a task

with definable, sequential steps. It's not a bridge to cross, a burden to bear, or an experience to 'recover' from. It is a normal, healthy and predictable response to loss.<sup>52</sup> Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity; it is the price we pay for love. Those grieving do not need to be fixed nor do they need to be *taught* how to grieve, but rather, be *allowed* to grieve and to make their own meaning of their new world without the deceased. There is no set schedule for grief<sup>53</sup> and no timetable for how long it will hurt. Grieving does not go in a straight line and sometimes it may do a U-turn. Grief is a process not an event<sup>54</sup> and mourning our loss is hard work, hard emotional<sup>55</sup> work. We need to walk through grief, not run. Each person's grief is unique and should not be compared with the grief of others. Everybody experiences grief in their lifetime and eventually we all learn to adapt to our different life without the deceased. The only way to deal with grief is to grieve.

We don't get over our loss, we adapt to it as space between the pain gets greater and the pain becomes less intense. Time does not completely heal our broken heart; it only teaches us how to live with it.<sup>56</sup> After we have suffered a loss we will more than likely manage to survive and adapt and integrate the loss into our lives as we go on to live happy lives. We will eventually find an appropriate place for our thoughts and memories of our loved one.<sup>57</sup> We eventually renegotiate our relationship with them. We reorganise our life with the deceased playing a different role in our mind and in our heart. We realise, that when they were alive we did not think about them all of the time so we don't have to think about them all the time

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<sup>52</sup> *The Club No One Wants to Join, A Dozen Lessons I've Learned from Grieving Children & Adolescents*, Donna L. Schuurman, The Dougy Center.

<sup>53</sup> *When a Friend Dies*, Marily Gootman, (U.S.A: Free Spirit Publishing, 2005) p 11.

<sup>54</sup> *Healing A Teen's Grieving Heart*, Alan Wolfelt, (Colorado: Companion Press, 2001) p 14.

<sup>55</sup> *Living When A Young Friend Commits Suicide*, E. Grollman & M. Malikow, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) p 51.

<sup>56</sup> *Straight Talk About Death For Teenagers*, Earl Grollman, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) p 129, 129, 6, & 55.

<sup>57</sup> *Grief Matters. Managing Bereavement & Trauma in Schools*. Educational Psychology Service, WELB, p 11.



now that they are dead. We begin to realise that we don't have to measure the love we have for the deceased by the amount of time we think about them or the amount of tears we shed, or the level of sadness we have. We slowly learn to think of the deceased without pain. As we slowly begin to realise that the deceased is only a thought away, our wound slowly closes up, leaving a healed scar.<sup>58</sup>

It is worth pointing out that although this document is written in a sequential manner, the guidelines outlined should only be used as an insight into what *may* lie ahead. The booklet describe the short, medium and long term issues, and it is not deigned to be red by the young person themselves as, at this time, they are only dealing with the immediate term.

Remember every person's grief is unique and they will deal with it at their own pace. Allow them to talk out or act out (safely) their feelings. Allow them to grieve when they are ready. Give them the space to do so and stay out of their way or take a step back when necessary. Hold their hand or give them a hug - be it physically or emotionally - when they need it. Put their emotional needs ahead of your understandable desire to help fix things. Encourage them to look inwards, not outwards, and take your cue as to what to say and do from where they are - rather than where you would like them to be. Avoid rushing them, show patience and, if needs be, show even more patience. Remember, we cannot get back the old normal we have to learn to adjust to a new normal.

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<sup>58</sup> *When a Friend Dies*, Marily Gootman, (U.S.A: Free Spirit Publishing, 2005) p 11.

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## Notes

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