



Introduction

Childhood is a time when children gradually learn to make sense of the world around them. As they grow from babies their brains continue to grow and develop resulting in children of different ages being able to think in different ways. As a result of this, very young children (pre-school and early primary school) may well know what words mean at some level, but can't really think logically so they take things pretty much at face value without realising the implications of some things. For this reason pre-school and early-school children may be rather non-plussed by serious illness or death as they do not yet have the mental development to handle the implications of these concepts.

From about the age of six or seven until about twelve years of age the child is able to think more logically about real things in the real world, can fully understand conversation but has difficulty in thinking logically about abstract concepts such as what death actually means.

For an adult the death of a close family member can result in feelings of pain, guilt, fear, anger or even hope, amongst the many possible emotions. We all react differently to death. Depending upon their age, your children might be very accepting or may have a lot of questions and be well aware of the grief around them. How can you help your children cope after MND?

Should I tell my child what happened?

Many adults worry that they will frighten a child by telling them the truth. It can be hard to believe, but a child's own ideas about what has happened may be more frightening to them than the truth. Not all their questions will have known answers. This may be frustrating for the child but it is better to be as honest as you can, even to the point of saying "I don't know." Giving children the chance to ask the questions and tell you what they think and feel will be as helpful as providing the answers.

If the death is expected in the very near future the possibility of death could be raised in advance with school-aged children to prepare them for the event. Very young children very often don't have a wide enough experience to need any preparation.

It can be difficult to listen to children, especially if they are being very matter of fact about what has happened. On learning that death is a normal part of life the next question younger children often ask is "So when are you going to die?" Encouraging them to be frank is a way of showing them that you care. Childhood is a period of learning; and learning about serious illness and death is a normal part of growing up.

What should I say about what happens after death?

There are many ideas about what

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happens to people after death and it may help to share your own ideas, whether of religious origin or not, about death with a child. Younger children may find it harder to understand and might ask more questions.

Should I let my child see the body?

Seeing the body can help children understand that the person they knew or loved is gone. It can help them believe that death is permanent and give them the opportunity to talk. Most children have a thoroughly morbid streak and look upon seeing a dead body as simply another new experience, even if the deceased was deeply loved. Children shouldn't be encouraged to view the body of a much loved relative if they don't want to.

Should I take my child to the funeral?

Many children do attend burials and cremations. Telling them what to expect will help them, and you, to decide if they should attend or not. If you are likely to be very distressed it can help to let someone you both trust take responsibility for them during the ceremony and explain to them what is going on. Occasionally children may laugh or giggle during the funeral, and this may be an understandable release of unbearable tension.

Should I let my children see me crying or being angry?

If they see you cry it will let them know that it is all right for them to cry too. It will always help if you can explain what you are sad or angry about so that the child doesn't think it is their fault. If you are overwhelmed with pain and feel you are not able to care for the child, perhaps a close relative or friend who you and the child trust and know well could take over

for a while.

Should I let my child stay up late?

You may not be able to keep to usual routines for some time following bereavement, but letting a child break all the rules may not help them, or you, in the long run. Routines provide a sense of security and normality in otherwise unusual circumstances and should be maintained or returned to as soon as possible.

Should I tell the school?

Teachers will be able to be more sensitive to a child if they know about a death. It can be very helpful to talk together with the child and a teacher about what to say to the other children in the class.

Showing your child that you care and are interested in their thoughts is always helpful. Talking about the person who has died can help both you and your children. Younger children may need your help remembering.

Looking at photos, drawings and paintings are great ways for children to remember times with the person they have lost.

How do children react when someone dies?

Every child will respond differently. If you are caring for a child it may help to know what many children say, think and feel when someone important to them dies, examples are given below. But don't be surprised if the child you are caring for finds it difficult to express how they are feeling. Above all, remember that many children cope remarkably well with bereavement and are often less affected than many of the adults around them.

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Some Common Questions:

Dad didn't die. When is he coming back?

It can take a long time to believe that someone who matters very much to you is never coming back, whatever your age. Quiet insistence that what the child has been told is true will win out in the long term and the questions will eventually stop coming.

Why did it have to happen?

Explanations are very important but children may need to ask the same questions over and over again. It will take them time to accept what has happened and the death may seem very unfair to them. They may be very angry that someone they care about has left them. Children often understand when analogies are made with events that are within their experience or simple explanations relating to how disease damages the body.

It was my fault.

However far-fetched this may seem to you, many children worry that something they said or did, or didn't say or do caused the death.

Will you die too?

It is difficult for children to understand why someone dies and they may become frightened about their own death or worry that someone else close to them will die soon. It is best to be direct with them and give straightforward answers such as "Everyone dies, eventually, but hopefully not for a very long time."

Where has she gone?

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Younger children may find it more difficult to grasp that a dead person is not coming back and may ask repeatedly 'Where have they gone?' expecting to be told of a place that they know about.

I wish I were dead.

Like adults, children may sometimes feel it is not worth living without someone they love. They may imagine that if they die they will be reunited with the dead person, or if they die the dead person will come back to life. Rationalise this one away by asking what all their friends and family would do if that happened too and re-enforce their value to friends and families living beings in their own right.

I don't want you to be sad.

It is difficult for children to see people they care about cry and suffer, but it is also important for them not to be shut out and to see that people can survive the sadness. There may also be great comfort in shared grief.

What happens to his body?

Young children might need help to understand that when someone is dead the body no longer works and must be buried or cremated. Most children will understand.

Will it hurt her when she is burned/buried?

Children may think that being dead is like sleeping as this is the closest parallel in their experience. They may need to be told there is neither feeling nor pain after death.

Common Behavioural Changes

Following a death you may notice slight

MND Factsheet 7 Bereavement And Children

changes in your child's behaviour. These might include any of the following.

Mood swings

One minute a child can be happy and the next very angry or distressed.

Not able to concentrate

Many children cannot focus on school work or any activity for some time after a death.

Quiet and withdrawn

Some children will find it difficult to share their thoughts and feelings, preferring to be alone.

Sleeping patterns disturbed

Some children may find it difficult to settle to sleep for a while or may also wake in the night.

Behaving like a younger child

Many children may start doing things they did when they were younger, like sucking their thumbs, wetting themselves or clinging to you.

Difficulties with friends

The death may make a child feel different

from their friends and less sure of themselves with other people. They may be bullied or even bully others.

Breaking the rules, stealing, playing truant from school

A child may feel there is no point in behaving well. They need firm and loving control to show them that the world is still a safe place for them.

Being very good

Some children will be frightened to cause further upset, especially if they feel they did something to cause the death. They may hope that if they are very good the dead person will come back. Some children will work very hard or behave like an older child, trying to take care of the adults around them.

The above are only some examples of the way some children might react to bereavement. Other children may react entirely differently with no real problems. Whichever way the children in your care react, enforcement of normal routines is essential to get the child operating normally again.

Booklets

I Feel Sad, written by Brian Moses; illustrated by Mike Gordon, Hove : Wayland,1993. 32 pages

The best cat in the world written by Lesléa Newman ; illustrated by Ronald Himler. Publication Details Grand Rapids, Mich. ; Cambridge : Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2004 32 pages

Factsheets

Factsheet 13 Coping After Bereavement
Factsheet 20 Library and Information

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