

NHS Shropshire Telford and Wrekin

Child Death Service

Understanding Grief



Information and Support for Families following Child Bereavement

The death of a child is a devastating experience for families. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and every person's journey is unique. This leaflet provides information about grief, reassurance that your feelings are normal, and details of support available to you and your family.

Understanding Grief

Grief affects people emotionally, physically, socially and spiritually. You may experience:

- Shock, numbness or disbelief
- Intense sadness and longing
- Anger or frustration
- Guilt or self-blame
- Anxiety and fear about the future
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches or aches and pains

These reactions are normal responses to a profound loss.

Models of Grief

Kübler-Ross' Five Stages of Grief

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross described five emotional responses that people may experience following significant loss:

- Denial - "this can't be happening"
- Anger - feelings of unfairness, frustration or blame
- Bargaining - thinking about what might have been different or wishing circumstances could be changed
- Depression - deep sadness as the reality of the loss is felt
- Acceptance - gradually learning to live alongside the loss

Remember: These stages are not a checklist. People may move between them, miss some entirely, or experience several at the same time.

Growing Around Grief (Lois Tonkin)

Many people expect grief to become smaller over time. Tonkin's model suggests something different.

Instead of grief shrinking, your life gradually grows around it.

At first, grief may feel all-consuming. Over time, new experiences, relationships and activities create space around the grief, while the love and loss remain an important part of your life.

You do not have to "get over" your child.

It is possible to:

- Continue loving and missing your child.
- Carry grief with you.
- Experience joy and happiness again.
- Build a meaningful future while remembering your child.

The Whirlpool of Grief (Dr Richard Wilson)

This model was developed from work with bereaved parents. It describes grief as being unexpectedly swept from the "River of Life" over a waterfall into a whirlpool. Families often describe feeling:

- Shocked
- Overwhelmed
- Lost
- Repeatedly pulled back into painful emotions

The whirlpool reminds us that grief is not a straight-line process. Some days may feel calmer, whilst at other times powerful emotions return unexpectedly.

Over time, most people learn to navigate a new river of life while carrying their grief with them.

The Dual Process Model of Grief (Stroebe & Schut)

This model suggests that people move between two different ways of coping.

Loss-Oriented Coping

Focusing on:

- Memories of your child
- Photographs and keepsakes
- Feelings of sadness and longing
- Talking about your child

Restoration-Oriented Coping

Focusing on:

- Daily tasks and routines
- Family responsibilities
- Returning to work, education or activities
- Adjusting to life changes

Moving between these two ways of coping is healthy and normal. Some days grief will feel overwhelming; on others you may focus more on everyday life. Both are important parts of bereavement.

Supporting Siblings

Children and young people often grieve differently from adults.

They may:

- Ask repeated questions
- Become withdrawn or clingy
- Display anger or behavioural changes
- Have difficulties at school
- Move quickly between sadness and play

This is a normal way for children to process grief.

Helpful approaches include:

- Giving honest, age-appropriate information
- Encouraging questions
- Maintaining routines where possible
- Informing schools and childcare providers
- Including children in remembrance activities if they wish

Looking after Yourself

In the days and weeks ahead:

- Accept help from family and friends
- Eat and drink regularly
- Rest when possible
- Take one day at a time
- Talk about your child when you feel able
- Be gentle with yourself

Grief can be exhausting. Looking after yourself is an important part of coping.

Further Support

Call the specialist nurse on 07917 010 518 or email
stw.cdop@nhs.net

Scan the QR code to access the Child Death Service Padlet.
It includes practical and emotional support services for families
and professionals following the death of a child.

