

Supporting a bereaved pupil - A pupil's expression of grief - Behaviour

Each young person is different and grieving pupils may display none, one or all of the behaviours described.

Behaviour	What can school do to help?
<p>Separation anxiety</p> <p><i>Fear of something happening while they are away from home or worry about members of their family and friends.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage their return to school following a bereavement; discuss any concerns with the pupil and their family/carers and offer strategies to help, build in regular reviews to monitor and review plan which may inform changes to be made • Find out whether there is a particular person or issue worrying them. • Offer to support their friendship group as friends can be so important at this difficult time. • Reassure the pupil about work they have missed and encourage them to take part in school activities. • A small comfort object carried in their pocket can be helpful; holding on to a soft piece of fabric, a pebble, small toy or photograph can help a pupil remain grounded and in control. See for Memory Making PDF for creative ideas for supporting pupils • Aim to create a school environment which offers flexible normality where the pupil feels safe and cared for. • Give lots of reassurance and encourage the routine of regular school attendance.
<p>Physical symptoms</p> <p><i>A bereaved pupil may present with physical ailments and may worry about their own mortality.</i></p>	<p>Tiredness / Insomnia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grief is exhausting and normal sleep patterns can be upset following a bereavement. • Is the pupil having any difficulty sleeping? Can they identify any specific worries or issues which cause this? • Offer a space where they can take a few minutes out of a busy school day, possibly even to take a nap if they feel too tired to cope in the classroom. • Avoid phrases such as, "gone to sleep", "died in their sleep" when speaking of the person who has died. These terms are unhelpful and can lead to the misconception being dead is the same as being asleep. Explain that when we sleep our bodies are still working, but when someone dies their heart stops beating, they no longer breathe, and their brain stops working.
	<p>Tightness in chest, sore throat, dry mouth, stomach pains, headache and other non-specific ailments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore different emotions - what might these feel like and where in the body may they be felt? • Can they describe the feelings of grief? Are these emotional or physical as well? Think about tiredness, nausea, headaches etc. • Reassure a pupil feeling physically unwell and explore any anxiety they may be feeling. • Are they eating and drinking regularly? Irregular meals or lack of food will add to their physical discomfort. • Ensure processes are in place to communicate to family/carers to ensure the right support is in place at the right time – this includes an exploration of health needs.
	<p>Lack of energy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apathy and reluctance – may be a result of their grief and physical tiredness, a plan which offers consistency between home and school in how the young person will be supported will help and may assist development of resilience for the future • Build up gradually – encourage participation in part of a session. • Set small achievable targets and review regularly.
<p>Regressive behaviours</p> <p><i>Trying to recreate a time of security before the bereavement</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassurance from adults in school - regression will impact a bereaved pupil's self-esteem. • Remind them of their strengths and help them to feel positive about their own abilities. • Set small targets and celebrate their successes. • Allow them time to spend on the areas of the curriculum they enjoy or excel at.
<p>Questioning</p> <p><i>They may seek more information about the death</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aim to tell the truth in simple, age-appropriate language while respecting the family's wishes. • Use the word "dead", "death" or "dying" rather than euphemisms which cause confusion. • Tell a pupil if you do not know an answer and ask whether they would like you to find out. • For difficult questions, ask the pupil what they think or find out what they have been told. • Be honest about questions which cannot be answered. • Good communication with the family/carers will mean a consistent approach by home and school.

<p>Risk-taking</p> <p><i>More common in older pupils as they struggle with the intensity of their feelings</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A death out of the natural order of things can be viewed as a huge injustice and extremely unfair; parents, siblings and friends are not meant to die when young. • Supportive peers and adults in school can offer alternative options for a bereaved pupil to take control and manage their emotions in a safe way. • Allow a bereaved pupil to make their own choices, particularly with regard to their grief, explore options for managing and communicating their grief (See Emotions PDF) • Young people's moods and behaviours can be quite erratic, so it may be challenging to identify grief within 'normal' teenage behaviour. • Talk to the young person directly to find out how they are managing their grief and signpost them to additional support, if required.
<p>Performance in school</p> <p><i>Changes to their attitude or attainment in school</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer flexible deadlines for homework or a safe space to work in school once they feel able to cope with the demands of the curriculum. • Under pressure – bereaved pupils may strive for perfection in their studies, sport or other extra-curricular activity. They may set unrealistic and unachievable goals. • Signs of stress – a bereaved pupil may have underlying feelings of guilt or a desire to 'prove themselves'. • Study options – their home environment may not be conducive to study/homework.
<p>Apathy / withdrawal</p> <p><i>When life has lost its meaning or purpose</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their grief will not go away, but their life will be able to grow and develop, albeit a different life to the one prior to the bereavement – Tonkin's model. • Focus on their strengths and skills. • Find out what they enjoy doing and offer this as an incentive or reward. • Longer term goals – this can be difficult when their world has been turned upside down. Support steppingstones to be identified.
<p>Responsibilities</p> <p><i>Home life may have been turned upside down by a bereavement and a pupil may be caring for others</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware that life may be very challenging outside school – this can take its toll on the wellbeing of a young person. • School can provide a secure environment away from the stresses of home and it may also be a place where a young person feels able to grieve. • Offer a time and space to study to help a pupil who is struggling to keep up with their academic work. This might include some peer mentoring or study leader work with other students • Signpost to support organisations, if necessary.