



## *Separation anxiety after bereavement*

### **Helping bereaved children and young people cope**

The way in which children experience and express grief after a significant death in their lives is influenced by many things.

Their grief will be influenced by:

- the nature and manner of the bereavement
- by their previous relationship with the deceased person
- by their personality and previous life experience, including other bereavements
- by their physical and emotional health
- by their age and developmental 'stage'
- by their relationship with other family members and with friends
- by the behaviour modelled by the adults in their life
- by the availability of understanding and loving support.



## **Balloons Information Sheet 16**

The impact of a bereavement affects children in very similar ways to those of adults, but their expressions of grief can be different.

A bereavement may confront children and young people with their own mortality. They may be thinking for the first time that they could die. They may be angry at the death, and this anger might show itself as a “Why should I care” attitude. Confused and hurting, young people sometimes engage in reckless or dangerous behaviours to show they don’t care or to try to prove they are immortal.

Children and young people who have been personally affected by death will have multiple fears, which might include:

- Fear of losing the other parent if a parent has died (then what will happen to me)
- Fear that they will also die
- Fear of going to sleep, in case they never wake up

- Fear of being separated from a parent or sibling
- Fear of being unprotected and alone

This information sheet focuses on ***separation anxiety after a bereavement.***

From birth, babies form attachments with care givers, and this gives them security and comfort.



The caregiver provides a secure base for the child, and the child seeks this security when feeling threatened, and uses this security as a safe platform for exploring and learning when the threat is reduced.

After bereavement, this secure base can shatter, especially if the person who has died was a caregiver for the child. It's important to understand that separation anxiety

amongst children who have suffered a bereavement is very common and indeed understandable.



Since the bereavement, you may have noticed changes in your child's behaviour which might include:

- Refusal to go to school
- Reluctance to go to sleep
- Complaining of physical sickness like a headache or stomachache

Children with extreme separation anxiety feel constantly worried or fearful about separation, and may be overwhelmed by one or more of the following:

**Fear that something terrible will happen to a loved one.** This is the most common fear; that harm will come to a loved one in the child's absence. For example,

the child may constantly worry about a parent becoming sick or getting hurt or dying. After experiencing bereavement, this is more common, because they have already experienced loss, and therefore fear further loss.

**Worry that an unpredicted event will lead to permanent separation.** Children may fear that once separated from a parent, something will happen to make the separation permanent. For example, they may worry about being kidnapped or getting lost.

**Nightmares about separation.** Children may have scary dreams about their separation fears.

If your child is constantly worried or fearful, and in turn this is keeping them from engaging long term in normal activities, then consider discussing this with your GP. If in doubt, seek help.



## What can you do to help your child?

If you find that your child is very 'clingy' and fearful about leaving you, consider the following:

**Listen to what your child is saying.** It can really help a child to feel heard. Showing understanding and acceptance of their separation anxiety can help to diminish its impact. The experience of being listened to can have a powerful healing effect. It's healthier for children to talk about their feelings—they don't benefit from "not thinking about it." Be empathetic, but also remind the child—gently—that he or she survived the last separation.



**Practice separation.** Leave your child with another trusted caregiver just for brief periods, and give lots of reassurances about when you are coming back. Make sure that you can do exactly what you have promised,

and return in the timescale you agreed.

**Schedule separations when your child is happy and rested.** Children are more susceptible to separation anxiety when they're tired or hungry.

**Develop a "goodbye" ritual.** Rituals are reassuring and can be as simple as a special wave through the window or a goodbye kiss.



**Leave without too much fuss.** Tell your child you are leaving and that you will return, then go. Try not to stall too much.

**Minimise scary television.** Frightening TV can increase separation anxiety.

**Anticipate separation difficulty.** Be ready for transition points that can cause anxiety for your child, such as going to school or meeting with friends to play.

**Provide a consistent pattern for the**

**day.** Don't underestimate the importance of predictability for your child. If your family's schedule is going to change, discuss it ahead of time with your child, so that they feel in control.

**Offer choices.** If your child is given a choice or some element of control in an activity or interaction with an adult, he or she may feel more safe and comfortable.

**Keep calm during separation.** If your child sees that you can stay calm, even though you are going to miss them, he or she is more likely to be calm, too.

**Support the child's participation in activities.** Encourage your child to participate in healthy social and physical activities.



**Help a child who has been absent from school return as quickly as possible.** Even if a shorter school day is necessary

initially, children's symptoms are more likely to decrease when they discover that they can survive the separation.

**Praise your child's efforts.** Use the smallest of accomplishments—going to bed without a fuss, a good report from school—as reason to give your child positive reinforcement.



## What can you do to help yourself?

It's important that you look after yourself, so that you are in the best position to take care of your child. This is especially true if you are grieving too. Consider the following:

- **Talk about your feelings.** Expressing what you're going through can be very helpful, even if there's nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation. Consider if you would like to be referred for bereavement

support, and talk to your GP if you think this would be helpful.

- **Take exercise.** Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. You will also be role modelling this for your child.
- **Get enough sleep.** Feeling tired will only increase your stress, making it harder to cope.

## Concluding thoughts

Bereavement changes children's view of the world.

Before the bereavement, their world might have felt safe, manageable and predictable.

This previous sense of comfort and predictability may in part have gone due to the bereavement.

Whilst you can't restore the same world, you can support your child to find their 'new normal', in



their world without the person who has died.

You can help them to understand why they have a heightened anxiety around separation, and what they might be able to do to stop this becoming too problematic.

Balloons can help. Ring us if you think your child would benefit from 1:1 support, or if you would like further ideas to help them cope with their separation anxiety.

**Ring us for other ideas.**

**Our telephone number is  
01392 826064**

*Here to help*