

HELPING BEREAVED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO MAINTAIN HEALTHY SLEEP PATTERNS

In the aftermath of the death of someone close, the sleep patterns of a bereaved child or young person can change significantly. Left unchecked and unsupported, this can be damaging. We all know that sleep is important for our mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. We also know that a child who isn't sleeping well can affect the wellbeing of the whole family.

Whilst it is important to try to support bereaved children and young people so that they can sleep, it's also important to remember that sleep disturbances are likely to become less acute over time, and not to get too anxious and obsessive about trying to 'solve' them quickly. Sometimes there isn't a quick fix. The acceptance that sleep might be tricky for a while, and the development of coping strategies for managing not sleeping well, can help in the short term.

Longer term sleep problems and disrupted sleep patterns should always be taken seriously and the support of the GP should be sought. If you are worried then your GP will be able to talk this through with you and suggest ways of managing this so that your child in turn finds ways of coping.

WHY CAN'T BEREAVED CHILDREN SLEEP?

A bereaved child or young person, irrespective of how tired they are, may find it difficult to fall asleep easily or may wake up during the night and have difficulty falling asleep again. This might happen repeatedly throughout the night.

Nightmares and vivid bad dreams are not uncommon in bereaved children and young people, and developing a fear of the dark, even if this wasn't present before, is also common.

Occasionally, bereaved children and young people are afraid to go to sleep because they fear that they might not wake up again, or that other loved ones might not wake up again. This can be the case especially if the person they have lost died during the night and/or in their sleep, but can occur no matter what time of day their loved one died.

Sometimes a bereaved child or young person may become obsessively 'hyper vigilant', staying awake on purpose in the hope of ensuring no one else dies or to stop anything bad happening during the night.

It can be the case that if a bereaved child or young person has had the nature of their loved one's death explained to them as "falling asleep", this can increase problems around sleep and sleep patterns.

Quite simply, the distractions of the day, which can help to keep the bereaved child or young person busy, are not present at night. During the night, it's much easier to be 'inside your head', to feel alone and afraid, to have time to reflect on the bereavement and all the fears, uncertainties, anxieties and stresses that accompany the adjustment to the loss of the significant person in their life.



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HOW CAN I HELP?

There are all sorts of ways in which you can help a bereaved child or young person who is struggling with sleep disruption. The ideas below might be helpful, but remember - we are always happy to talk with you if you want to contact us to discuss your worries.

1. Talking things through

Allow your child / young person to share their worries with you, so that they can 'offload' and feel less alone. If you give them the opportunity to say how difficult the nights can be, plus show them that this is a common response to bereavement, then some of their worries can automatically be lessened.

2. The importance of sleep

Whilst sympathising with the difficulty of sleeping, it's also important to remind children / young people about the importance of sleep and the benefits that come from good sleep. This helps to keep the focus on managing the sleep disruption, rather than ignoring it and pretending it doesn't matter

3. Develop sleep strategies together

You can work with your child / young person to think through the best ways of managing their sleep disruption, and this might include:

- Making bedtime a special time by choosing favourite story books to share, snuggling together and sharing the best thing about that day, telling each other how you are feeling, reminding each other of what you will do if sleep doesn't come, staying with the child until they are asleep
- Have a strong bedtime routine, where the same things happen in the same order to give a sense of ritual and calm
- Check the bedroom environment – is it too warm / too cold? Is there too much light / not enough light? Maybe none of these things mattered before the bereavement, but it's worth checking that the physical environment creates the best possible opportunity to fall asleep and stay asleep
- Agree on a relaxation exercise, and do it together each night as part of the 'getting ready for bed' ritual. It might be a stretching exercise, or a chanting exercise, or a breathing exercise – whatever works for your family
- Use a comfort blanket or quilt. Some bereaved children and young people feel more secure at night time if they can wrap themselves in a blanket that is special to them
- Use aromatherapy - the use of certain calming oils such as lavender can be used to aid sleep and promote restfulness. A few droplets on to the pillow can be used, but do not place straight on to the skin (always follow the instructions)
- Introduce a night light that gives a warm and soothing glow
- Make the hour before going to bed a 'slow down' time, rather than having lots of stimulating things going on. Reduce screen time if possible, use bath time as a soothing ritual, cut out stimulating fizzy drinks
- Don't be afraid to mention the person who has died – maybe agree that just before bed you will share one happy memory of the person who has died, and record it in a memory book, which can then be left by the child / young person's bedside. Look together at memory boxes, photographs etc. to show that the person who has died is still important and still a part of your lives. Have a memories jar next to the bed. Each night, add one memory to the jar and read some of the memories together that are already in the jar
- During daytime, look back with your child at the previous night – how long did they sleep for, what did they do when they woke up? etc. Looking at it together in the daytime can make it feel less overwhelming in the night time

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NIGHTMARES

If your bereaved child or young person tells you that they are experiencing nightmares, encourage them to share them and help the child or young person talk about any fears or worries they might have. It can really help to explore nightmares in the day time, when it's not dark and lonely and overwhelming.

- Nightmare diary - some children / young people enjoy keeping a 'nightmare diary' – where they write down their nightmares, and maybe even illustrate them. This can help to take the potency out of these bad dreams, and in the light of day they can seem less harmful and scary
- Make a dreamcatcher - in some Native American cultures, a dreamcatcher is a handmade object based on a willow hoop, on which is woven a loose net or web. The dreamcatcher is then decorated with items such as feathers and beads. When you sleep under your dreamcatcher the dreams are all caught up in the web so that you are not troubled and you can sleep peacefully! Balloons has an activity sheet on how to make a dreamcatcher
- Make worry dolls - worry dolls, originally from Guatemala, are made for children to tell their worries to. Children put them under their pillows at night and their worries are looked after by the dolls so that the child can sleep peacefully. You could also use dolls or other toys that your child already has – the technique is the same. They are learning to 'give their worries away' so that they can sleep (this might be putting them in a 'Worry Monster' toy. Balloons has an activity sheet on how to make worry dolls

EXERCISE IS IMPORTANT

We all know that if we are physically tired, we have a better chance of sleeping well. When we are stressed, we can feel lacking in energy and want to opt out of exercise, even if we used to enjoy it. This can be true for children and young people when they are bereaved. Their usual routine of sports and playtimes may seem less relevant now that they are grieving. Talk to them about this. Ensure that they understand the link between physical exercise and sound sleep. Encourage them to think about when they might go back to their sporting hobbies and their physical play.

