Supporting Children and Young People Dealing with Difficult Events

A Guide for Parents/Carers

1. **Children and young people's initial reactions** may range from great distress to what may seem to be unconcern. All of these – and more – are normal and do not mean that the child/young person is uncaring or reacting excessively**.** Younger children may experience grief by reacting very strongly one minute (e.g. sobbing) and the talking about daily life (e.g.' What's for tea?') next. It does not mean they care any less about what has happened.

2. **Some children/young people may experience some or all of the following, to varying degrees. They may:**

- Become anxious about being separated from their parents/carers for any reason
- Becoming fearful, clingy and anxious
- Bed wet or thumb suck (or develop another babyish behaviour)
- Develop a fear of the dark
- Engage in naughty and attention-seeking behaviour
- Have difficulties going to sleep or waking up
- Have nightmares or disturbing dreams
- Develop physical symptoms such as head aches and tummy aches
- Find it difficult to understand and want to ask questions
- Not want to go to school
- Find it difficult to concentrate on school work

These are all normal reactions for children/young people and adults may experience similar things.

If a child/young person persists with some of these symptoms for a long period of time (six months or more), then professional guidance from a psychologist of a child psychiatrist should be sought.

3. **The following may be helpful:**

- Expect questions, but don't feel pressured to give immediate answers.
- Some questions may need an honest and factual answer, for example, 'Does everyone have to die?'
- Some questions may seem more difficult. You can begin by asking 'What do you think?'…and building on their answer. This will aid their understanding.
- Use clear language. Phrases such as 'gone to sleep' or' we have lost' can be confusing for children.
- Don't assume anything. Ask the child how they are feeling.
- Try to **normalise** the feelings that the child shares with you. They are probably worried that they are the only person who has ever felt this way. It is ok to show that you are upset.
- Provide reassurance and support in the ways that feel right for you. This could be through listening or comforting words.

Some General Rules for Supporting Children and Young People at Difficult Times

- **Tell them what they need to know**
  - Give them the facts at a level they understand
  - Be honest – not just your feelings or what you believe to be the case
  - Tell them if you don't know the answer (don't just make it up)
  - Be prepared to challenge unfounded rumours, gossip or lies

- **Re-assure them that things will be alright**
  - Assure them that things will be alright
  - Tell them that things will get better eventually
  - Give them personal examples of how you have coped with problems
  - Remind them of all the things that won't be changing

- **Keep the routines constant**
  - Don't change the 'ordinary things' that you do
  - Treats are fine, but not all of the time
  - The child/young person's own space and time are really important

- **Keep calm and don't panic about your own fears**
  - If you are worried, share this with the adults in your family – not the children
  - Focus on practical advice for your children
  - Notice how you being calm helps your child to calm down
  - Don't escalate the child/young person's worries by over-reacting yourself

- **Don't project your own fears/anger**
  - Be aware that children/young people react more to feelings than what you say
  - Find out if they are reacting more to your behaviour rather than the difficult event
  - If you can't separate your feelings from the event, get a partner or relative to talk to your child

- **Find enjoyable things for all of you to do**
  - However upsetting the vent, you all deserve enjoyable things to do
  - Don't put off planned treats because "It's not the right thing to do"
  - Little things, such as reading a bedtime story, will still be very important

- **Listen to and talk to the children/young people**
  - Find a time to chat without others interrupting
  - It's better to be doing something together (such as shopping, washing up, going for a walk) rather than having a 'face to face chat'
  - Try to develop an attitude of "I'm interested but it's OK if you don't want to talk!"

- **Just be there**
  - Plenty of hugs and cuddles
  - Keep on doing the 'ordinary' things
  - Tell them how much you love them and how special they are to you
  - Keep up the old stupid family jokes