Good Grief:

What will we tell the kids?

This short booklet helps you to help your child prepare for the possible death of their parent or loved one, and what to expect afterwards.

We'll look at how and when to break the initial news that their mummy, daddy, close relative or carer is probably terminally ill, through to preparing for their loss in advance and, finally, dealing with a death through different stages of a child's development. I have included some background theory about the way children grieve, to give you an idea of what a child might expect - and what you should expect from a child.

Although every situation varies, and every child reacts in their own way to news that a loved one is dying, I have heard the same kind of questions over and over again from those who are looking after the child. ***When should I/we tell them? How will they react? How do I/we know if they're OK?*** And so on. The booklet will tackle some of those most-often-asked questions directly.

This is not an easy journey. We don't like to talk about death at the best of times. It's even harder to talk openly about it when the people involved ***just shouldn't be dying*** - especially when it's a mother or a father who has a life to lead, and children to bring up.

I've helped many children to come to terms with the death of a parent, but I've realised that most professional care focuses on what happens after a death. That's why I'm keen, here, to help you think as much about how to prepare the child for a possible loss, as how they will react afterwards.

Studies show that good communication really helps the grieving process - and a good process before someone dies can really help a child to re-establish their life and to re-imagine their future - one without their loved one, yes, but a positive future nevertheless, in which the memory of, and connection with, the person they've lost helps them to live their own life as fully as they can.

While you may, understandably, wish to 'protect' them from heartache for as long as possible, it's kinder, in the long run, to help them begin to come to terms with the possible change that is about to happen. It's rare that any child is too young to ***feel*** the loss, although the older they are, the more they will understand. Later, we'll look at how children of different ages understand and respond to the loss of a loved one.

You cannot hope to reduce this whole process to a simple programme. Preparing for, and adjusting to loss and change takes a lifetime. But thankfully we don't usually grieve on our own; most people, and most children, have friends and relatives who will share their grief, and embark together on a difficult but profound journey of support and care.

It is a journey of loss – but this journey ***will*** lead into a journey of life. It's our job, as adults, to help the child move at their own speed towards a positive future.

There will never be 'closure', as such, and it is wrong to expect it. Children will put their grief down and pick it up again. And they'll do it at their own pace, in their own style.

When someone is diagnosed with a terminal illness, it is important to re-establish some sense of 'normality' in your family unit as soon as possible. At the same time, however it is crucial to allow everyone the possibility to talk about what is happening. To think about how they understand it and feel about it. This is no easy balance to achieve. But healthy relationships and good family dynamics represent one of the best potential sources of ongoing support and help in the long-term.

You, your family and friends can help your child to make sense of what they are about to go through. It's therefore vital to listen to what they say about their experience, and to help them to share it in their own way - so that ultimately, they can take responsibility for moving forwards into a positive future.

I do hope that the following information, along with the questions and answers we have put together, help to support you within what can be a difficult and traumatic time. Amidst bad news, the good news is that the child you love and care for can be helped, through clear and honest communication, continuing love and support, careful preparation and sensitive follow-up, to take creative and confident steps towards the future they deserve and you wish for them.

Best wishes,

Ana Draper,
Consultant Systemic Psychotherapist
in Palliative Care

"It's within the relationship that you decide what needs to happen. There's no automatic way of saying, 'These are the things you have to do with a grieving child.'"

Section 1:

Making preparations - dealing with a child in the period from discovering the news of a terminal illness, to the death of a parent or loved one.

Breaking the news to your child: how much, and how soon, should you tell them?

There's never a good time to tell your child that mummy or daddy, or someone important to them, is dying. Naturally, it will be tempting to put it off for as long as possible. But it's important - for your child's sake - that you speak to them as soon as you can.

Don't overload them with too much, too soon, however. One way of beginning, could be: *"Mummy is ill - and this is what we know so far. Do you have any questions about this?"* From there, try to provide a clear message that you'll answer any questions your child has, in their own time. Reassure them that it's OK to ask questions, or not to, as the case may be. Questions you could ask are: *"Mummy is ill, have you noticed? What do you think might be wrong with her? Let me know if you would like me to explain anything to you about her illness."*

These questions will help you to know what the child has noticed and already understands.

Answer your child's questions at ***their*** pace. It's about giving them enough information from the start to help them ask the questions when they feel it is time.

You need only to answer the question that they are asking; don't go any further. Each child will be different in terms of what they can manage. They will give you the cues - and you will learn to pick those up. It is in those moments that you need to be transparent, frank and honest - even if you say, *"I don't quite know what's happening."*

Sometimes it can be tempting not to tell the truth. It can be much more comforting to say, *"Daddy isn't going to die."* But children can end up feeling very angry if they have been lied to and have not had the chance to say goodbye.

Try not to be too specific with dates, however. Sometimes, a seriously ill person will die sooner than expected; sometimes, they will outlive their prognosis handsomely. You can say that mummy or daddy will die, but you are not sure when, or how.

Remember that while death might be imminent, there is also a life to live. Don't lose sight of that. People often say, *"There is no future"* but that is not true. There ***is*** a future for you all - it's just ***limited***. The question is, how are you going to live that future?

You can ask your children, *"How are we going to live as a family during the time we do have together?"*

How will you know if your child needs to talk?

This is a really important question to ask. The response is likely to vary from child to child. But it is all about trying to understand their behaviour in advance, so that you know, when the time comes, how they might want to deal with talking and asking questions. So try speaking to them about how they think they would like to do this, so that you all have a better idea about what to expect.

Can grieving start before a parent dies?

Lots of people do not realise this, but the process of grieving can start for a child when their parent becomes ill. A father who always used to take his children to football may no longer have the energy. A mother who was always playful and full of life might not seem like the "old" mum they used to know.

Some children even talk about their "first" mummy or daddy and their "second" - the fit, healthy one they used to know, and the ill person who has taken their place. The child often keenly feels this change of identity before their parent dies.

Be aware, too, that the role of the healthy parent may begin to change. As they become a carer for their partner, for example, they may not have the time or energy for all the things they used to do with their children.

What practical steps can you take to make these early days of change easier?

It is important to try to retain a routine as much as possible. That is not to say you keep the same old routine - you cannot. But it helps if you are able to re-create new routines to help your children feel that there is a sense of control.

Make sure the pace of change is slow, if you can; one step at a time, so that it is not all new and overwhelming. The more you involve your child in the decision-making process, the better - again, so that they feel in control. There is so much you and they cannot control, it is good to have some things you can.

Adjusting their expectations about the future

When we are growing up, we tend to believe that our parents will always be there. We take it as a "given". But if one of them becomes seriously ill, we are forced to re-shape our expectations of what it will mean to grow up. That's why it's important to help a child to "re-imagine" what their future could be like now things are changing.

Part of that process means being realistic about how their material circumstances may need to change.

For example, if dad is ill and has stopped work, the family's income may be decreasing significantly. You may have to move home, or your child may have to move school and make new friends. Or they may have to readjust to life on social security for the time being.

An illness can challenge any beliefs about the future in an instant. This makes a child feel as if they have lost all control over their circumstances. You can help them to deal with this lack of control by talking about how you can all begin to take control of your new circumstances more effectively.

Should you hide your emotions from a child at this time, to protect them?

It's entirely natural for a parent to try to protect their child from their emotions. But distress and emotion are neither good nor bad. It is what we do with them that matters. Talking about your emotions can really help your child to understand what is happening. It is easy to withdraw from your child rather than show emotion. But that can make things harder, because it seems like a punishment.

Families tend to protect each other from emotion - but often that is not helpful. It can lead to everyone feeling isolated. So try, if you can, to talk about your emotions with your children; show them that emotions are a neutral thing and it's OK to express them.

Remember that this can be an intense time for children. They are unlikely to have experienced such emotion before, so the more you talk about it the better. Remind them that when someone's dying, we can expect to have very powerful emotions. It is about helping to channel them appropriately.

What about crying, specifically? Should you let your children see you cry?

It can be easier for a child to cope with a cross parent than one who is showing signs of vulnerability through crying. But that's not to say, *"Don't cry!"* Instead, be careful to explain - and continue to remind them - that even if you cry, you are OK. You do not want them to think, mistakenly, that you are tearful because of something ***they*** have done to upset you.

Do not try to pretend that you have not been crying when you obviously have been; it is better to acknowledge what is transparently obvious. However, if you do not want to say why you've been crying at precisely that moment, say you've been listening to a sad song instead.

As a family, it is really good to think together about what tears may mean to the parent that has cried them, and to the person they have cried in front of. So try to talk about it when you have recovered. It is also helpful to remind each other that crying is not a sign of weakness, and that the person who is tearful is more robust than other family members might assume.

How can you help your child to see things more positively?

It's important to discuss change with your children, and to help them see the future in terms of 'new possibilities' instead of something ominous or difficult or horrible. Try to ask them, *"What shall we do to try to bring good out of this?"*

One lady I knew could no longer do her housework. But her seven-year-old daughter learned to lay the table really well. Everyone took pride in this - especially when friends and relatives visited for a meal. That change happened out of necessity; and yet they created something really positive through the process of the illness.

How can you tell if your child is coping with 'new possibilities'?

Every child is different, of course, and some don't like to have too many options. So, feel your way forward together, being sensitive to how your child likes to act. There is no blueprint for saying, *"This is what you must do."* How old is your child? What are they like? Do they want to know everything and be informed? Would they rather just let everyone else get along with it? Ask yourself these kinds of questions.

Parents and carers tend to think that talking is a positive sign, but it does not always have to be - sometimes children do not always need to talk. Do not force it.

But is there a right or wrong way for a child to react at this time?

No. While it's exceptional circumstances, your child is likely to react in a way that is 'normal' for them (even if that is a surprise for you!). People get worried if a child is not talking much, or asking the right questions; it can be disconcerting if they are very emotional or - the reverse - not displaying any emotion. But try to talk with them from the start about how they think they might react. That will help both them and you to understand their behaviour better!

Do you need to include other people (friends, school) in preparing your child for their loss?

Yes. Think about which other adults will help to support your child in the future - adults such as school teachers. Talk to the school and ask how they would like to support the child. Find out together whom your child would turn to naturally at school, in case they have a moment of grief and cannot manage. The more you help them to understand that their response is normal, that it's *OK*, then the happier they will feel to make that response when the time comes.

Should you arrange a meeting with the school?

Yes. It is worth getting everyone together, if you can - you, the teachers, and your child - to explore how your child might like other people to help them when they experience moments of sadness or grief, and who would they like to talk to.

It's worth you talking with their teachers about how to spot if they are in need of some help, if it's all getting too much. Talk about these 'trigger' times so that everyone feels easier about reading the signs and acting appropriately when the time comes.

It helps the child to make choices - and this gives them a little more control in an out-of-control situation. The more areas of control they have, the more healthy they will feel. They will feel like they can manage things better themselves.

Should we ask the school to respond to the death in a particular way, when it comes?

Some schools have been wrongly advised to make a death public and *"get it all out in the open"*, when sometimes a child wants to tell their friends themselves, quietly, in their own time. That is why it is important to include the child in a "round" conversation - so the teachers know how best to act, and so the child is assured that they have some control.

How do you prepare, in advance, to keep the memory of mum or dad or a special person alive to them?

Children can worry about losing the memories they have of their parents, so it is good, if you can, to take your children to see your friends in advance to talk about this. You can choose people - friends, family - to help trigger your child's memories. These people will help to provide different memories - and these stories can help them to reconnect in a powerful way.

We call these people "memory holders". Try to discuss with your children who they think the key memory holders might be - and meet up together with these friends, if you can, to talk about their role in keeping the memories.

How could the person who's dying help to create a 'continuing bond'?

There are many things you will have done with your children that will evoke powerful memories - teaching them to skip, for example, or to paint, cook, or ride a bike. You might discuss songs you used to sing together.

You could create a journal for your child about how you feel about them. It's good for them to hear their parent's voice on such a personal subject. You might want to tape it, write it, or put a photo album of key memories together. There are lots of different ways of continuing the bond.

Should they leave letters or gifts for special times in the future when they won't be there?

Some parents like to do this - some do not. It might be for their 18th birthday, their wedding day, or for when their own child is born. You may want to write something about what you might be thinking; a daddy might wish to write to his daughter about walking down the aisle with them in spirit, even though they can't be there in body. But some parents do not want to do that, and that is fine.

Section 2:

After the death: continuing the process; sharing the grief

How do you know if you are saying or doing the right thing?

Simply by asking the child. Say to them, *"How is this working for you? Do you want me to leave you or stay with you when you're upset?"* Those kinds of questions help you all to know, as you go on, what is working and what is not. Again, it gives back a little bit of control to the child, too.

Remember that things change. So, just because they've told you to leave them alone once, doesn't mean the second time they will want to be left alone. So it is OK to ask the same question again as things emerge. Never assume anything. The process of asking questions helps you to fit more closely with the child, whose feelings may be fluctuating a lot.

What if the child is acting differently to what you have all decided would be 'normal' behaviour? Is that something to worry about?

Just try to be healthily curious - with the child - about what is making them act in that way. One little girl had lost her daddy, and her friends at school were trying very hard to support her. But they kept asking her about her daddy all the time.

It became a little overbearing and the child could no longer face going to school. She felt she had no space. We talked to the friends and the child about how they all could still be best friends and a gang without connecting the child so quickly into her grief. She wanted school to be a place where she could think about life, not death.

It is similar with children at home. A little girl believed she had given her mother cancer, because she heard her telling a friend that she had developed it while she was pregnant. In fact, the pregnancy had probably staved the cancer off for a while. But the little girl did not believe that, so her behaviour, which flowed out of a wrong belief, became problematic.

So, if a child is suddenly acting differently to how they normally would, you can ask, *"What are they believing that is making them act differently?"* Often you can shift their belief, and that will help.

How do you talk to a child who is very young about death? Is it OK to use euphemisms?

A child will understand death differently depending on their developmental stage (see section 4). One child I knew of was once told, *"Mummy has gone to heaven"*. A few months later, however, the child said, *"Let's go and visit mummy in heaven"* - which seemed natural to her, as she thought that heaven was a place like Birmingham.

She had not understood what she was being told. So euphemisms are not always helpful. The question is, how do you help your child to understand that they are experiencing something permanent, whilst also creating 'continuing bonds' - that is, recognising that a deceased parent still has a presence in their lives.

In the past, we tended to think it important to "Say goodbye" once and for all. Today, we do not think like that. Your mother is your mother, and there will always remain a sense of her within you, whether she is alive or not.

Certain things may remind your children of the parent they have lost, or things they learned from them - each time they tie their laces, for example. It is about interconnectedness, inter-relationship - something that goes beyond the finality and physicality of the relationship.

We say goodbye and hello more times than we realise. You say goodbye to your children in the morning and say hello in the evening when you pick them up from school. The same is happening through death.

How should the story your child tells about their grief change over time? What can you do to help them grieve effectively as they grow up?

Once upon a time, there were four-year-old twins whose mum had died. They were told that the fairies had come down and taken her up to heaven, where they now looked after her.

That's a delightful and helpful story when you are four. But when you are seven or eight, it is not so helpful. So how do you help that story to evolve and develop according to the different phases of a child's growth? It is easy to forget that we need to help children to develop these stories truthfully as they grow up. At each developmental phase (see section 4), a child needs help to re-orient their story - otherwise, they will end up starting the process of grieving again from scratch each time they reach a new stage.

So what can you do to help your child develop the story they tell?

You can help by talking to the child at each stage of their life and by checking that they understand. There are different kinds of stories - some are very simple - such as the story about the fairies. Others are more complex - and as your child gets older they need to develop their story to bring in more information. Your child will want to find out more about what it was like when their parent was dying, for example, what things she might have said, and so on. As you help the child to develop their story, you will help them to proceed healthily instead of having to start grieving all over again. If they don't develop the stories over time, a child will fantasise instead - and often the fantasy is worse than the reality.

Section 3:

More background to childhood bereavement

The oscillating nature of children's grief

Children are far more random about the way they express their grief than adults, which makes the process much harder for us to define. Whether you are a professional, a parent or a primary carer, you need to bear in mind a number of things if you are to respond effectively.

One of the most significant, when it comes to children, is that one minute they may seem to be fine, but the next they can seem upset or as if they are 'acting up'. Sometimes, it may even seem as if they are wilfully exploiting the situation. We call this up-and-down, fluctuating response to grief 'oscillation'. And you may find oscillation disquieting, as it may seem as if the child is having behavioural problems or being downright insensitive.

The bereavement specialist Esther Shapiro puts it very helpfully:

> *Children are more likely to put their grief down and pick it up again, a manner of coping that adults might consider callous if they see the child only during moments of distancing and not during the moments of longing and intense recognition of their loss.*

This is the context in which you are likely to be trying to support the child. Try not to be surprised or shocked or angered by it.

Another thing to bear in mind is that other family members - who would normally help to protect and support the child - will be caught up in their own grief as well. It seems only natural, in this context, to try to protect people from your own grief; the trouble is that when everyone becomes too afraid to speak about how they are feeling, or about the person who has died, it is unhelpful. The silence that follows can stall the entire process by which your collective grief can help a new, positive story to emerge.

If grief is bottled up or swept under the carpet, children can find it hard to communicate with those who normally support them. In fact, the whole family can sometimes require outside support to start talking beneficially about the dead person. But it is important to make sure you try to keep talking, as good communication leads to fewer behaviour problems further down the line for the child.

Grief is all about constructing a lasting story that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead person into their ongoing lives. You can do this by helping your child to talk with others who knew the deceased. However, it is vital not to subject them to a huge barrage of questions. If your child has not consented to these kinds of conversations, it can feel intrusive and upsetting. (It is important to ask the child whether 'now' is a good time to have a chat, for instance.)

And while it's important for children and their families to understand who they are and how they relate ***afresh***, in the light of their significant loss - sometimes it is just as important ***not*** to talk. The routine of school life, for example, can be a source of certainty and stability in a changing personal world; and so, too much talk at school about their bereavement could undermine their wellbeing. It is good to talk, but it is also good to allow space for silence and even 'normality'.

Section 4:

Developing grief from childhood to adulthood

As the child grows up, they will need to revisit their grief - and readjust the story they tell about it - at different stages of their development and understanding.

Formative moments and milestones can prove very significant, especially when a child wishes her or his mummy or daddy were there to help them through it. The onset of adolescence and puberty, for example, can be an extremely difficult time for any child. The absence of a parent can force a child to revisit their loss in a real and psychologically painful way. The emotions they experience may result in seemingly unreasonable or irrational behaviour patterns, which could become a source of breakdown within your family relationships and their emotional health.

While every child will grieve in their own unique way, there are common characteristics of grief which occur within four broad stages of childhood.

Very young children and babies

Before the age of two, a child has very little language to express their loss. However, even such young children and babies are aware that people they have been attached to have gone, and can begin to realise that they are not coming back.

When a baby or young child feels unsafe, or if a parent leaves the room or stays away for longer than they can bear, a baby or young child will start crying to express their distress. If the adults around the child are also distressed and there is a change in their care routines, this can cause greater anxiety.

Children from two to five years

From two to five, children are beginning to grasp the reality of death as something 'final', and starting to understand that the dead person is not coming back.

These children may find it hard to acknowledge the death fully, as it threatens the security of their world. It also makes them question their own mortality. During this period of development they will form important attachments. Children cope with being separated from parents or carers by creating a picture of them in their mind. If they experience the death of someone close, they will communicate their grief through their play and everyday activities.

Children from 6 to 12 years

Much of the last section applies to this age range too. However, a child from 6 to 12 will have developed their understanding of death and life much more fully, and will be well aware that everyone dies one day, including themselves. The death of someone close may leave a child in this age range struggling to express their own feelings.

So, you may find that they 'withdraw' from the family, especially if adults are also grieving. Sometimes, if they know a parent is dying, a child may try in advance to make themselves less dependent on the adults around them. They may also feel more emotionally volatile and express themselves accordingly. They will also be able to ask pertinent questions about the death that has occurred.

Adolescents

Adolescents, as we know, can be complex creatures! Often they can be preoccupied with thoughts about life and death. However, at other times they can be so busy that they rarely stop to reflect. A significant death can be complicated by the natural separation that has already started to occur between them and their parent or carer. In adolescence, we all develop a sense of the future and how others feature in that future.

Adolescent young people communicate grief in many different ways. They might withdraw to a private world, which creates a feeling of safety for them. They might wish to regress and become like a younger child. Sometimes they might try to detach themselves from the strong emotions they are experiencing, or display anger.

Section 5:

Recap and making contact

The most important thing you can do for your child is to seek pro-actively to ***listen*** and ***look*** out for how they are feeling, and how they want to prepare for this difficult journey.

Let them know they are not alone, even though they are going to experience loss. And demonstrate to them, as early as you can in the process,that you will be looking for the signs of how they wish to prepare for their grief, and listening hard to what they have to say.

There is a big difference between hearing someone talk and ***actively listening*** to what they are saying. Most of us, if we are honest, are not great listeners. But this is one time when it is crucial to become as sensitive, patient and observant as you can.

Every child will respond in their own way, and - given the chance - most will respond 'normally' according to who they are and how they normally act. But it is by speaking to them, and listening to their reply, that you will really begin to prepare ***together*** for the road ahead.

Do not forget that a child or young person is likely to 'put down' and 'pick up' their grief depending on how they feel. Do not be upset or dismayed if they seem to be insensitive or callous. If they are not outwardly demonstrating grief, it does not mean to say they are not grieving. (On the other hand, just because they seem to be outwardly grieving, it does not mean to say they are always dealing effectively with their loss - so remain healthily 'curious' at all times.)

Ask questions, and invite your child to ask their own questions too, at their own pace. Let things flow naturally - do not overload a child with too much, too soon, but do not try to protect them from the imminence of their grief by masking your emotions or trying to pretend 'this isn't happening to us'. Honesty and clear communication is the key to a healthy, on-going relationship within your family.

Be in touch with school, and keep your child involved in your discussions. Remember to ask them how they would like to be treated at school when the time comes. How would they like to tell their friends? If they feel overcome with sadness, how would they like people to react? Keep all the key players in the loop of your communication, and let your child speak.

Don't forget that once they have lost their mum or dad, they will need to revisit the story they tell about their loss, as well as keeping a healthy connection with the person they have lost as they try to move forward. Their loss is permanent, but that does not mean they must face a complete void. What can be done, ahead of time, to help them think of positive connections between parent and child which they can be reminded of, or symbolise? What small reminders will keep their mummy or daddy's presence in their life real, even as they learn to live without the person themselves? Who else can help to remind them about how their mummy or daddy used to act, what they used to say, how they used to be..?

They will need help at all the important, life-changing milestones as they grow up. The story of their grief can be deepened and enriched through these times of development, so that they nurture a healthy understanding - and not a fantasy - of who their parent used to be, how they died, and so on.

It is hard not to feel bleak and blank about a future that features the death of someone very special. But together, through good communication, healthy relationships, times of talking and times of listening, you can help your child to imagine a future that embraces their loss, but learns to live through it, and beyond it, creatively, positively and with hope. We wish you well.

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