

# HOW TO COPE WHEN SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENS

- ❖ Reach out – people do care
- ❖ Talk to your friends, family and teachers - talking is the most healing medicine
- ❖ Remember you are normal and having normal reactions – don't label yourself as crazy or mad
- ❖ It is acceptable to cry
- ❖ Spend time with people who have a positive influence on you
- ❖ Sticking to your “normal” routine helps. Structure your time – keep busy
- ❖ Take time out – go for a cycle or kick a football
- ❖ Make as many daily decisions as possible. This will give you a feeling of control over your life, e.g. if
- ❖ someone asks you what you want to eat – answer them, even if you're not sure
- ❖ Make a special effort to take care of yourself during this time. Try to get some extra sleep, eat nutritious
- ❖ foods and get some exercise, even if it is just a walk
- ❖ It is acceptable to smile
- ❖ Some people find that writing or drawing is helpful. What about writing a note or letter to the family of the person who died or the person themselves?
- ❖ When the stress level is high there is a temptation to try to numb the feelings perhaps with
- ❖ alcohol and drugs, this complicates matters rather than bringing relief
- ❖ If your feelings and reactions seem different from those of your friends, remember everyone reacts
- ❖ differently
- ❖ Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal – don't try to fight them – they'll decrease over time and become less painful
- ❖ Provide some balance to the negative things that have gone on by doing something special or fun for yourself. Think about something that makes you feel good. Then make it happen – like going to the cinema, listening to music, calling a friend, etc. Laughter is good medicine. Watch a funny movie or play a silly game with younger children to lighten your spirits
- ❖ Use of social media can help but do not rely on it as your only source of support
- ❖ Useful websites: [www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie); [www.youth.ie](http://www.youth.ie); [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)
- ❖ Above all, realise that what you are experiencing is normal following a traumatic event. Be understanding of yourself and others.

# STAGES OF GRIEF

Grief is a normal, healthy and predictable response to loss. Although there are distinct phases in the grieving process, people go through these stages in different sequences and at different paces. Generally the grieving process in adults is thought to take about two years, while with children and adolescents it may be over a more extended time-frame with different issues arising as they go through developmental milestones.

## Denial, numbness, shock (up to 6 weeks)

- ✓ Death of the person may be denied
- ✓ Emerging feelings may be suppressed
- ✓ Refusal to talk about the death
- ✓ Bereaved keeps very busy to avoid thinking about the death
- ✓ Bereaved may show signs of confusion and forget everyday routines
- ✓ Children in shock may display either silent withdrawal or outbursts of crying.

## Acute grief/searching and longing for deceased (6 weeks to 4 months)

- ✓ Acute sadness – crying.
- ✓ Physical pangs of pain including loss of appetite and disturbed sleep
- ✓ Emotional pain accompanied by dejection, hopelessness, lack of concentration
- ✓ Fears of life after death, nightmares, ghosts
- ✓ Disorganisation
- ✓ Strong guilt feelings and questioning of self and others, particularly in the case of a sudden death
- ✓ Feelings of anger at the departed for leaving them
- ✓ Bereaved may reject offers to comfort them.

## Adaptation to life without the deceased (6 months to 18 months)

- ✓ People begin to adjust to their lives without the person who is gone
- ✓ Sense of isolation
- ✓ Fearful of forgetting the deceased
- ✓ Less crying and irritability
- ✓ Exacerbation of existing personality problems. Children with low self-esteem may be at a greater risk of emotional/behavioural difficulties.

## Normalisation of Life

- ✓ Getting on with life
- ✓ Returned sense of humour and play
- ✓ Able to participate emotionally in new relationships
- ✓ Changed relationship with the deceased – able to think of the deceased without pain
- ✓ Reduction in physical/emotional symptoms
- ✓ Less guilt.

# WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD THROUGH THIS DIFFICULT TIME

Children do not need to be taught how to grieve. They will do it naturally and in healthy ways if we allow them and if we provide a safe atmosphere, permission and example to do so.

- ✓ Listen carefully. Let them tell their story. Tell them that the reactions they are having are normal
- ✓ Pay extra attention, spend extra time with them, be more nurturing and comforting
- ✓ Reassure them that they are safe
- ✓ Don't take their anger or other feelings personally. Help them to understand the relationship between anger and trauma. Help them find safe ways to express their feelings e.g. by drawing, taking exercise, or talking
- ✓ When going out, let them know where you are going and when you will be back
- ✓ If you are out for a long time, telephone and reassure them.
- ✓ Do not be surprised by changes in behaviour or personality. They will return to their usual selves in time.
- ✓ Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse". People are not consoled by such statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and help them
- ✓ Help them to understand that defiance, aggression and risk behaviour is a way to avoid feeling the pain, hurt and or fear they are feeling
- ✓ Tolerate regressive behaviour such as nail biting, thumb sucking, or the need for a night light
- ✓ Share your own experience of being frightened of something and getting through it
- ✓ If they are feeling guilt or shame, emphasise that they did not choose for this to happen and that they are not to blame. Even if they were angry with the person who died, or had been mean to them, this did not make it happen
- ✓ Work with the school support services and other available services
- ✓ As well as advising your child about appropriate use of social media, monitor their use, particularly during this vulnerable time.
- ✓ Useful website: [www.webwise.ie](http://www.webwise.ie)

