

Guiding Conversations

Bereavement



Why talking about bereavement matters

The aim of this guiding conversation is to 'normalise' grief, loss and bereavement. This might be in the context of a general conversation about these topics, or because one or more girls in the unit is currently experiencing bereavement.

We live in a society where culturally, adults very often avoid talking about death, grief, loss and bereavement for fear of causing upset and because it can feel uncomfortable. Many young people are more open when discussing death and dying, but adults often build cultural barriers to protect themselves.

In reality, avoiding talking about grief, loss and bereavement when a young person is going through a difficult time can be more problematic. It can lead to them feeling that others don't care, meaning they feel more isolated and less able to talk about what is happening.

It is important to create an open environment where grief, loss and bereavement can be discussed, either on an individual basis with the girl or young person, or in a group discussion. The leader should be prepared for the discussion.

Grief and loss are experienced in relation to other changes as well as death. These feelings can be explored in the context of changes that are familiar for young people such as moving schools, moving between Brownies and Guides, or losing something precious.

The aim of the conversation

The aim of this guiding conversation should be to normalise grief, loss and bereavement.

- To recognise that grief and loss represent change for a young person.
- To understand more about grief and what can help, both before and after bereavement, along with where to get help.
- To challenge some of the 'myths' that young people may already have regarding grief, loss and bereavement.
- To enable young people to understand that support may be necessary before bereavement to cope with the changes brought about by a long-term illness or to prepare them for bereavement.
- To increase young peoples' resilience to grief, loss and bereavement around expected or unexpected deaths.
- To increase a young person's capacity to support themselves and their peers who are experiencing grief, loss and bereavement.

Preparing to talk about these topics

Grief, loss and bereavement are emotive subjects. Discussion can trigger a range of reactions in both young members and leaders. Leaders need to be prepared for this and be confident enough to discuss the subject and know where to get additional support for young members and for themselves if needed.

Leaders should be aware of recent personal bereavements of young members, and discuss with them how they would like to be involved in the conversation.

To help leaders feel more prepared for conversations, they might want to think about timelines for their own life events and losses - how they felt, how they coped and who supported them.

How to talk about bereavement

Talking about bereavement doesn't just happen when someone is affected, or a discussion has been planned. It often comes up anyway, so it's good to be prepared. Girls may share news of a loss or bereavement in their lives during a meeting.

Rather than focus on a particular loss, as a leader you may want to have an open conversation or a group activity to open the subject - perhaps a 'Thought for the moment'.

It might be helpful to keep openings general or relate it to the death of a public figure, but girls may wish to discuss loss that they personally have experienced as part of this conversation. Make it clear that no-one has to share experiences if they don't want to.

Defining loss, grief and bereavement

A **loss** in someone's life can lead to a range of reactions: emotional but also often physical, behavioural and spiritual. Losses include:

- changes in the life of a young person, for example moving schools away from friends.
- the loss of self-esteem such as through bullying or a specific incident.
- the loss of independence, e.g. through illness.
- the loss of expectations for the future when someone has a terminal diagnosis.
- losses associated with death, e.g. a family member or a friend. Many more young people will be bereaved of a pet or feel a loss when a public figure dies.

Bereavement is a particular kind of loss around the death of someone important. **Grief** is the feelings and reactions that someone has in response to their bereavement. These feelings and reactions can start before someone has died, if they have a life-threatening illness or their death seems a possibility.

What is bereavement like?

The relationship with the person who died was unique, and in the same way, the bereavement is unique too. One bereaved young person may be affected in a different way from the next. This can be influenced by the circumstances of the death, whether they had time to prepare for it, how much support they have from family, friends and school, and what else changes as a result of the bereavement such as having to move house or live with someone new.

Lots of people have heard there are 'stages' of grief - and expect that their grief or that of other people will follow a set pattern. But often there is no pattern like this.

Understanding the feelings and reactions that are common in grief can help prepare young people for the experience, and to know when to get extra help. Common reactions include:

- overwhelming feelings which can include sadness, anger, guilt, relief, numbness.
- difficulty sleeping and concentrating.
- getting really angry.
- feeling lonely and misunderstood.
- worrying about other people and the future.

What can help?

Understanding grief can help young people feel more in control. Other helpful things include:

- Having their grief acknowledged by those around them - people not avoiding them.
- Support from friends and family.
- A chance to talk about and remember the person who died.
- Help to manage overwhelming feelings.
- Having an explanation about what happened that makes sense to them.
- Having the chance to meet other young people who have been bereaved.

Some frequently asked questions

What if people don't want to talk about bereavement? Is that OK?

Yes, this is perfectly normal. Giving choices about how much to share in these discussions helps young people feel more in control. Have an alternative activity ready in case girls don't want to take part.

Is unexpected bereavement harder?

Different circumstances make different bereavements tough for different reasons. If the loss is sudden or unexpected, there will be an additional shock. But if it follows a long time of illness and uncertainty, everyone can be exhausted by the time the person dies.

Can we “move on” after bereavement?

‘Moving on’ can suggest that we will forget the person who has died, but usually they stay an important part of our lives. There can be an expectation that the pain of loss and other feelings associated with bereavement will just stop. More often, those feelings stay with us but change in intensity or how often we have them. Over time, they become easier to manage.

What should we do after a death affecting the unit?

- Think about sending a card or acknowledging the death in some way.
- Consider what you need to tell the rest of the unit and, if appropriate, discuss with the family whether they have any preferences.
- If the death was of a unit member or someone that everyone knew well, think about how to remember that person together, e.g. through making a memory tree or quilt.
- Keep an eye out for those who are particularly affected by the death, and know where to find them or their family more help if they need it.

Simple unit activities for understanding bereavement

(See ‘how to talk about bereavement’). Other activities could include:

- **A research activity.** This could be on the resources available to support young people with loss and bereavement, or understanding how loss and bereavement is understood and approached in different cultures. Guides can discuss what they have found from their research.

How do different faith traditions deal with bereavement?

‘Faith at end of life’ published by Public Health England is a great starting point for researching how different faiths deal with bereavement:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/496231/Faith_at_end_of_life_a_resource.pdf

- **External visitor.** This could be a fundraising or service manager from a hospice, a specialist palliative care nurse based in the hospice or community, or a speaker from the local childhood bereavement network.
- **Visit** to an adult’s or children’s hospice or a community setting that cares for palliative / end of life patients.
- **An act of kindness.** Guides can be inspired to get involved with volunteering at their local hospice, fundraising or offering practical support for patients, writing poems, writing postcards, cooking, listening.
- **A creative activity** such as artwork or poetry writing to help young people express their feelings.

Sign-posting for further support

To help leaders to feel able, confident and supported in delivering the conversation online support is available:

Winston's Wish	https://www.winstonswish.org/about-us/
Hope Support Services	http://www.hopesupport.org.uk/
Hospice UK	https://www.hospiceuk.org
Dying Matters	http://www.dyingmatters.org/
Childhood Bereavement Network	http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/
Noah's Ark Children's Hospice	https://www.noahsarkhospice.org.uk/
Cruse Bereavement Care	https://www.cruse.org.uk/
Maggie's Centre	https://www.maggiescentres.org/
NHS Choices	https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/bereavement/

Books are also available to help young people cope with grief, loss and bereavement. Visit <https://childbereavementuk.org/for-families/info-sheets/other-reading/support-children-young-people/>

Resource compiled in collaboration with:

