

Trauma and Grief During the Pandemic

SERIES 3 COVID 19 IN INDIA



Supporting bereaved children

Many children have lost one or both parents, grandparents or family members during this pandemic. This experience will change the course of their life, and they are the most vulnerable of us. In a time where we are all coping with collective trauma, we must be more attentive to young children, for whom grief will be a more confusing, difficult process. We have to do this with sensitivity and care.

Children experience grief differently from adults.

Their ideas and understanding about life and death are still growing, and we need to be supportive of however they process this, and gently guide them. Now that all the 'ordinary' aspects of life are suspended, we do not have extended support or grieving processes like funerals, or spending time with family and friends. Normally, children handle their difficult emotions by playing with their friends, or going to school and talking to teachers. All of these emotional resources are now not available.



How can you support a grieving child?

The first thing to do is to be sensitive to a child's experience of grief. Grief is a complicated process, not just an event. Children will not grieve in a predictable way, so do not make any assumptions on their behalf. Given the times we are in, it is likely that you are grieving at the same time as the child. You will need to be patient and open to the child, who will need you to make sense of this time.

What to expect when a child is bereaved

Each child will handle grief in their own way, depending on their temperament. Here are some ways a child might behave:

- Go about things as usual and not seem distressed.
- Withdraw and live in fantasies and make believe.
- Be fussy with eating and sleeping, or grow stubborn and act out.
- Not wish to go to school, and growing more clingy.
- Anxiety about sleeping alone.
- Become very quiet.
- Grow very angry at small occurrence.

Some children may not want to talk about their loved one at all.

How do you help a child with their grief?



Be truthful, simple and sincere

Children will pick up on what has happened, even if they don't understand it. How you talk to them about it matters.

Let the child ask the questions

Make sure the child is aware of their loss, and encourage them to ask questions. Children can lead their own understanding of what has happened. What you say should be guided by their questions.



Give the child safety through predictability and routines.

A routine is very important for young children, especially after a loss. Speak to the child about what will happen each day: today, tomorrow, next week. Address any specific concerns they have.

Go over their daily routine. If you are their primary caregiver, let them understand who will look after them. Tell them who will be with them, when, and for how long. Be ready to give them all the details they want to know, whether about home, school, food or friends. Ensure they know how it will work.



Keep the child engaged

Keep the child involved in day to day activities, and give them small responsibilities: small chores in the kitchen, cleaning up after a meal, helping with drying out laundry or folding clothes. This will help them feel in control, and feel a little less strange.

How do you help children of different ages through their grief?

Different ages of children will experience grief in different ways. These experiences are not watertight, and individual children will have their own responses. Try to recognise each child for their context, age and temperament. It is crucial that you encourage behaviour appropriate to their age group. Respond to where the child is at the moment.

INFANTS



While we may assume infants are too young to know what is happening, remember that they are very sensitive to their environment. They will respond to the bereavement in the family if people are upset or distracted.

- Try to make them feel secure and comfortable with holding and physical comfort.
- Pay attention to basic needs like feeding, toilet, sleep times in the day and night. Make sure the baby's natural rhythms and routines are maintained.
- If the baby has lost their primary caregiver, the infant will need someone who is familiar to take care of them. Ensure that the baby's blankets, pillows and toys are around.
- Do not forget to engage the baby with touch, play and stimulation. Talk or sing to the baby, give them massages and baths. Create warm sleeping rituals. Keep their routine activities going and soothe them when they are distressed.

TODDLERS



Toddlers may ask many questions about who they have lost, especially if they have lost a parent. Answer these questions sincerely. Explain clearly, in short and simple language, what happened. Be truthful. Make sure they understand.

You can take time and space to do this. Be available consistently to respond to their needs and follow their lead.

ADDRESS ANY IMMEDIATE QUESTIONS A CHILD MAY HAVE:

— “I have some sad news. _____ died this morning”.

- Let the child take this in.
- Let the child ask questions about the health, hospital treatment and passing of who they have lost. Don't dismiss questions, and answer truthfully with simple and short answers.

Who will feed me?
Where will I stay?
Who can I ask for help?
Who will take me to school?

- Watch for the child's response to what you are saying. As you speak, check in with what they are feeling or thinking. Help them articulate their emotions, and find words and labels for these emotions. Take pauses.

I know you are feeling sad. I am very sad too.
You loved your mother so much, and she loved you too.

- Help the child recall their loved one, by doing activities they enjoyed or looking at photographs. Encourage them to remember the person who they have lost.
- Young ones might replay the circumstances around the death repeatedly. This is part of their normal processing. Engage with the child's questions, and see if they have misunderstood anything. Help them understand things correctly and do not completely stop this process.

- Make sure they are physically comforted with hugs and cuddles.
- Check in with them about any changes in routines. Let them know who is available to them, and when.
- Help them understand how tomorrow and the next week will unfold, and what they can expect.

YOUNG SCHOOL-GOING CHILDREN



OLDER CHILDREN

(PRE-PUBESCENT
AND ADOLESCENT)



Older children have a more developed idea about death and dying. You won't need to tell them what happened, because they will have figured it out. Make sure to be with them and spend time together.

- Answer any questions they ask as clearly and honestly as possible. They may not wish to talk about anything for days and that's okay. Reassure them that you are there for whenever they want to open up.
- They may be angry or distressed when people express condolences or others weep in front of them. This is because they are helpless and confused about what is happening around them. Be gentle and understanding. Say things that validate their feelings: "I can see that you are really upset and angry about how unfair this is".
- They may not believe some ideas people offer, like: 'your loved one is a star', or 'gone to God'. They might challenge such statements.
- Provide a reassuring and safe space for the child to express their feelings. They might worry about upsetting you if they express their emotions, so let them know it is okay. Let them know that everyone in the family is affected and handling it in some way.
- Some children may be silent, while others may cry, and this may change over time.



Toll Free NIMHANS Helpline for Psychosocial Support- 080 46110007

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<https://mentalhealtheeducationnimhans.org/covid-resources/covid-19-trauma-and-grief-series/>