

# TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT GRIEF, LOSS & DEATH



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## HAVING THAT HONEST CONVERSATION

Loss, change, death and grief are a natural part of our human experience. You are not alone.

In a global crisis, it's safe to say we are all dealing with some form of loss and grief, for example, restrictions to our everyday routines, losing loved ones, losing jobs, losing homes, loss of education, loss of social connections, friendships and relationships. This can be very stressful.

As a parent/caregiver, having these difficult conversations with our children are never easy talking to our children can be one of the most daunting tasks you will face. Added to this, you may also be struggling with your own emotions and trying to come to terms with the loss or even the death of a loved one.

Our natural instinct is to shield and protect our children. But the truth is, children need reassurance, and they need the truth in a way they can understand. Even very young children will know there is something wrong in their world. Pretending it isn't happening will only make them feel more unsure and upset. Every family situation and child is different and there is technically no right or wrong way to manage loss or grieve.

Improving the experiences of loss for our children helps foster resilience, good mental health and wellbeing. We hope that the information and tips in this resource will help you get started.



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# GRIEF, LOSS & BEREAVEMENT EVENTS

Life is experienced as a series of events - good and bad, happy and sad. These all contribute to our individual growth and development. Within a family unit, when experiences such as these are shared and openly acknowledged, they foster bonds that create a sense of togetherness and wellness. Generally speaking, our cultural traditions, religious practices and customs can heavily influence how we mourn loss.

## LOSS

You no longer have something or have less of something. Loss in life is inevitable and grief is the automatic emotional response

## GRIEF

Is a natural reaction which occurs when there is a loss of any sort

## BEREAVEMENT

A bereaved person is someone who is living in a state of loss and grief after having experiencing loss of something or someone vulnerable

# TYPES OF LOSS

Loss can be categorised by type:

**Physical** - Such as Death or Illness

**Social** - Such as Divorce, family breakdown or lockdown

**Occupational** - Such as work or school

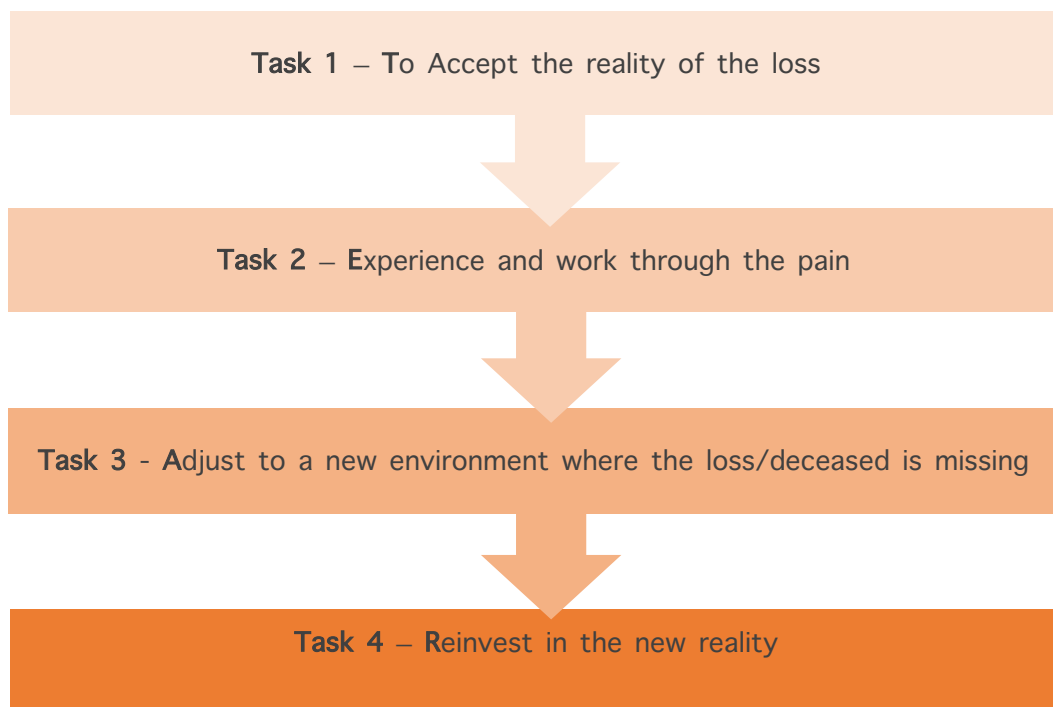
Loss events can happen in many ways, such as:

- Moving home, particularly if it has been your childhood home or family home
- Changing schools
- The end of a friendship or loss of a relationship
- Divorce within the family
- Exam grades not meeting expectations
- Inability to complete qualifying courses
- The loss of a job or sought-after career opportunity
- Theft or other forms of crime, whether directly or within the proximity
- Illness, whether yourself or someone close to you
- Death of any type, including pets

# THE JOURNEY TO HEALING FROM LOSS

There is no right way or wrong way to grieve. Every family situation and child is different. Grief or loss happens as a process rather than as an event and there is no time limit as to how long the feelings about the loss will last. The act of working through different emotions and determining the meaning of the loss experienced is known as the Grief Process or Grief Journey.

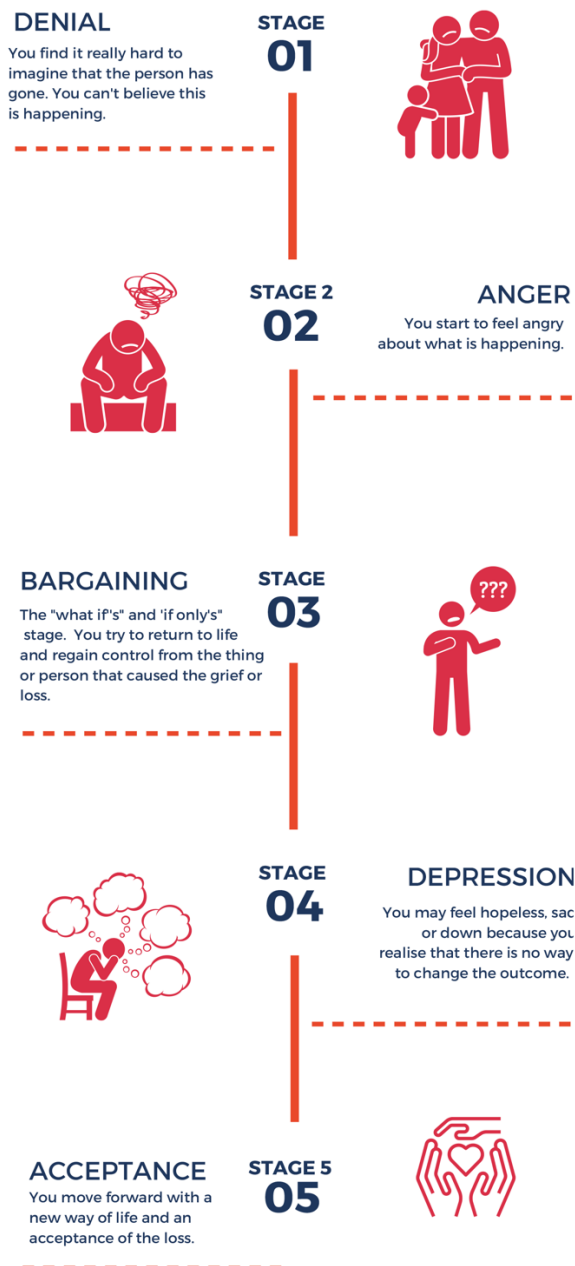
The four tasks below called Worden's T.E.A.R. (2008) can help you through the process.



Created by The Institute of Wellbeing (Adapted from Worden's T.E.A.R Model (2008))

# 5 STAGES OF GRIEF & LOSS

There are 5 primary emotional states associated with the loss and grieving process. You do not have to go through each stage in order to heal. We are all unique individuals. Its ok to switch back and forth between each of the five stages.



<https://theinstituteofwellbeing.com>  
Based on Kubler Ross Model

# SELF CARE TIPS

As a Parent/Caregiver, it is important that you take care of yourself first, so that you are in the best position to take care of your children.

**First things first, practice self compassion** - Remember everybody grieves differently. Treat yourself with same kindness as you would a close friend going through loss. Give yourself the space to feel the pain of grief and let the range of emotions play out. Anger, sadness, confusion and more are all perfectly normal.

**Accept help** - It's important that you don't try and cope alone especially at a time when we can't socially connect. When friends offer, accept without hesitation – even if you haven't quite figured out what you need. They can help you with that too! If you are feeling overwhelmed and struggling. It is ok to seek professional support. Details of organisations can be found on our website – visit [www.TIOW.org/support](http://www.TIOW.org/support)

**Daily routine** - Make a plan each day. Even small daily routines can help in providing structure and accomplishment to your day, enabling you to focus on something else.

**Rest at every opportunity** - Give yourself permission to take a break when you need it. Practice good sleep habits. Sleep is important to your healing, not only physically but emotionally too. Sleep strengthens our immune system and our ability to handle our day-to-day tasks.

**Eat healthily, drink water** - Eat even when you don't have an appetite. You need the energy. Eating regular healthy meals and keeping hydrated will not only help your physical and mental state but also provide structure in your day. Avoid alcohol as much as you can, as it can upset your sleep schedule and depress your mood.

**Get out into nature** - Loss of any kind (e.g. divorce or death of a loved one) can leave you emotionally drained. Fresh air and sunlight can help improve your wellbeing across multiple areas in your life, making you feel happier and providing a sense of normalcy back into your life.

**One step at a time** - Exercise allows you to go into a space where you can focus on yourself and will contribute to better sleep, mental stability, and an overall sense of wellbeing. You don't need to go to the gym to exercise. You can use your stairs, a can of beans as weights, your bed and your floor, or follow online free workouts to help do your exercise.

**Breathe in, breathe out** - Breathing deeply and fully can be a helpful tool to decrease stress, increase clarity of thought and help to counteract emotional and physical fatigue. Try the 3-4-5 simple breathing technique. Breathe in for 3 seconds, hold for four seconds and out for 5 seconds. When your outbreath is longer than your inbreath, you reduce the activation of your stress state and encourage your body to move into thrive state. Keep doing this for 3 to 5 minutes.

**Prayer & meditation** - Regardless of your belief system, prayer and meditation contributes to your mental wellbeing and are useful tools to utilise during the loss and grief process. It can offer comfort and decrease anxiety. Practice regularly. Consistency is more important than the length of your individual prayer or meditation session.

**Keeping a grief journal** - Can be a way to give yourself permission to put your thoughts and feelings down on paper. Putting these into words and pictures can help you make sense out of loss and pain. Try journaling first thing in the morning or before you to bed. If you are struggling to sleep, keep a journal and pen by your bed, and write down any thoughts or feelings that is keeping you awake.

**Creative expression** - Focus and activate the imaginative side of your brain through creative arts, activities and hobbies. These can increase your resilience and contribute to a better sense of wellbeing.

# GRIEF JOURNAL PROMPTS

Keeping a Grief Journal can help you make sense out of loss and pain. Give yourself permission to put the thoughts and feelings that you are holding in your mind down on paper. Below are some prompts to help you get started. You don't need to write something for every one of the prompts listed below; just pick one or two that speak to you and start there.

- Today I am feeling? Think of the emotion the feeling evokes, explore it and write down what the feeling means to you? Why do you feel that way? How would you describe how you're feeling to someone else?
- I miss.....
- The hardest part of the day is.....
- What stage of grief do I feel I am at.....
- I choose to remember you by....
- What I wish I could tell you.....
- The things that help me most right now are.....
- This experience has taught me.....
- 10 Things I am grateful for.....
- I choose to.....

# AGE APPROPRIATE CONVERSATIONS

Helping children understand the finality of any significant loss and death is not an easy conversation. How you approach this will depend on their level of development, their ability to process the loss and cope with their feelings. Engage with children in age-appropriate ways with different activities to generate trust and help children feel secure.

	(0 – 2 years)	(2 – 4 years)	(4 – 5 years)
Ages & Stages	Babies are sensitive to the loss and will respond to the emotions they are sensing. Although they will not appear to understand and react, they absorb the change over time and make the connection.	Children will experience emotional reactions but not recognise them. They may express strong emotions such as sadness or anger, but not with any clear understanding.	Children at this age will have a greater capacity for understanding the loss. The child's relationship with the deceased would be more established and their emotional connection stronger.
Loss Reactions	<p>Searching behaviour</p> <p>Increased crying spells</p> <p>Refusing food</p> <p>Being fretful and distress</p> <p>Being less responsive</p> <p>Clingy</p>	<p>Repetitive questions - limited capacity to retain information/relate to what has been said</p> <p>“Magical” thinking - wanting to reverse the situation</p> <p>Creating stories - relating to the absent person as if present based on events from their past</p> <p>Regression, thumb/soother sucking, language</p> <p>Change in eating and sleeping patterns</p> <p>Anxiety, Clinging or withdrawing, Tantrums</p> <p>Bed wetting or toileting problems</p>	<p>Repetitive questions – trying to make sense of growing knowledge of loss</p> <p>Story building</p> <p>Searching – physical searches based on recollections</p> <p>Makes associations from memory as if in the present</p> <p>Disturbed sleep patterns</p> <p>Toileting problems</p> <p>Bedwetting</p> <p>Anxiety</p> <p>Developmental regression</p>

# 10 TIPS – HOW TO TALK TO A CHILD ABOUT LOSS

1. **Talk openly about the loss when it happens** to help make it real for them.
2. **Use age-appropriate and simple language** to provide an explanation about the circumstances so they feel included and recognised. Think ahead about what you want to share. Use clear simple words your child can understand. e.g., 'I have sad news to tell you, grandpa died today', rather than 'gone away' or 'sleeping'.
3. **Share and express your feelings calmly.** Helping your child can be quite difficult. Infants in particular are extremely sensitive, they can sense when you are feeling sad and can pick up on your how you relate and respond to news of a loss event, They will model their behaviour on yours, so be authentic with your feelings.
4. **Comfort them with love and lots of cuddles** and reassure them they are safe.
5. **Let them know it's okay to be not okay.** Helping children accept and understand emotions from an early age provides a strong foundation to foster resilience and enables children to navigate the grief process via a healthy emotional experience. This gives your child permission to approach you when they are overwhelmed or confused and need to talk
6. **Maintain a calm supportive home environment.** Be honest when they ask questions. Create a safe and nurturing space in your home and try to talk together as a family. Your child may not always want to talk, that can be because they cannot explain what they are going through. Be prepared for follow up questions to come up for days, weeks, even months whilst your child processes their loss.
7. **Keep their routines as far as possible.** For a child or young person whose life has been turned upside down by a loss or bereavement, routines can offer a sense of security to support a child's wellbeing. Routines can give a sense of normality.
8. **Speak often of their loved one.** Grief is a process that can take a long time. Anticipate grief triggers such as holidays and everyday experiences. Use photographs and tell stories to remember happy times together with loved ones.
9. **Help your child start a memory box.** Remembering happy times with a loved one can be very healing. A memory box should take whatever shape the child wants it to. Use this activity to help your children understand loss experiences are natural. There are examples all around. Help you and your child to remember that your loved one's life was so much more meaningful than how it ended.
10. **Involve your child in saying goodbye** at the Funeral or Memorial in accordance with your culture beliefs, faith and cultural traditions.

# LOOKING FORWARD

What are the three most important things you've learned from doing the activities in the Managing relationships in difficult times kit?

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What aspect(s) do you intend to continue?

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How can you make sure you keep the momentum going?

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# FINALLY - FOR NOW

Many people are inspired and influenced by the wise words of others, during the time of grief, loss or death, hearing words of comfort and wisdom can help you to heal and recover.

Children's minds are like sponges and will soak up their environment, it can be difficult to tell how they are feeling following any form of loss. How and when to have the sensitive conversation about grief, loss and death can be daunting. Choose a time that works for you all, try to relax and recognise that there is no perfect time. Remember to be honest and not create fairy tales especially if someone has died. That said it is vital to help keep your child's emotional wellbeing in tip top shape.

On our website - <https://theinstituteofwellbeing.com> there is a suite of courses and a wellbeing assessment that can help you to process in order to progress. Life can feel extremely tough, it is really important that you are ok, If you are experiencing overwhelming difficulties as a parent, please do speak to a healthcare professional or seek counselling at the earliest convenience.

Finally, here are **five** key points:

- Create an environment of comfort, calm and love
- Choose the right time to talk
- Be honest but age appropriate
- Observe mood and make allowances for fluctuations
- Listen with a mind to understand

All the very best.



Dr. Mike Kelly  
Think well, Live well and Be well.