

Grief and Bereavement in Gypsy and Traveller Families

Death and bereavement are experiences common to most of us and few of us go through life without experiencing the death of someone close. Each situation is unique and how we respond to such a death is very individual. How we cope with bereavement is dependent upon many things, including our previous experience, our individual vulnerability and aspects of our lifestyle. People living in Gypsy and Traveller communities are no exception. However there are aspects of their lives that may make coping with death and bereavement more challenging. There are an estimated 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers (including English Romany Gypsies, Welsh Gypsies, Scottish and Irish Travellers, Fairground Travellers, Barge or Boat Dwellers, European Roma and New Travellers) living in the UK. This information sheet has been written to help increase understanding of the factors facing Gypsies and Travellers following the death of someone close. It also aims to identify what support might be helpful to this community.

Gypsy and Traveller communities have a higher death rate than the mainstream population. Figures show that they have the poorest life chances of any ethnic group in the UK. The nature of Traveller lifestyles increases their risk of poor health and death. Gypsies and Travellers have a shorter life expectancy than the mainstream population (by 10 years for men and 12 years for women), are more likely to experience the premature death of a child (17% compared to just under 10% of the wider population) and have a high suicide rate, particularly amongst young men.

There are many reasons behind these statistics, and these include the mobile lifestyle of Gypsies and Travellers, limited access to healthcare and the lack of safe stopping places. This means that they may be living in unhygienic and poor environments, or at a roadside, increasing the risk of illness, road traffic accidents and fire hazards. There are also problems for Gypsies and Travellers living in static houses where they may feel restricted by a fixed and immobile lifestyle. This can result in an increased risk of mental health problems and risk taking behaviour.

The close-knit nature of these communities, with families who see each other on a daily basis, means that the death of an individual can be felt with great intensity, impacting a wide network of people. This makes death a very important part of Gypsies' and Travellers' lives, with a death becoming both a personal and a social loss, and influencing their approach to the rituals surrounding death, such as funerals.

Funeral traditions

Whilst each family is individual and will have their own ways of doing things, certain traditions held amongst Gypsies and Travellers may have an impact on the way each person grieves. Traditionally the trailer (caravan) and all the possessions of the person who has died would have been burnt. Today they are more likely to be sold. This removing of memories and possessions means that any connection with the person who has died has gone. Children and young people can find the absence of reminders of someone who they may have been close to very difficult. The practice of "sitting up", of not leaving the deceased alone from the time of death until the funeral, is common and may impact on family members in different ways. For many families religion may be an important aspect of Traveller life and traditionally funerals in these communities take place quickly, particularly for Irish Travellers who are Catholic. This may limit the amount of time available to discuss how different family members would like things to be done.

Gypsy and Traveller funerals may be extremely lavish and headstones ornate. These are seen as an expression of the very respected and valued place the individual held within both the family and the wider community. It is not unusual for people to travel a great distance across the country to attend a very elaborate event, with a perception that the larger the funeral, the greater the respect shown. In addition the showing of such respect and the holding of extravagant services is seen as an illustration of the importance of the place that is held by the dead in the lives of the living.

Impact on children and young people

Children and young people grieve just as deeply as adults but they may show it in different ways. They learn how to grieve by mirroring the responses of the adults around them and rely on adults to provide them with what they need to support them in their grief. It is normal for children and young people to react strongly to the death of someone close even if the resulting feelings and behaviours look and feel far from normal. Children in Gypsy and Traveller communities are no different in this way. However, differences in cultural expectations in these communities highlight a general reluctance in some Gypsy and Traveller families to discuss bereavement and loss following a death. This may be a protective strategy and designed to shield family members from upset but can inadvertently lead to difficulties in managing their grief. For children, this means that they may not have the emotional support they need to understand their feelings and to make sense of what has happened. At Child Bereavement UK, the children we support tell us that they need to have honest, simple explanations of how we might feel and what we do when someone dies.

Children in Gypsy Traveller communities often take part in nearly all aspects of adult life, including all the rituals surrounding a death and the funeral. However, the protective nature of Traveller families may mean that the death of someone important to a child is often not openly talked about. Children often tell us that being involved and being given choices about participation in such rituals can be very helpful. We also know that families where there is more open communication about the death and about the person who has died, then the better the child's longer term adjustment. Whilst talking about someone who has died can be hard for these families, it is important for children to feel able to ask questions and understand what has happened. Children and young people may benefit from the opportunity to remember and share thoughts and feelings about the person who has died. However, such open discussion can often present a challenge to Gypsy and Traveller families. This can make it harder for these families to access external support agencies such as mental health or bereavement services.

A book, based on a series of workshops held with grieving Gypsy Traveller children, has been written by Carol Rogers (see below). It has been designed to be read by an adult and child together and can act as a gentle way in to start conversations about the person who has died. The book is illustrated using photographs of members of Gypsy Traveller communities. The aim is that by reading the book together, the adults will find it easier to talk to children about something that their culture may not encourage, and that the children will receive the emotional support they need from close family members.

Supporting Gypsy and Traveller Families

As with any family, when supporting Gypsy and Traveller families it is important to keep in mind the cultural attitudes and behaviours relating to death. Each family experiencing a death will have their own idiosyncratic way of managing the bereavement and each individual within the family may differ greatly in terms of the kind of support they need.

Additional information

Rogers, Carol (2014) *It's different without you*. Self published. This is a book for children based on the results of Carol's research looking at the bereavement experiences of Gypsy and Traveller families.

Further resource references are available from Child Bereavement UK