

Looking after yourself

Being alongside anyone experiencing a loss is emotionally draining, but supporting a bereaved child, particularly so. The need for support is not an inability to cope or of professional incompetence but a recognition that everyone needs help to carry out this demanding role. Below are some ideas for ways to look after yourself.

Share Feelings

Use friends and colleagues to talk about how you are feeling and share experiences. Just knowing that others are affected can help you to feel less alone and more able to care. Informal peer support in the staffroom can be a welcome opportunity to talk through issues and concerns and reduce feelings of inadequacy by jointly talking through helping strategies.

Anticipate that you may Experience an Emotional Reaction

It is perfectly normal and OK to be emotionally affected. However, recognise that in order to help others, you need to feel reasonably strong yourself. You may become aware of previous losses in your own life that have resurfaced. If it all feels too close to home, do not be afraid to say so. This is not a sign of weakness but merely recognising that we all have our limits.

Professional Boundaries

When working in a school environment, it is very easy to let the carer in us take over and forget our professional boundaries. Getting over involved is not helpful to either yourself or the bereaved child or adult. Remember that you can not carry their grief for them, but you can share their journey by being there and being aware.

Have Information on Resources and Organisations

Having contact details of bereavement organisations will enable you to feel that you have done something practical to support a grieving family. You will be helping by putting them in touch with people better able to offer the support they need. See Helpful Organisations Factsheet.

Help Others

If you become aware that a colleague is stressed or affected by a death in your school community, or know that they have experienced a bereavement themselves, try to find the time to ask how they are.

Spoil Yourself

Make time to do something just for you, or give yourself a treat. Physical exercise is a great stress buster.

Factors that can contribute to overload.

Supporting bereaved children is emotionally demanding. In a study by Brown (1993), teachers from five schools cited the following factors as contributing to their stress.

- Witnessing pain and distress experienced by the families.
- Feeling unskilled in dealing with emotional responses.
- Physical exhaustion as a result of emotional trauma.
- Poor communication between themselves and families or other carers.

Brown also comments on the tensions that can arise in a school setting between personal needs and the professional role. Distancing oneself protects but may be perceived as not helpful to the bereaved individual. Being over involved can lead to attachments that are inappropriate or impossible to sustain.

It might help to keep in mind:

It does not help to offer something that you can not deliver.

No matter how well meant or strong the desire to take the pain away, always try to be realistic with the amount of support that you can give. It is much better to offer something small but constant rather than a grand gesture that is going to be difficult to deliver. Providing a listening ear once a week and sticking to it is more meaningful than the offer of help anytime when inevitably that can not be achieved within a busy school environment. Other demands will get in the way and you will feel stressed over breaking the arrangement.

You do not need to be an expert to provide effective help.

Many of us feel inadequate and out of our depth when faced with adults or children experiencing deep sadness or trauma. Being alongside hurting children can remind us of our own vulnerability and mortality. Most teachers and school staff are caring individuals who naturally have the characteristics required to support bereaved children. It is more about being there for them whilst in school and building a relationship with them in your classroom, than being a bereavement professional.

Try to recognise when you are running on empty.

Working in the education profession is very much about giving in terms of time and energy, supporting a bereaved pupil may compound this, resulting in very depleted resources. It is hardest to ask for help when we most need it as to do so requires energy and strength. Some of the signs include feeling physically exhausted and overworked, an inability to delegate and generally not on top of things. Remind yourself that doing a “good enough” job is perfectly OK.