

## Looking after yourself (staff)

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Being alongside anyone experiencing a loss can be emotionally draining, but supporting a bereaved child, particularly so. The need for support for yourself is not a sign of 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 to share experiences. Just knowing that others are affected can help you to feel less alone and better-able to cope. 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 strategies to help.

### 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 a recognition 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 to the bereaved child or adult. Remember that you cannot carry their grief for them, but you can share their journey by being there for them and being aware.

### Have information on resources and organisations

Sharing contact details of bereavement organisations will enable you to do something practical to support a grieving family. You will be helping by putting them in touch with people who are qualified and experienced in offering the support they might need. See: *Helpful organisations* fact sheet (in this pack).

### 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 can be 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 a member of staff's personal needs and their professional role. Being over-involved could lead to attachments that are inappropriate or impossible to sustain.

A study by Lane, Rowland and Beinart (2014) showed that teachers often feel uncertain how to respond to bereaved adolescents, particularly in relation to talking about the bereavement, yet feel an obligation to stay strong, to address the bereavement and to provide support even if distressed themselves. They found that teachers best managed their own emotions through setting boundaries in their professional role, creating emotional distance, seeking support from colleagues or using their own social networks or social agencies. They also identified the benefit of drawing on teachers' own experience of bereavement and the usefulness of bereavement training.

## It does not help to offer something that you cannot 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 cannot be achieved within a busy school environment.

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

Many people feel inadequate and out of their depth when faced with adults or children experiencing deep sadness or trauma. Being alongside children who are hurting 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 depleted resources. It can be difficult to ask for help when we most need it as to do so requires energy and strength. Some of the signs to look out for include feeling physically exhausted and overworked, an inability to delegate and generally not feeling on top of things.

If staff members want further support, ring helpline on **0800 02 888 40** or email [support@childbereavementuk.org](mailto:support@childbereavementuk.org)