

2nd
edition

THE FAMILY HAS BEEN INFORMED

**SUPPORTING GRIEVING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
FROM MILITARY FAMILIES**

 SUPPORTED BY
**HELP for
HEROES**
CHARITY NO
1120920

**WINSTON'S
WISH WW**

Giving hope to grieving children

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WINSTON'S WISH SUPPORTS BEREAVED CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES

At Winston's Wish we value and care about the lives of families when someone has died. We believe that there is a future with hope for grieving children, and that timely and appropriate support, information and guidance can make a difference.

With more than 100 children bereaved of a parent every single day in the UK, we believe in a society in which every child can get the help they need when someone close to them dies.

Any death is a life-changing event for children. When the death is that of a member of the Armed Forces, there are additional factors to consider and additional losses to face. Sometimes service families feel that other people may not understand the particular challenges they encounter when someone dies.

Winston's Wish has supported military families throughout our history: we also appreciate that every person and every family will grieve in individual and unique ways.

The Family Has Been Informed brings together what we have learned, over many years, in working with bereaved families. Our aim is to share the experience and knowledge of others, with a connection to the Armed Forces, who have experienced the death of someone close. It is designed for parents, carers and professionals and offers some guidance and practical ideas for families as they try to make sense of what has happened. Throughout there are quotes from those who have experienced a similar bereavement and some ideas of ways to support children's grieving.

Despite experiencing such devastating loss in childhood, with understanding, support and guidance these children can strengthen their resilience and go on to lead full and flourishing lives.

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A note about language:

We use the term 'children' to include children and young people

When we refer to the death of a parent, the support and guidance given is applicable to the death of any carer or important person in a child's life

We use the shorthand of expressions such as 'military families' or 'Forces' families' or 'service families' to include all those with a connection to one of the Armed Forces. We appreciate that some people wouldn't describe themselves as part of 'a military family'.



"It's hard to ask for help – I've always been a strong person. And I thought no one would understand what it was like for the boys. But now I know what a difference it makes to have support."

Sunita

YOUR OWN GRIEF ADVICE FOR PARENTS

It is important to remember that people react differently when they experience a death. How someone responds to a death is very personal and depends on many different factors. Some of these factors are age, personality, relationships, coping style, past experiences, religious beliefs and cultural background.

It is not uncommon for members of a family to react in different ways to the death of the same person. At different times they may be feeling very different things. Some family members may not show any visible reactions; others may openly show their distress. Often family members try to protect each other: when one person is sad, another may try to support them by appearing cheerful. Although this is quite normal it sometimes makes it difficult for a family to be open about their grief because they may worry about upsetting each other.

Coping with your own feelings after your partner or your child has died can be especially difficult when you are trying to support your child or children. You may feel a range of different emotions: shock, sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, relief, loneliness, irritability, tiredness, to name just a few. Such reactions are again quite natural. You may find that you experience a number of these feelings all at the same time, which can make it hard to know how to manage them all. Everyday situations and tasks can feel impossible to achieve.

When a partner or child dies, it is natural to feel utterly lost. Some people have said they feel like a part of them is missing and that they don't know who they are any more. When it is a son or daughter who has died, it can seem very challenging to care for your other children: you may feel over-protective or overwhelmed. Adjusting to life as a lone parent is so hard if you have supported each other and made joint decisions about everyday family life. If parents have separated before a death, grief may feel complicated and there may be additional challenges to overcome.

In the short term there will, of course, be disruption to normal family routines and life may be a bit unfocused. As time goes on, children will do better if routines and boundaries are in place and stay the same. Taking life one step at a time – and being clear, consistent and confident about decisions affecting your children – will help you and your children.

You will be able to support your children most effectively when you look after yourself. This can seem like an impossible task when you're feeling overwhelmed by your own grief and aware, at the same time, that your children need you. You may find family and friends can provide you with invaluable support. Sometimes it can help to talk to someone more neutral and it might help to discuss this with your family doctor, or call the Winston's Wish Freephone National Helpline (08088 020 021) to find out about support services (see pages 48 and 49).

It is vital that you give yourself time and space to process your own thoughts and feelings. Getting outside support will make sure that you can respond confidently to both the physical and emotional needs of your children.

A LIFE OF SERVICE

It has been said that it is not only members of the Armed Forces who serve. Service life impacts family life and relationships, exposing family members to a lot of change and uncertainty. Serving parents may be deployed away from home at short notice and for a period of many months. Family relationships shift: the staying-behind parent acts as a single parent temporarily, with the responsibility for decision-making in everyday life. On the return of their partner, these roles shift once more. Children may be unsettled by these changes, having to find ways to reconnect with their returned parent while preparing themselves for their next departure. In addition, service families are more likely to move home on a regular basis – meaning that children have to adjust to new surroundings, new schools and new friends.

For some people, this may help to develop flexibility and resilience, but for others it may heighten anxiety or worry.

These experiences may affect how families respond to a bereavement. Also, every family and every individual within that family may respond differently.

There is a common belief that the simple fact of knowing someone is serving or has served in the Forces should prepare you for the possibility of their death. Those who serve may understand that dying is a part of the risk they take when choosing their profession. Parents, partners and older children may spend part of their lives braced for that terrible call. However, none of this makes the news of a death any easier to bear or any less shocking.

If a person has been on active service or deployed elsewhere, it may be difficult to comprehend that they won't be coming home as usual and for younger children, struggling with understanding the finality of death, it may feel as if their parent is simply still away working.

In addition, the nature of the death may bring added trauma; it may have been in combat or as a result of individual or terrorist action. This, in turn, may bring intense – and often unwanted – media interest. Private grief can become very public and families can feel overwhelmed by the role(s) they are expected to play. Or the death may be due to long illness or to suicide: every cause of death brings different challenges.

"I felt I was holding the worry and anxiety of separation, as well as trying to maintain family life. Having to get the children to school, do the shopping, housework, as well as be 'Mum and Dad' when it came to managing tricky situations, like arguments or trouble at school."

Jo

"Ossie was the only one in the Armed Forces from our family. He liked to keep it separate. We went to a few parades and things, but I think he was embarrassed by us. After he died, a few of his friends popped round, but we haven't really had anything to do with the military since. I wouldn't call us a military family."

Ella

THE EARLY DAYS

HEARING THE NEWS – *See page 8*

TELLING THE CHILDREN – *See page 9*

TELLING FAMILY AND FRIENDS – *See page 15*

REPATRIATION – *See page 16*

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HEARING THE NEWS

Even if a death has been expected, the reality can still be shocking. Depending on the circumstances, there may, at first, be few facts about what has happened. If the person has died overseas, there is the added complication of waiting to hear more details. Families may immediately be in contact with supportive personnel from the Forces or from one of the charities offering help to families or may be isolated from such support.

It may be that family relationships are complicated and the news may filter more slowly to, for example, former partners. Sometimes, people with a close connection to the person who has died find out in less than ideal ways; for example, through social media.

However the news comes, it brings shock and sorrow. The one thing that you have been dreading has happened and now you have to steel yourself to tell your children.

"I have no clear memories of those first days after we heard the news. It was like there was a fog between me and the world..."

Alex



"George is his son but because we'd divorced, his mum was down as his next of kin and she didn't tell me for five days."

Tash

TELLING THE CHILDREN

There is no set way to tell a child something as difficult as the fact that someone they know has died or been killed. Many adults find it difficult to talk about death with children and it can be tempting to try to shield them from pain. However, it is really important that children have a clear understanding that the person has died. Nothing you can say will make it worse – the worst has already happened.

It is also a natural reaction to want to spare children from learning how the death happened by making up some other explanation. However, when there has been a death in service, the media is likely to be involved and the story will probably become public knowledge. It is much better for children and young people to hear the news from someone they trust in a calm and accurate way rather than from rumour or from another child in the playground. If at all possible, it is best for a parent or carer to tell children this difficult news; it will also give you the chance to reassure them. If you just don't feel able to say the words, try to make sure that you are with the child when someone else tells them what has happened.

Telling children details about someone's death is hugely emotive for all involved. Conversations like these will be difficult and upsetting for everyone. It is important to take your time; if necessary pause for a moment. Afterwards most parents feel relieved that they have been able to be honest and have built a foundation of trust with their child.

Families sometimes worry about 're-traumatising' children by talking about the details of the death. It can help even very young children to have a simple story they can use to retell and slowly make sense of what has happened. Use words they can understand. Always ask them what they think about what you have said and make sure they have actually understood (as much as they are able to).

Younger children may not need to know the exact details of how someone died but they will need to return to this at some point in the future as their understanding develops and they seek more information as they mature.

In our experience, it is better for children to release their emotions in a safe and steady way. This can help children feel that emotions are safer to experience when they are spoken about or expressed, rather than left to 'swirl around' or 'eat away' inside them.



BUILDING THE PICTURE

One helpful way of thinking about telling children and young people what has happened is to think of giving information in stages like building a jigsaw from pieces. Breaking this up into smaller steps may help you to feel more in control and you can adjust the steps to suit your child. Depending on how old children are or their level of understanding, these pieces may be added over minutes, days, weeks or years. The pace between stages will differ from child to child, due to their ability to understand as well as their willingness or reluctance to hear more information. For teenagers, you may be able to tell them everything you know immediately – the complete jigsaw. For younger children, hearing that their loved one has died may be all they can absorb at first. Some young people describe getting stuck between wanting to know more and not wanting to upset their parents by asking questions. Not knowing can sometimes lead young people to make 'best guesses' or search online for information. Some guesses or information may be far from the truth.

It may also be the case that details about the death are not known immediately and will not be known for weeks, months or even years. It is helpful to children in these circumstances to know that you will tell them more when more is known.

Once children and young people have been given new information, it's helpful to have in mind that they may need to process and express their feelings. Take a look at the feelings and thoughts section on page 24 for some ideas.

Winston's Wish has a range of publications that go into more depth about explaining death to children and young people.

Never Too Young To Grieve (children under 5)

A Child's Grief (children 5 to 11)

You Just Don't Understand (young people over 12)

1. EXPLAIN THAT THE PERSON HAS DIED

2. GIVE SIMPLE DETAILS ABOUT THE DEATH

3. EXPLAIN THE DEATH IN CONTEXT TO THEIR LIFE

4. PROVIDE A MORE DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF HOW THE PERSON DIED

5. EXPLAIN WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT



"I was petrified that I would say the wrong thing."

Dylan

1. EXPLAIN THAT THE PERSON HAS DIED

This will probably be the hardest thing you ever have to say. The most important thing is to say, simply, gently and clearly, that the person has died. You could start by saying something like: ***'I have something very sad to tell you.'***

Follow this with the hardest part of the news: ***'Daddy has died', 'Mum died this morning.'***

As adults, we can find the words ***'death'*** or ***'died'*** very hard and blunt to say: but for children, these words are simply describing a circumstance that may be new to them. As a parent, your natural instinct will be to protect your children and avoid causing them distress. It's not a question of being brutally frank: what is important is to explain things in language children can understand. It is important that they hear the unique words that describe what has happened. Children, especially younger ones, can be very confused by other expressions such as ***'lost'*** (***why is no one looking for Daddy?***) or ***'gone'*** (***gone where?***). This confusion can lead the child to misunderstand, which makes it harder to make sense of what has happened. The correct words, used consistently and accurately, help children understand that these are special words for special circumstances unlike any other.

Depending on their age and level of understanding, children may understand what has happened or may need a little more information about what 'died' means. For example: ***'When someone dies, their body stops working. This means that they can no longer talk or walk or be with us any longer.'***

Younger children will not understand that death is universal (that it happens to all living things) nor that it is permanent (that people can't come back to life). They might not understand that there is a reason (a cause) why someone dies.

2. GIVE SIMPLE DETAILS ABOUT THE DEATH

This is an opportunity to explain where and how the person died and allows you to tell part of the story without going into lots of detail (which you might not know yet). There are more examples on pages 32 to 39 depending if someone died in action, through suicide, through an accident or illness or homicide.

For example, you might say:

'What seems to have happened is that there was a big explosion right beside where Daddy was standing and he was hurt so badly that he died.'

'It seems that Mum was in a car that was hit by another car; everyone in Mum's car was hurt so badly that they died.'

'You know Dad has been ill for a long time and the doctors have been trying so hard to make him better? Well, the illness he had was so serious that his body could not keep living and he died this morning.'

It is important to check out with the child that they understand what has been said, especially if you have used any words that might be new to them. Ask them if they would like to know more: even though it might be upsetting, it will mean that they are less likely to think about all the other possible ways the person could have died. If children are not given information, they tend to fill in the gaps themselves and possibly jump to conclusions.

3. EXPLAIN THE DEATH IN CONTEXT TO THEIR LIFE

This is the opportunity for some immediate reassurance and comfort. For example:

'Even though this is the saddest thing to ever happen, we have got each other and we will be OK...'

'Dad loved you so much, he always wanted to hear what you had been doing.'

It's helpful for children to feel informed about what will happen next, for example, if the person's body is being returned from overseas or about arrangements for the funeral. See pages 16 to 18.

Older children may immediately consider the impact of this death on their own lives, realising that there are other changes up ahead.

4. PROVIDE A MORE DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF HOW THE PERSON DIED

What you say and when you say it will depend on your knowledge and understanding of your child and their developmental age and also on the nature of what has happened. Generally speaking, a 14 year old will have a different level of understanding to a 4 year old. Most people worry about telling children about how someone had died, but if you say what has happened simply and factually, children and young people will be able to piece things together and start to make sense of what has happened.

Remember, take your time, explain in words they understand and if introducing new words, explain what they mean: children will need time to absorb any information.

The likelihood is that children will want to know more about what has happened; talking about how someone died will often open up more questions, though not always straight away. Consider this as a good thing – one question asked out loud or written down on paper is one less question in someone's head going unanswered.

Young people will be concerned that the person who has died was in pain. It is important to be as honest and yet as reassuring as you can be. You might be able to say that you think the death was quick or that the person was unconscious or in shock so may not have felt pain, or that those treating them were able to give them medicine which helped the pain go away.

Children may ask the same question a number of times over the course of days, months or years as they process the information and check that they have remembered things correctly. When talking about sensitive subjects, it is helpful to check to see how they are interpreting what has been said.

Although children may want to know more information, they can also become overwhelmed and sometimes frightened by upsetting details. It's important to reassure them that they are safe and after hearing something distressing, it might be helpful to do something comforting to relax and let the information 'sink in'.

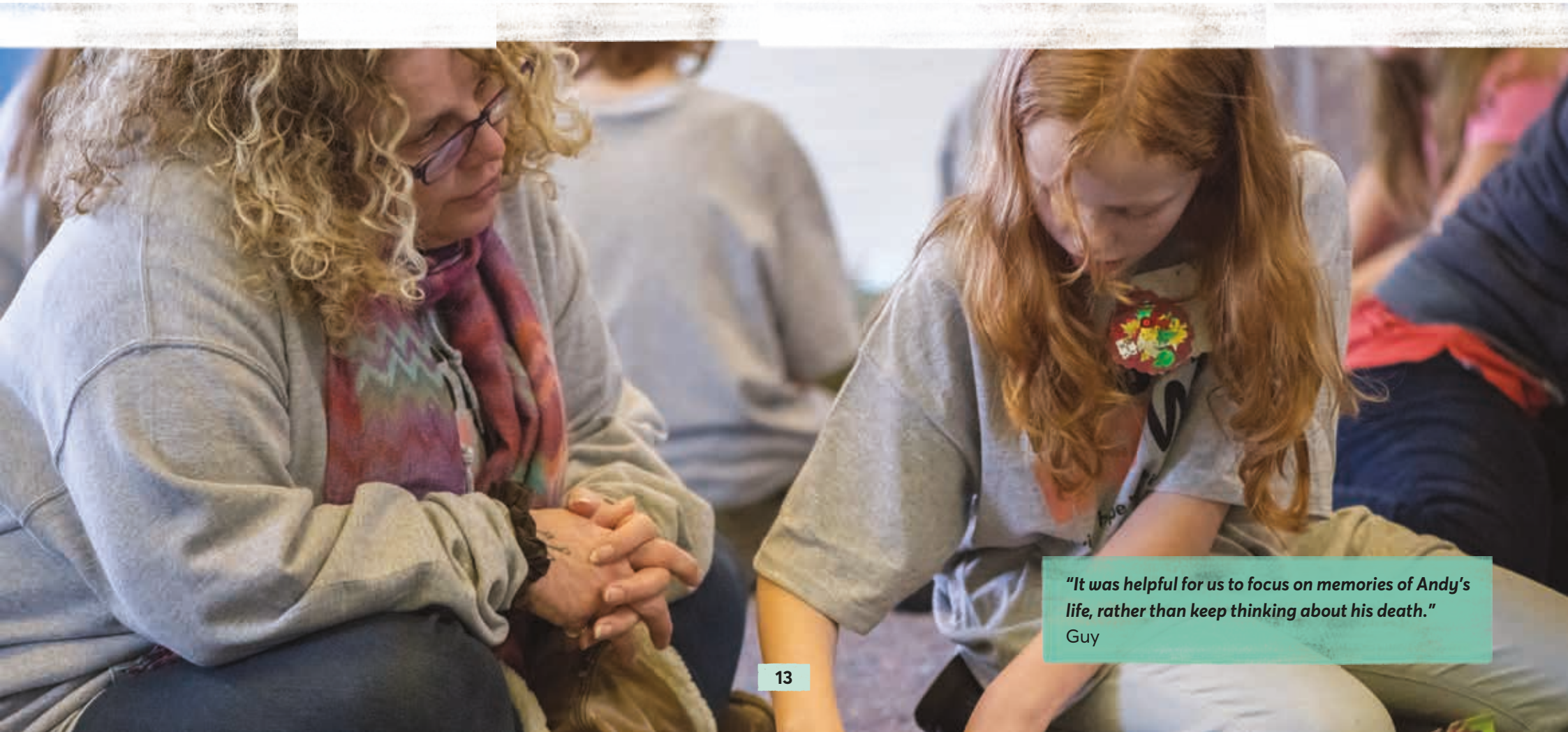
Clarity on what has happened may only be possible some months after the death. The circumstances surrounding a death in service will be unique to your situation. After a post-mortem, coroner's report or service inquiry there may still be some questions that remain unanswered. In these circumstances, it is important to keep communicating with children, explaining that you will tell them more when you have the information – and then doing so.

5. EXPLAIN WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT

Older children will seek reassurance about the next steps facing the family. They will be aware that this death may mean significant changes in their lives: leaving their home, for example, or changing schools.

Younger children will also appreciate some reassurance that even if there are major changes ahead, the family will come through.

As far as possible, involve children in conversations about the future: they might not be able to choose what happens but they will feel less as though everything is out of their control at a time when the world has become a very uncertain place.



"It was helpful for us to focus on memories of Andy's life, rather than keep thinking about his death."
Guy



"Jai was able to tell me that he didn't want to ask about his brother's death as it would make me cry and be upset. So I told him that I cry because it is upsetting and that I miss his brother. I've told him hundreds of times that it's ok for me to cry and that's my way of getting my feelings out. He has only recently realised that it's not him that's causing me to cry. I'm crying because his brother died and I miss him, not because Jai is asking a question or wanting to talk about his brother or how he is feeling."

Luisa

TELLING FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Because of the public nature of some deaths of members of the military, you may not have much control over what your family and friends hear about what has happened. This may mean that you are catapulted into talking about it before you feel ready.

Family and friends will also be keen to support you and your children but may be too far away and unable to get to you in person. You may want their support and presence – or you may need time to yourselves.

It may help to have a few sentences in your mind to answer questions from well-meaning people. For example:

'Yes, Danny has died. We are all in shock. I'm sure you'll understand if I don't want to say any more at the moment...'

'We know that Annie was killed in a road collision. We're just trying to get our heads around it...'

'Thank you so much for offering help. I'm not thinking straight right now but I am grateful...'

You may find that details about what has happened – accurate or not – appear on social media. One of your friends might take on the role of monitoring content in order to correct inaccuracies and to alert you to comments.



REPATRIATION

Repatriation happens when a member of the military dies overseas and their body is returned to the UK. This may involve a family who have stayed in the UK anticipating the return of the person's body or it may mean a family accompanying someone's body on the journey back to the UK.

If the death has happened overseas – and the family is living elsewhere – there may be the opportunity to meet the flight bringing the person's body back to the UK. Depending on circumstances, this may become a semi-public event, involving the media, other serving personnel and even members of the public.

Children used to a parent's absence and return after a tour of duty may be confused and hopeful that a living Mum or Dad will step off the plane. This may be the time to re-explain what death means and to ensure that children understand that it is the person's body that is coming home.

Hopefully, the family will have the support of a Visiting Officer, military chaplain and/or one of the support organisations for families (see pages 48 and 49).



BEFORE THE FUNERAL

In civilian life, viewing the body can be a valuable way for children and young people to realise the finality of death, witnessing first hand that the person has changed, their heart is no longer beating and they are no longer alive. This can also serve as an opportunity to say goodbye.

When there is a death in service, viewing the body can be more difficult. The nature of the death may affect your decision on whether to see the body. Next of kin have the right to see the body if they wish but will be advised on the state of the body by the Visiting Officer or Ministry of Defence undertakers. These people may err on the side of caution, especially where children are concerned.

If the body has been significantly injured due to the cause of death, it may be that there is little that is recognisable or there may be delays due to the need for DNA tests or other post-mortem enquiries. Under these circumstances, with thought and care, it may be possible for a part of the body to be viewed – a hand, for example, while the rest of the body is covered. Occasionally a body may not have been recovered and this can lead to additional difficulties in accepting the reality of the death.

If you do decide to support your child to see the body, some preparation will be important. If it seems reasonable to you, offer your child enough information to make a choice. Make it clear that they can change their mind at any time and that if they decide not to view the body, they are in no way 'letting down' the person they love. It can help to have someone with you if a visit goes ahead so that your child can wait outside with them if they feel they need to leave.

"We helped Millie to buy two soft toys that were exactly the same – one was buried with her Dad's body and she keeps the other one to feel close to him."

Kelly and Lee

- Start with some factual details about the place: this might be at a funeral home or within a military facility. For example: ***'Dad's body is at the funeral home. This is an ordinary building where people go to make arrangements for funerals and where a person's body is kept safely until the funeral.'***
- If a visit is going ahead, add some more information about the place. For example: ***'The room where Mum's body is lying is quite cool. There are two windows high up on the wall and a vase of flowers. It's a bit darker than rooms usually are and it doesn't smell of anything much – apart from those flowers.'***
- Then add some information about the body. For example: ***'Tom's body will be lying on a table. Most of his body will be covered by a cloth but we will be able to see his face/hand/etc. He will look a bit different to the Tom you remember wrestling with. His eyes will be closed and he won't open them or move because he has died. He will feel cold and maybe his skin will feel rather hard to touch.'***
- Suggest some ideas for what they may do to say goodbye. These might include leaving a picture, card or flower beside the body. If appropriate, tell the child that it is OK to touch their loved one's body or to kiss them – and also OK not to want to do so. Blowing a kiss might feel easier.

"Wayne's body was so badly injured I let the girls know that we would only be able to see parts of his body. We organised for his body to be covered, but his hands and arms were not covered so the girls could hold his hand. I must admit there was part of me that thought it was going to be horrendous, but it wasn't and the girls said how comforting it was to be able to touch him one last time."

Katie

THE FUNERAL

There can sometimes be a long time between a death and the release of the body for a funeral and this can add to the pressure on a family. Some families describe being in limbo, having to wait a long time before they can really say goodbye. Because of the complications that may arise following the death of a member of the military, the funeral may be delayed. This is often the case when the death has been the result of direct or indirect military conflict. This delay can be very difficult for your family and can compromise your cultural customs. You may feel the need to mark the death in some way before the actual funeral; this might involve lighting candles or holding a small ceremony at a special place.

When there is a death in service, the Visiting Officer will advise families on possible funeral arrangements. A family can usually choose to have a military funeral or can opt to have a private ceremony. Even with a military funeral there can be a balance between military formalities and personal touches, for example, a football shirt draped over the coffin instead of a flag. A military funeral tends to come with some ceremony that may feel comforting – or may feel overwhelming – and may be held in the public eye.

Children and young people appreciate being involved in decisions about funeral services: maybe by suggesting music, choosing flowers or even writing a tribute. They may want to put something meaningful in the coffin. The decision on whether a child should attend a funeral, ceremony or other memorial service is different for every family. In our experience, attendance — at least for part of the service – can help children understand the significance of what has happened. This adds to their story of what has happened as they grow older and more able to appreciate having been part of the final goodbyes. However, there are circumstances – for example, if there is the potential for family conflict or too much media intrusion because of the nature of the death – when an alternative way of remembering may feel more appropriate for your individual child.

If they do attend, they will appreciate being prepared for what will happen and having their own 'supporter' (a favourite aunt or uncle, for example) who can accompany them if they feel overwhelmed. This will allow you to concentrate fully on the ceremony. It will also help if you prepare them for who they might see and what will happen during and after the service.

As part of this, children will seek an explanation about what will happen to the body after the funeral. This may seem very daunting to describe but it is better that children learn from those they trust. Clear, straightforward explanations can help a child begin to understand that after someone dies, they can no longer use their body nor feel any pain.

Sometimes following the death of someone with a connection to the military, there is a memorial service at a later date. This can help a child by separating out the sheer sadness of the funeral from some positive memories and celebration of their life, rather than their death.

It is important to note that, for some families where the person had already left the Armed Forces, it can seem unfair if they had not received either the support they needed nor a 'hero's' funeral after they have died. Part of supporting children in these circumstances will involve acknowledging such difficult feelings while finding a way to make the person's military service a part of a civilian ceremony.

"She keeps the order of service booklet in her memory box along with a dried rose. She put one from the same bunch on her Dad's coffin during the funeral."

Jude

The Winston's Wish Freephone National Helpline (08088 020 021) can help with guidance on talking to children about funerals, burials and cremations.

FORMAL INVESTIGATIONS

Investigations into the cause or circumstances of the death may have started before the body is released for the funeral.

These usually take the form of both an inquest and a service inquiry, but in some circumstances (such as an expected death through illness) an inquest may not be considered necessary. Your Visiting Officer will be able to explain more about the processes and your role with each investigation: some family members are able to attend these inquiries and the Visiting Officer will be there as a support.

Put simply, the inquest is a civil process undertaken to determine the cause of death. The service inquiry is to determine if there were any reasons, involving operational procedure or protective equipment, for example, that contributed towards or failed to prevent the death.

It is fair to acknowledge that you may disagree with the findings of one or other of these investigations; more questions could be raised than can be answered.

Children may wonder what these formal processes mean and why you are attending. You could say something like: ***'People want to be sure that they understand how and why Dad died. Would you like me to tell you about it when they have decided?'***



MEDIA INTEREST

The death of a family member in the military, especially if the death occurs through combat, means that there will often be media attention and you may have less chance of grieving in private.

It can be very painful to have your family member and the way they died discussed by strangers or referred to in the media. When there is an operational death, the media coverage and public interest can continue for some time and involve the funeral and the outcome of inquiries.

If the death becomes of interest to the public and the media, you may find you have to face intrusion from photographers and journalists at a time when you most want privacy. You may experience the shock of seeing your relative's face in the media, without warning, months or even years after their death.

Families say that it can feel as if the person who has died is in some way 'not theirs any more'. Children can find it particularly difficult when their loved one becomes public property in this way and when things may be said or written about them which feel hurtful or do not seem true. It can be hard knowing, for example, that other people seem to know more about what has happened than you do – one reason why honest communication within the family is so important.

It may help to prepare a simple statement to give to the press, along with a request for respect and privacy.

The Independent Press Standards Organisation (www.ipso.co.uk) is there to handle complaints about media intrusion or inaccurate reporting.




TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF IT

Shock and trauma may shatter the everyday lives of those left behind. Attempts to accept, make sense of and grieve after such deaths are often hampered by the military investigations, legal processes and the high possibility of media coverage. For children, the experience is often made worse by their lack of understanding. This happens on top of the understandable but unhelpful desire to protect each other from the painful reality and consequences of what has happened.

If the death has been due to enemy action or terrorism, you may find images of what has happened intruding into your thoughts – or be confronted by them in broadcast or print media.

A death in service can raise many questions and you can find the 'what if?' and 'why?' questions dominating your thoughts (see also page 27).





"To begin with, I felt I was living someone else's life. I watched her make tea, take the children to school, put the washing on. I couldn't work out how or why she did it when Dan was dead. Gradually, I've realised that we're the same person: the one who copes and the one who crumbles. We're getting there together."

Kate

LIVING WITH GRIEF

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LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF – See page 29

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FEELINGS AND THOUGHTS

Grief is as individual as a fingerprint. The way people respond depends on so many factors: prior experiences, current circumstances and each person's way of seeing the world. Even within the same family, people may grieve differently because everyone had their own relationship with the person who died.

People also express their feelings and thoughts in different ways. Some people find it helps to share their feelings and thoughts; other people find it hard to show emotion or put into words how they are feeling.

There is no 'right' way to grieve: each person has a unique road to walk. Sometimes, however, well-meaning people may tell bereaved people what they are – or ought to be – feeling (**'You must be feeling so ...'**) (**'You ought to ...'**). It is important to remember that there are no set rules and that everyone grieves differently.

In our experience, there are some feelings and thoughts after someone has died that just about everyone experiences at some time – children included. This doesn't mean that everyone has to feel or react in the same ways or that there is some sort of timetable to grief.

NUMBNESS, SHOCK AND DISBELIEF

Any death, whether sudden or expected, comes as a shock and can leave people feeling as if time is suspended and nothing is quite real. It is natural to struggle to believe what has happened and that the person who has died will no longer be a part of life.

A death as a result of direct military conflict is both sudden and traumatic. It can be hard to imagine it is true, especially if it happens in an unknown country or place.

It can be particularly difficult to come to terms with a death overseas when the person has not been home for some time. For children in particular, the sense of unreality can be profound (**'Mark will be home soon. He always comes back.'**) It also may be impossible to visit the place where the person has died – as is usually possible after someone dies in this country. This makes it harder to believe.

Feeling numb can also lead to feelings of guilt (**'If everyone else is so obviously distressed, why aren't I? Didn't I love them as much?'**). For some people, it can take a while for the pain to break through: this can make it hard to answer the question **'How are you feeling?'** when the true answer is **'Nothing'**.

"The day after, I was walking around as if nothing had happened. It couldn't be real, could it? Surely I would wake up and find it was a dream?"

Louise

ANGER

People who have been bereaved often feel angry: angry with the person for dying, angry about how they died, angry with the way life has been irrevocably changed.

If the death has been due to military engagement, anger might be directed at the people who caused the death, or at those responsible for why the person who died was in that particular place at that time (politicians, senior officers etc). It's also not unusual for members of the public, disapproving of military action, to show disrespect or less sympathy than they would in other circumstances.

Anger can search for a target, for someone to blame. Sometimes this is directed out to those who might have prevented the death and sometimes inside, questioning whether there was anything you could have done to prevent this death and feeling angry and bitter at yourself.

Children often express anger after someone has died: this is a very natural response to something that seems profoundly unfair. It can also be the way in which children and young people are able to express the chaotic, tumbling feelings inside.

Sometimes people say – especially to children – **'don't be angry'**. It may be more helpful to acknowledge that it is OK to feel anger but that there can be ways to express that anger safely, without hurting yourself or others.

ACTIVITY

FIZZY FEELINGS

Have a couple of 1 litre bottles of fizzy water to hand – and maybe a towel! It's probably best to do this outside.

Take turns shaking one of the bottles as hard as possible.

Explain that this is what it can feel like inside – all of the feelings, the anger, the confusion, everything – all churned up and waiting to explode.

Then let a brave person quickly take the top off!

Explain that this is what can happen: if you let the feelings, especially the anger, build up and then let them all out in a rush, everyone around you gets soaked.

Now take the other bottle and shake that as hard as possible.

This time, take the top off s-l-o-w-l-y... with lots of gentle fizzing.

Explain that we all need to find ways to let the pressure out safely so that no one gets drenched and overwhelmed.

"I hate that he died like this – in a sniper attack. I hate the person who killed him so much that I want to kill them too – but I will never know who that was."

John

FEAR AND INSECURITY

Many children and young people will have already experienced considerable fear and anxiety when parents or siblings in the Forces are away from home. Many children will have observed or participated in the sort of virtual reality games that involve battles, war or conflict: with a loved person likely to be in real-life situations, anxiety can be intensified.

When a death actually happens, it is a confirmation of fears and can remove a sense of security. Suddenly the world is less safe when someone important can just die and disappear.

Children may need lots more reassurance, may revert to earlier stages of development for a short while (bed-wetting, clinging, return to earlier toys etc).

They may become very worried that something will happen to their surviving parent(s). There are some ideas that may help rebuild a sense of safety: these can be downloaded from winstonswish.org/tfhibi

"We spent the days without letting each other out of our sight, even for a moment. I still worry when the boys are away from me."

Linda

The Winston's Wish Freephone National Helpline (08088 020 021) can help with guidance on supporting children's feelings and building reassurance.

PHYSICAL REACTIONS

After someone has died it is quite common for people, and especially children, to feel physically unwell with headaches, upset stomachs and sickness. There is a special pain connected with grief that feels like a hole punched through a stomach – children sometimes don't know how to describe this so use words like 'hungry', 'empty' or 'bored'.

People catch colds, find it hard to eat or eat too much, find it hard to sleep.

It's not unusual for people, especially children, to develop symptoms of illnesses that the person who died might have experienced; for example, a sore arm.



THE BIG QUESTIONS

Two of the overwhelming thoughts after someone has died are: 'What if...?' and 'Why...?'. These can be particularly loud and intrusive when a death has occurred in connection with the Armed Forces, whether in combat or as a result of the pressures and stresses of Forces' life.

These may include:

- **Why did this happen?**
- **Could anything have been done to prevent it happening?**
- **Were any mistakes made? By whom?**
- **Did they have the right equipment?**
- **Could medical help have reached them sooner?**
- **Did they get the emergency treatment they needed?**
- **Why were they put in this position by senior officers or politicians?**
- **Could it happen again?**

Children's questions may be more direct and even harder to find answers for:

- **Why my daddy?**
- **Did these people hate my mum?**

One of the challenges of living after such a death is struggling to accept and be at peace with the realisation that some questions never can or will be answered.

"I found my daughter's questions about her brother's death overwhelming; but then I realised how many questions I had too."

Flynn

One of the questions that you may find you or your children asking is ***'what happens after you die?'***

You may have a spiritual belief about life after death that can be reassuring in dark times; sharing this belief with your child can be comforting for both of you. However, it may be very confusing for a child to imagine a place that is also not a place, from which people do not return, email or text. The language that is sometimes associated with a belief in an afterlife can also be confusing to younger children and this confusion may cause pain rather than alleviate it. (*'Gran says Jesus loved my dad so much he wanted him to be with him in a better place... but I loved my dad more and he wouldn't have gone to a better place without me.'*)

It may be better to share your faith as a belief not a fact, for example: ***'People have many different beliefs about what happens after death. Grandpa and I believe that after a person dies part of them goes to a place called heaven – your dad believes that after a person dies their atoms simply return to the universe. What do you think?'***





A HEROIC DEATH?

Deaths in a combat or military operation are frequently called 'heroic'. There may be a confusing response for children to negotiate: people are praising your relative and calling them a 'hero'. This might make you very proud while also feeling very sad. The public seems to want to celebrate your relative's heroism – but you just want them back.

Or it might be difficult to connect the idea of a hero or heroine with the person you knew in daily life. Not all serving personnel are heroes simply because of their job.

Medals are awarded to some servicemen and women – but not to all, even if several people died in a single incident. It may be difficult for relatives of those who are not honoured to understand. Of course, medals do not make up for the loss but some families may feel hurt by their absence.

It is also challenging for those whose relative died under other circumstances: a training exercise, a road collision, suicide, illness. The loss is experienced just as intensely but it may feel as if there is less sympathy. It may be bewildering and infuriating to understand why one death gets recognition and praise, and one gets silence.

"Some days I have to walk away when people say he was a hero. A hero paying no maintenance and refusing to see his child, is that what they mean?"

Anon

"Two fathers of children at my son's school were killed in the same week. One was killed trying to help a fallen comrade and was given a medal – the other died when his vehicle went off the road in the dark. The son of the second soldier really struggled to come to terms with the fact that his dad hadn't been called a hero in the newspapers."

Kim

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

After someone dies, the adult who has been bereaved can spend all their time and energy looking after other people; in particular, their children. It seems important to be seen to 'cope' – and this can be especially true if grieving needs to be done in the public eye or if you feel you have to, in some way, live up to the courage of the person who died.

It can be tempting to become very busy or to be involved in a search for answers or for justice. Parents try so hard to protect their children that they can lose sight of their own need to grieve.

Sometimes adults feel they shouldn't get upset in front of children and children often say they want their parents to stop crying. While, of course, children are distressed by a parent's grief, they need to see that the thing that has happened is, indeed, immense and has hurt everyone profoundly and you can still manage the tasks of everyday life. While you may howl, you will then be able to make tea, drive to football training, play a game. Learning that huge emotions are appropriate and can be safely felt and expressed is so important.

Your reactions may be affected by the relationship you had with the person who died: this can be particularly so if the person who died had another family, or if you were estranged before their death.

You may feel that you need the support of those who understand some of the special circumstances involving the death of a member of the Armed Forces and the particularities of service life. Visiting Officers and the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre can help you make contacts.

Or you may feel that you want to have nothing to do with the services ever again or at least not for a very long time.

If you are finding it hard to reach out to family and friends, consider contacting one of the organisations that can offer listening and support to those who are grieving or in despair. Having a supportive listener does not mean you have to talk to them about your feelings all of the time. You may simply want company for a walk or a visit to the park.

"It's like they say on airplanes — put on your own oxygen mask before you look after others. I found I had to take a few minutes for me or I'd have gone under and been no help for anyone."

Faye

There are details of helpful supporting organisations on page 49

HOW ADULTS GRIEVE

Adults tend to wade through rivers of grief or get stuck in the middle of a big sea. Sometimes an overwhelming tidal wave of grief can knock you off your feet.

No one should tell anyone else how to grieve; if anyone tries, remind them that grief affects people individually. Grieving for someone has a definite start point but no end point. The truth is that you will always carry what happened inside you.

HOW CHILDREN GRIEVE

On the other hand, children's grief can seem – on the surface – to come and go. Sometimes people talk about 'puddle-jumping' because of the way children can leap from tears to running around, playing. This doesn't mean they feel grief any less intensely than adults: they may express it more through behaviour than adults do. It is very natural for children to be sobbing one moment and asking 'What's for tea?' the next.

There may be times when children and young people will express their feelings through challenging behaviour or language. If it's humanly possible, try looking for the feeling behind the action; sometimes the simple acknowledgment of pain and confusion can make a big difference.

"We moved away to my parents. I lost my home, my friends, my support network...it's been very difficult adjusting to the civilian world."

Maria

ADDITIONAL LOSSES

Family circumstances following a death may mean that a child has to face a series of changes that can feel to them like a series of additional losses, and this can happen even more after a military death.

Families may have led a 'service-centred' life in which daily life has been dominated by the military but which has also provided a ready-made support system. You may feel that not only have you lost your relative, but also your entire way of life.

It is likely that those living in service accommodation will need to move out at some point, certainly within two years. Families may not have had the opportunity to own property in civilian life and may face the challenges of moving to new areas. Familiar landmarks and essential support networks may be left behind. Children and young people may 'lose' not only the person who died but also familiar surroundings, their schools and favourite teachers, friends and regular activities and clubs.

"Having to move after David died was like a double blow. We had to leave our friends and community that we loved. We stayed for as long as we could, but there comes a point where you have to leave the barracks."

Claire

RELATIONSHIPS TO THE PERSON WHO HAS DIED

This booklet has been mainly written for parents or those in a caring role after someone has died.

All families are different.

Some will have had happy, supportive, positive relationships that were expected to continue into the future and which have been brutally ended. If the person was regularly overseas, there may have been the excited anticipation of reunions that kept relationships vibrant.

On the other hand, relationships between individuals may already have been strained before the death happened. The person who has died may be an ex-partner with whom there has been an acrimonious relationship. It may be hard to hear them described as a 'selfless hero' or to see a subsequent family take the spotlight of public sympathy that your child is not receiving.

Grandparents bringing up their grandchildren after a parent has died may feel overwhelmed by their own grief and that of their grandchildren. There may have been a family tradition of serving in the Armed Forces that now seems futile. Or they may have disapproved of their child's career choices and now feel horribly, confusingly justified.

It may have been a young person who has died and their parent is experiencing the intensity of their own grief alongside trying to support their other children. There may be fear that siblings will idolise the brother or sister who has died and choose to follow them into the Forces.



"I nod and smile when people tell me I must be proud. I want to scream that I'd rather he had a boring job in a boring office but was alive to come home at the end of the day."

Lexi

DIFFERENT CAUSES OF DEATH

This booklet is aimed at all those who are supporting children who have experienced the death of someone with a connection to the military.

There can be an assumption that all such deaths will happen in action; in fact, these deaths form only a proportion of all the deaths of military personnel. For their families, of course, every death is a tragedy.

IN THE LINE OF DUTY

Death on active duty is the cause which first comes to the public mind. It includes deaths caused by enemy action, snipers, roadside explosions and so on.

As noted before, these deaths bring a chaos of reactions to families. They may:

- hear the news indirectly through social or broadcast media
- experience shock and trauma about how the person died
- feel anxious about whether they were in pain or afraid before they died
- experience almost immediate media intrusion
- feel they are grieving in the public eye
- struggle with the concepts of 'heroes' or 'valiant service'.

In talking to children about this type of death, it can help to remind younger children of the context. For example:

'You know that Mum had been working in Afghanistan. People do the very best they can and are really well trained, like Mum was. But they work in very dangerous conditions and sometimes, they get killed. That's what happened to Mum.'

'Your brother was on patrol in the desert with some other soldiers. People were shooting from the hills. One of the bullets hit Liam and although the other soldiers tried really hard to help him, he was too badly hurt and so he died.'

'What seems to have happened is that Dad was in a vehicle with some other people when they hit a sort of bomb that's called an I.E.D. It exploded and Dad's body was hurt too badly for him to keep living. Two other people died and one person is badly injured.'

JOANNE'S STORY

We knew the risks with his job. The kids knew too. We knew there was a chance that he might not come back. But we lived in hope, not fear.

Even though we would argue when he was back about how untidy he was, and how I wanted to see more of him but he'd want to see his mates, we would always say 'I love you, see you later' when he left for work.

I just knew it when the doorbell rang that they were here to tell me that Mike had been killed. It was all a bit of a blur; some things I remember crystal clearly and other things are really fuzzy. The kids were at school so my sister went to pick them up; they said that they knew something was up, as she wouldn't tell them why she had picked them up instead of me. That bought me some time to think about what I would tell them. I didn't know what words to use. I just remember saying that something bad had happened and that their dad had died.

James was 8 and just cried and cried. Luke was 10 and didn't say a word. We all hugged on the sofa for what must have been hours before more family came round. James then asked if he could have his friend over to play on his Xbox. I think he wanted to just avoid being sad.

Luke sat with me and then came out with so many questions, like 'Where was he?', 'Who was he with?' 'Did anyone try and save him?' I could answer hardly any at the time because I just didn't know the answers. So I said that I didn't know all the details yet, but when I found out I could tell him if he wanted to know.

I got enough courage to call the Winston's Wish helpline, and I'm so glad I did. The person on the phone was reassuring and gave me some good ideas, like writing the boys' questions down, then thinking with them about how we might get answers. I later called the helpline again to sound out a few ideas about the funeral and what we might do for the boys' birthdays that were coming up. I came away with ideas like making a memory box, getting the boys copies of their favourite photos, letting the boys decide what they wanted to do (within reason) to remember their dad.

We had to wait for a few weeks before Mike's body was repatriated. I had told the boys what to expect from what I knew, but I don't think I did a very good job as I hadn't done anything like this before. They didn't know any different, so they seemed to just go along with it, playing on their games consoles most of the time to distract themselves or avoid conversation.

The funeral was nice and awful at the same time; I couldn't believe it was happening but I think it's what Mike would have liked. The boys actually enjoyed hearing stories about their dad and seeing Mike's family and friends. It was all a bit of a whirlwind.

Luke and James both now know more information — that Mike was killed by an I.E.D. They use the word 'blown up' and are quite matter of fact about it. They see their dad as a hero, but we remember him as their dad first and foremost.

We have his favourite food on his birthday, listen to his music if we want to laugh or cry in the car on the way to school. It's taken us a few years to suss out what works for us on anniversaries and Remembrance Day but I think we've just about got it cracked. We accept that we can do what we like, not what other people expect us to do.

We used to be afraid to talk about him because we worried it upset other people, but now we have come to realise that talking about him and doing things that remind us of him helps us remember him. We like to keep his memory alive and think about his life, rather than let his death define him or who we are.

DEATH THROUGH MURDER OR MANSLAUGHTER

Most people think that a death in service due to enemy action should be described as murder. Sometimes service personnel are victims of murder or manslaughter away from combat areas; even when home on leave or while working in the UK. The perpetrators may have deliberately sought out a member of the Armed Forces to attack or the death may be unconnected to the military.

Either way, a violent death will attract public attention, and maybe political comment. The feelings and responses of those who have been bereaved in this way share many similarities with those when a death has been on active service. However, it is unlikely that there will be the same recognition from the Forces and this may seem unjust.

If the perpetrator is captured, there is an added complication of the legal processes, including a trial, that will be distressing and draining for the family. Deaths on active service rarely result in a trial; even more rarely, a trial in the UK. Coverage may be distressing as details of how the person died become known and children may need support and preparation to field questions – or, sadly, even teasing – from school.

Winston's Wish has a publication about supporting children after a death by murder or manslaughter, called *Hope Beyond The Headlines*. For some answers to Frequently Asked Questions when a death has been through murder or manslaughter, visit winstonswish.org/tfhbi



"He survived Afghanistan. He survived Iraq. He was stabbed by a drunk in the fish and chip shop. How does that make sense?"

Karen

SUDDEN ILLNESS OR ACCIDENT

When someone dies without warning; the shock can be immense. When the general public think of a death involving members of the military, they probably think first of a death in action. Other deaths can happen suddenly – a road traffic collision, for example, or a sudden illness such as a heart attack or brain haemorrhage. Sudden illness can be hard to understand if the person has always appeared to be fitter than other people. And it can be so hard to imagine how a person who drove tanks in minefields could die while riding a bicycle to the shops.

It can seem immensely difficult to accept that someone has died and if they died overseas or away from home, there are all the added complications discussed above, for example, around repatriation.

When an important person dies suddenly but not in action it may feel as if this death has not received the same attention or the same respect.

'What seems to have happened is that Dad was driving in a car when it crashed into another car. Dad's body was hurt so badly that his heart and his brain stopped working – and so he died. It happened in a moment.'

'Mum always seemed to be so fit and healthy but there was something wrong with her heart that no one knew about. Her heart suddenly stopped working and that meant that Mum died.'

"I can't say I was prepared for her to die in action but I had at least thought about it. It never occurred to me that she'd just have a stupid accident in a market."

Anne



EXPECTED DEATH

The general public also rarely think that service men and women may develop illnesses that affect other people. This can also be a hard concept for their families to understand: however tough it is to contemplate, a sudden death in conflict is more expected than a slow death from illness.

People sometimes think that there is an advantage in having time to prepare for death; there may be the chance to make memories and for the children to begin to understand what is happening. However, it can be distressing for all concerned to witness a loved person becoming weaker, more ill and changed.

However long anticipated, when a death occurs, it is almost always a shock. It can also be a relief, which can be a confusing emotion to experience alongside deep sorrow.

'As you know, Mum had an illness called cancer. Everyone involved in her care – the doctors and nurses and everyone – did everything they could to make her well but sometimes, the cancer is just too far advanced. This is what happened to Mum; the cancer made her body very weak and her heart stopped which meant her brain stopped and she died.'

Winston's Wish has publications about supporting children after a death through accident or illness. **A Child's Grief** is aimed at those supporting primary school aged children and **You Just Don't Understand** is aimed at those supporting teenagers. We also have a publication about supporting children when a parent is expected to die, **As Big As It Gets**. All of these are available from shop.winstonswish.org



BECKY'S STORY

We were on holiday when James told me that he had found a lump. I told him that he should call the doctor straight away. He spoke with the doctor who said it could be a number of things and that he should come in to get it checked out.

James was diagnosed with cancer; we were upfront with the children and told them from the start. Joseph, who was 15, (James was his stepfather) understood and asked lots of questions about treatment and what he could do to help. He had his head full of GCSE pressure and the thought of losing James was unbearable for him. He started struggling in school and found it hard to concentrate. Mary, who was 8 at the time, seemed a bit oblivious and in her own world, but I discovered that she was listening to everything but keeping quiet.

At a scan we found out that James' cancer that had started in the lung had spread to his liver and his lymph nodes.

We had multiple visits to the hospital for chemotherapy; the children would visit, but didn't want to see James like that. He began to feel weaker and weaker. The strong father and war hero we knew had become frail and exhausted within a couple of years.

A friend gave me a booklet from Winston's Wish when we found out that James was going to die. I called the helpline and came away with things that really helped, like making a diary and getting James to record videos and write letters and birthday cards to the kids.

We decided to have him home as he wanted to spend time with us. The kids got used to his hospital bed and nurse visits. We tried to make it fun, even though sometimes it was anything but.

A few years after James died, when Mary was going into secondary school, she became very clingy. She didn't want to do some of the things she used to, she would go off to her own room and cry. Sometimes she would scream and shout if she didn't get her own way, saying that she wanted Dad back and that she wished that I was dead instead. I knew she didn't mean it, but it was so hard to deal with, I felt I wasn't helping her. I didn't know what was her becoming more independent and growing up, and what was her grief.

A teacher at school suggested I get back in touch with Winston's Wish. I discovered that they were able to offer some direct support because James had been in the services.

During the first meeting we explored our family and what support we have. The kids brought down their memory boxes and we shared memories of James.

In the second meeting we talked about what happened when James died and the funeral. It was amazing how we all remembered different bits. We drew a timeline and talked about how we felt then, how we feel now and how we want to feel in the future. It was emotional but it felt really good to have blown some of the cobwebs away.

DEATH THROUGH SUICIDE

Being bereaved by suicide has been described as 'grief with the volume turned up.' Many of the feelings and thoughts would be the same if the person had died suddenly or after a long illness, yet a death by suicide seems to intensify the loss. People can feel intense anger, sharp guilt, bitter blame or a deeper despair. The big questions of 'Why?' and 'What if...?' can dominate thinking.

It can be hard to reconcile the public's response to suicide with the public response to a death in service. Sadly, there can sometimes be a lack of understanding and people who have been bereaved by suicide may feel they are not entitled to as much sympathy as if the person had died in action or through an accident. This can lead people – including children and young people – to feel very confused about the person who died and disinclined to talk about what has happened. As a member of the Armed Forces, people may have been described in terms of pride and respect, even as a 'hero' or 'heroine'. A family's experience of this might be different if their loved one took their own life.

The effects of military life can cause some individuals to suffer mentally as well as physically. This may mean that families have lived with the impact of psychological distress for a period of time – or that the death comes as a total surprise.

There may be an overwhelming desire to protect young people from knowing that suicide was the cause of death; it seems unimaginable to talk about it. Yet, it is crucially important for children to know they can trust their parent or carer to answer their questions truthfully, in a way appropriate to their age and level of understanding.

In our experience, if children are given honest, straightforward explanations of how their parent may have been affected by mental illness or despair and how these feelings coexisted alongside their love and concern for their family, they are able to see beyond how the person died to their memories of the person's life.

One family's way of explaining it was like this. ***'Dad had a very stressful experience at work in the Navy. He thought he could manage on his own, but in fact he was suffering from something called depression which is a serious illness that affects how people think and feel. He kept this hidden from everyone he knew. He reached a point when he could not see how to keep on living. He thought he had only one option and that was to die. He loved you so much and would not have done this if he had been well.'***

Winston's Wish has a publication about supporting children after a death through suicide. ***Beyond The Rough Rock*** helps parents and carers find the words with which to talk about what has happened and describes possible reactions and responses. Many of the calls to our Freephone National Helpline (**08088 020 021**) are from those supporting children bereaved by suicide.

The website **www.supportaftersuicide.org.uk** has additional resources, in particular a booklet for adults called ***Help is at Hand*** aimed at anyone bereaved or affected by suicide.

CHLOE'S STORY

David joined the Army when he was 21. His Mum says that he was quite naughty when he was younger and that he had tried a few jobs but went into the Army because that was his 'backup plan'. He loved it, he got to see the world, met loads of friends and learned loads of skills.

He used to talk to me about how he was feeling and that war scared him. But after a few tours he seemed to put that behind him and come back with fun stories for the kids. They loved having him back: both Jodie and Livvie couldn't get enough of him when he was here, but it would tear them apart when he'd leave to go on tour again.

I remember him muttering things in his sleep and waking up in sweats; this progressively got worse before he finally got some help from his doctor. For some reason he wouldn't go to the welfare unit – I think it was his stubbornness and maybe shame or stigma.

He came back from tour again and things were getting worse; he was drinking too much alcohol and had stopped sleeping. His attitude seemed to change and he would get moody really quickly. He decided that he would come out of the Army and that we would find something to help him get more settled. But things just got worse and worse for him.

We moved out of barracks a few years before he left the Army so that I could be closer to my family. I think he really missed his Army buddies; I would try to get him to meet up with them, but there always seemed to be an excuse as to why they couldn't meet up.

David hanged himself at home in the garage. He left a note saying that he was sorry and that our lives would be better without him. I had no idea that he had plans to do that.

Initially I told the girls that he had died of a heart attack. I had thought this would be gentler on them but then I realised they deserved the truth, which was just as well as their older cousins told them that he had killed himself because he drank too much and had PTSD.

I called Winston's Wish on the recommendation of a friend. I came away with a few ideas about how I could talk to the girls about their dad's death and they told me about the service they offer to military families.

The Winston's Wish staff that came to see us were lovely. We were all nervous before they came, but the girls really opened up after a while and began to share memories and talk about their feelings (which was amazing, as it was like they were a closed book before).

I realise now that the girls didn't want to upset me, so they were keeping their thoughts and feelings in. We have had some amazing conversations about how we are sometimes angry at David for leaving us the way he did, but also sorry that we didn't know how he was feeling. We've learnt about how important it is to look after our own and each other's mental health and what we do to cope.

I would recommend for anyone to get in touch with Winston's Wish. We went into it with the mindset of 'let's have one meeting and see how it goes'. It went really well for us, we had three family meetings before we went to a group. I'm still in contact with some of the mums, and the girls still have a WhatsApp group going with the other girls in their group. I know they've found this really helpful, to know that they are not the only ones who have had to live through this.

The one thing that has stuck with me is that I don't need to be told how to grieve. Grieving is individual and personal. I got huge comfort hearing another parent share that they sometimes felt relieved that their wife had died after years of ill health and several attempts to end her life. It's that sort of thing that some people don't get, because it isn't often said or talked about. The safety of the group gave us permission to express our feelings and process some of our grief as a family and as individuals.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

It may feel impossible to consider right now, but there will be days again when it is possible to think of the future. Sometimes events (such as an enforced move) may catapult you into a different future. And sometimes there are events that can't help but return you to the past.

REMEMBRANCE DAY AND ARMED FORCES DAY – *See page 41*

REMEMBERING ON SPECIAL DAYS – *See page 42*

MEMORIES – *See page 43*

LOOKING AHEAD – *See page 44*

REMEMBRANCE DAY AND ARMED FORCES DAY

Remembrance Day comes around each November and for a while, the whole country thinks about the Forces and about those who have died.

It may be difficult around the times of such public events when you are thinking about your own very personal loss. It can also be difficult for children in schools if there is a Remembrance Day service or lessons themed around the day. It may also be really comforting to feel that, even for a short while, people are honouring your relative who died. Some children get upset when they see Remembrance Day poppies on sale; others are upset if they think a teacher or member of the public should be wearing a poppy and isn't doing so.

Armed Forces Day falls on the last Saturday of June: bereaved families may find the celebration of those who have served or are serving in one of the Forces very poignant. Bereaved families may be invited to local memorial day events, specific to their relative's service, on this or another day.

Spending time as a family to discuss your thoughts about these days can be useful. There may be mixed feelings in families about attending a service or ceremony at a local war memorial. If young people are not keen to go, it's worth exploring if there are other ways of remembering that they would like to try.

Wise schools and teachers are alert to such occasions, but it doesn't hurt to remind them when an event such as Remembrance Day may be painful.



REMEMBERING ON SPECIAL DAYS

For all grieving children, some days can be especially challenging. Marking Mother's Day or Father's Day, for example, when a parent has died can feel really difficult when shops are full of reminders and friends are making cards for their mum or dad. Talking through ways to include memories of the person who died can be very helpful.

The birthday of the person who died or the anniversary of the death can be very moving. Children may appreciate some suggestions of ways to remember the person who died on such a day.

Christmas and other religious festivals may have been a time when families came together and built special traditions. There may be some traditions that you decide as a family that you want to uphold and others you may wish to change slightly.

On days like these, it is important to look after yourself. Give yourself permission to not be OK and, equally, to smile.

Of course, each anniversary doesn't have to contain a grand gesture; in fact, some families decide to 'write off' some days if they feel there is already enough space given to remembering.

There may be future life events when the person who has died is very much missed. There are ways to invoke their memory; for example, by having photographs in a special place on a wedding day.

"Sara used to always put the decorations up for Diwali, but now Arjun loves doing it. He says it makes him remember her more."

Raj

On special days, you could:

Have a special candle and light it on important days that remind you of the person who died

Take a card, drawing or a special message to their grave, or to where their ashes were buried or scattered

Tie a special message to a helium balloon and watch it soar into the sky

Plant some bulbs or a shrub in a place that holds special memories

Eat their favourite meal – Fish and chips? Roast dinner? Curry?

Listen to their favourite music or music that reminds you of them (even if you don't like it!)

Watch their favourite film

Ask other people for their memories of the person who died as a child or teenager: for example, what was the funniest thing they did?

Find out where their favourite places were and plan to visit when you can or visit where they grew up

Have a go at doing some of the things they did for fun: bike riding, gardening, cooking

Write a letter or a poem. Maybe you could start with something like 'I have something I'd like to tell you...'

MEMORIES

A death in service often involves a family with small children. If a parent has been serving away from home, young children may have only a few memories of time spent together; or there may have been little contact due to family break up. Sadly, sometimes a father dies before a baby has been born and there are no memories to hold onto – or the child may have been too small to retain many memories.

As a child grows up, they may become more aware of gaps in their memories. It can help to build up memories with stories about the person who died, looking at photographs and personal items and talking about them. Supportive family and friends can help paint a real and vivid picture of the person who died by sharing their own stories and memories: sometimes it helps to jot down the start of a story to be shared at a later date. 'Ask me about the time your dad got stuck on the school roof.'

By continuing to share memories and thoughts about the person who died, it is more likely that young people will hold onto memories and be able to tell others about them for years to come. Their death does not have to define them and people can get to know what kind of person they were through their children.

"I used to get really upset and angry that I didn't have any memories of Dad as he died when I was so little. I like hearing stories about him; it makes me imagine what he would be like if he was alive now."

Carl

"I'm so glad that we looked through the old photo album so much when he died. Now, years later, I'm still able to tell new friends about him and even tell my new nephew about the kind of dad he was."

Cassie

It's important to acknowledge that not everyone who dies is loved by everyone all of the time. Sometimes you can love someone but hate their moods or aspects of their behaviour. Some people can behave in ways that are frightening, unkind or disloyal – this may be the result of the stressful situations that service personnel can find themselves in.

Family members may react to the death in differing ways as each will have had a unique relationship with the person who died. If the relationship was a difficult one, grief is likely to be complicated. Other people might think: 'They didn't get on at all so I don't know why they are so upset'; but grief doesn't work this way. It is important that you and your children have the chance to remember the person who died honestly, not trying to make them perfect, but not forgetting the good bits either.

In time it will hopefully become easier to remember the person who lived, rather than the way they died.



LOOKING AHEAD

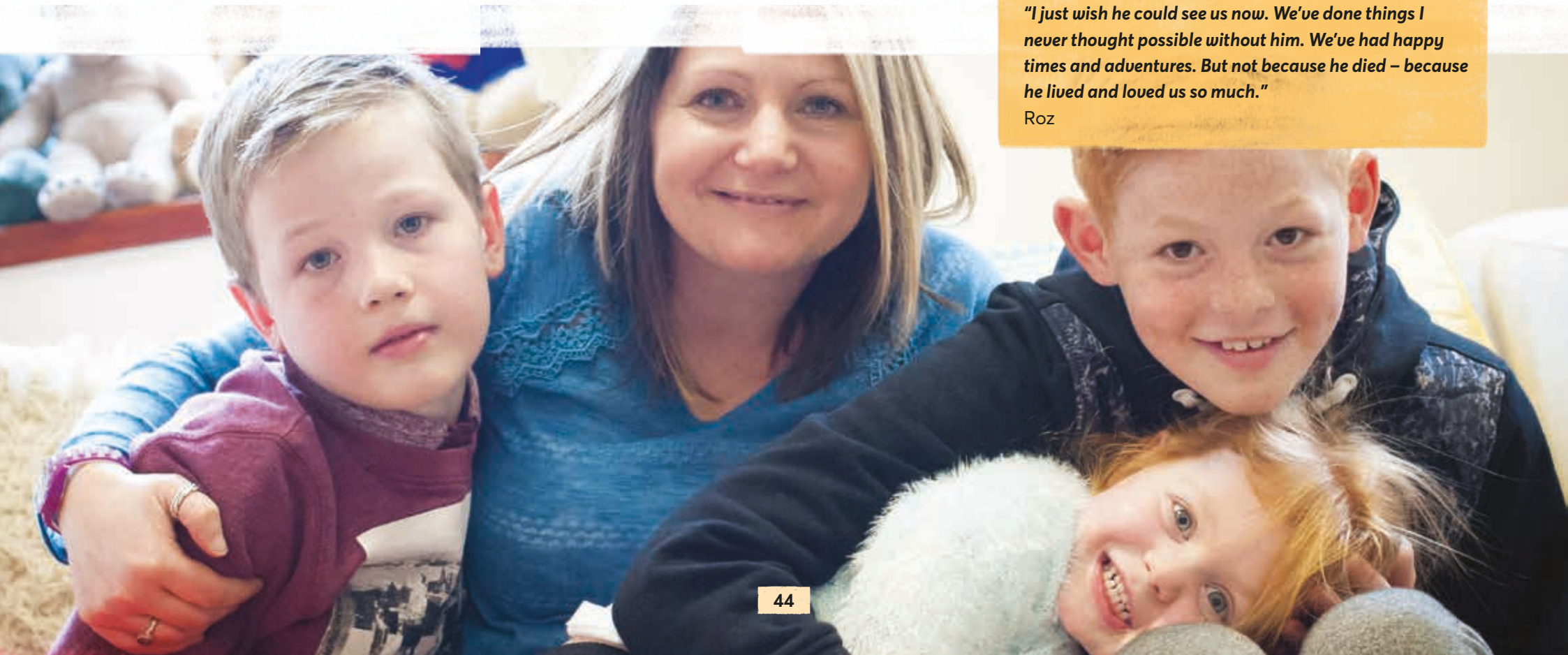
Some days the only thing you can think about is the loss; some days it is possible to be distracted by everyday life. You might go from total immersion in grief to doing the washing in hours – or days. And some days you can laugh or smile about 'normal' things with friends and family and some days, it's just the grief.

Bereaved people say that, sometimes against their expectations, a time comes when there is a little space for new plans or for some hope. And then a little more space. It isn't that the grief is getting smaller, it's that you are growing around and beyond the grief.

For children and young people, the past cannot be changed. Yet with the right support at the right time, grieving children can go on to lead full, rich and flourishing lives.

"I just wish he could see us now. We've done things I never thought possible without him. We've had happy times and adventures. But not because he died – because he lived and loved us so much."

Roz



WHO CAN HELP?

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

School plays a familiar and routine part in children's lives. After any death, many children want to get back to school because it gives them a sense of stability and security in the middle of the chaos. Some will see school as a place to stop thinking about what has happened for a few hours. Others may feel too anxious, confused and upset to join in with school activities or be shy of being upset in front of other children. Some may find it too much of a challenge to go to school at all. This may be because they don't want to leave their family and are anxious about another person dying; others may want to be at home to be a support to their grieving parent. All of these reactions are natural.



TALKING WITH THE SCHOOL

It can be very helpful to inform the school as soon as possible. This gives them a chance to prepare both to respond to an individual child and also to consider how to communicate with and support the whole school. Talking it through also provides an opportunity to agree how the information about a particular death is handled. Schools will strive to respond to individual choices but, by and large, it is worthwhile for staff to know what has happened and to communicate this with other students and their parents.

It may feel difficult to talk to the school but the more that teachers know about what has happened and how things are at home, the more they are able to help. School staff will want to understand how the school can make a positive response; they may appreciate a conversation along the lines of:

'As you know, our family is having a really tough time at the moment. You will have heard that Tom's dad died after his plane was hit. It's been a huge shock and we are all still all over the place. Tom is keen to come back to school but a bit anxious about what it will be like. I wanted to have a word about what sort of support Tom will be able to have. He wondered if he would be able to talk to {named member of staff} if things get too much?'

It may be that because of the demands of service life, children are away from home at boarding school. This may have given children stability when they might otherwise have moved around a lot and they may be keen to return to a place where they feel supported. It may be a very difficult decision to agree to them returning and the school's pastoral support will need to be very aware of what has happened and very alert to the emotional support that might be needed.

Any death can also mean big changes, such as a move of home or area which, therefore, also means a change of school. It is really important for the staff at a new school to know what has happened when a bereaved child transitions from primary to secondary school – even if this is many years after a death.

SCHOOL SUPPORT

Schools and teachers have such an important role for grieving children. One of the most valuable things they can do is simply to acknowledge what has happened: children tell us that having a teacher say **'I was really sorry to hear about your dad'** makes a big difference.

Ensuring that all members of the school staff know what has happened can help them provide support for a bereaved child. This is easier at primary or first school level when a class teacher can keep eyes and ears open for signs of distress and requires more communication at secondary or high school level when more people need to remember.

'You may have heard in the news that the father of Tom in Year 4 died. He was in the RAF and his plane crashed after being hit by gunfire. He's coming back in on Thursday so we need to think about how best to tell the school and put in place some support for him.'

If it is likely that members of a school community know more about what has happened than the bereaved child does, this may require sensitive and careful exploration with the child's family.

"This was the first time we had a child whose dad had been killed in action. We were shaken by the effect it had on other children. It was really good to talk this through with the helpline."

Richard: Headteacher



Winston's Wish has a **Schools Information Pack** and a **Strategy for Schools** which include guidance on discussing a death affecting a school community, ideas for lesson plans, sample letters for parents and/or governors. These can be obtained through the Winston's Wish website or by contacting the Freephone National Helpline on 08088 020 021 where guidance and information on handling individual circumstances can also be discussed.

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

- Think through how you will answer any questions; it might help to practise this with your family. For example, you might feel you can only say something like: **'Yes, my brother died, he was a soldier. I don't want to talk about it just now.'**
- Or you may want to share a little more about what happened and how you are feeling, for example: **'My mum was in the Army and she was really badly injured in a car crash when she was training. The doctors tried really hard to save her but she was too badly hurt and so she died. I just can't believe it.'**
- It may help to ask your friends to look out for you and have a word with a teacher if some people are being too inquisitive or unkind.
- Talk with your teacher about what to do if it all becomes a bit too much: for example, have a few minutes 'out', a walk around the playground, a glass of water.
- It is natural to feel a huge and confusing range of emotions – and also to feel almost numb. Be gentle on yourself.



FOR TEACHERS AND OTHER SCHOOL STAFF

- Acknowledge what has happened with the child.
- Consider the impact of this death on other bereaved members of the school community or other children with family in the military.
- Help the bereaved child to think through how they will respond to questions.
- Give the class/school some guidance on what to say, for example: **'It's a very tough time for Alex. Think about how you can be kind... you might want to say: 'I'm sorry your brother died'. Alex might not feel able to reply but will appreciate if you understand that and still include Alex in games.'**
- Discuss with the child what they would like to do if it all becomes a bit overwhelming. This might include a 'Time Out' card (when they can have a few minutes out of the classroom) or an 'Emotional First Aid Kit' of strategies.
- Consider the planned curriculum for the next weeks and, ideally, next few terms. Lesson content involving war or military engagement or, for example, activities around Father's Day or Remembrance Day may need sensitive planning. It is important to give a grieving child advance notice and options about whether and how to be involved.
- Keep a calendar of important dates for a bereaved child, for example: the anniversary of the death and the birthday of the person who died.

SUPPORT FROM THE SERVICES

The first of point of contact may be with the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC) (known as the 'J Triple C'). The JCCC are available 24 hours a day every day of the year to support families when there is an incident affecting serving personnel overseas (or when there is a need for the person in the service to return home for compassionate reasons). The JCCC will handle welfare matters such as repatriation, financial help and support and other queries affecting daily life.

Each bereaved family will have an assigned Visiting Officer who can provide information as well as support and act as liaison with other agencies. Each service also has its own welfare staff.

The Royal Army Chaplains' Department (RACHD) oversees the work of Army chaplains who minister to soldiers and their families in times of war and peace. The Royal Air Force Chaplains Branch and the Royal Navy Chaplaincy Service provide equivalent services to their respective forces. Chaplains provide spiritual and emotional support to serving personnel and also to their families, irrespective of religion or belief. They also can offer guidance for those families who have spiritual questions after someone has died and for those seeking emotional and spiritual help in mourning. Chaplains can be contacted through the JCCC (see panel). In addition, there are many organisations within the charitable and/or voluntary sector who can help in specific ways.

Organisations that offer support to bereaved children and adults can be found on page 49.

Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC)

Phone: **01452 519951** (calling from the UK) (24 hours a day)

+44 1452 519951 (calling from outside UK) (24 hours a day)

www.gov.uk/guidance/joint-casualty-and-compassionate-centre-jccc

The text of the 'Purple Book' – the bereavement guide for families of service personnel is available at the link below.

www.gov.uk/government/publications/purple-pack-bereavement-guide-for-families-of-service-personnel

Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo)

Most organisations that offer support to military families are members of the Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo), which promotes the interests of the Armed Forces community. Their website contains a helpful, searchable directory of over 200 such organisations:

www.cobseo.org.uk/members/directory



WHERE TO SEEK FURTHER SUPPORT

FOR ADULTS WHO ARE GRIEVING

Cruse is the bereavement organisation for those who are grieving after the death of someone important; many of the local branches are also able to offer support to young people.

www.cruse.org.uk

0808 808 1677 (9.30am to 5pm Mon and Fri; 9.30am to 8pm Tues to Thurs)

WAY (Widowed and Young) is a peer-to-peer support charity for men and women aged 50 or under when their partner dies. There are local groups and supportive online forums.

www.widowedandyoung.org.uk

The Child Death Helpline is a helpline for anyone who is affected by the death of a child, of any age, however recently or long ago.

www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk

0800 282 986 (from landline) **0808 800 6019** (from mobile)

(Open every day of the year. Mon, Thurs and Fri 10am to 1pm & 7pm to 10pm | Tues and Wed 10am to 4pm & 7pm to 10pm | Sat and Sun 7pm to 10pm)

The Compassionate Friends is an organisation offering support after the death of a child of any age; they also have a network of local groups.

www.tcf.org.uk

0345 123 2304 (Open every day of the year, 10am to 4pm & 7pm to 10pm)

Samaritans offers emotional support and listening to anyone in despair who needs the time to talk.

www.samaritans.org

116 123 (Open 24 hours a day, every day of the year)

FOR THOSE SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The Childhood Bereavement Network is the hub of all organisations offering support to bereaved children and young people. They have an online directory of local services.

www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/directory

Winston's Wish offers guidance, information and support to those caring for a bereaved child through a national helpline and a range of publications and resources.

www.winstonswish.org

08088 020 021 (Open Monday to Friday, 8am - 8pm)

Scotty's Little Soldiers is a military charity dedicated to supporting children who have lost a parent in the Armed Forces.

www.scottyslittlesoldiers.co.uk

0800 092 8571

Some apps have been developed by young people for other young people who have been bereaved: search for these through an app store. Examples include:

- Lilies
- Smiles and Tears (developed by Nelson's Journey)
- Grief Support for Young People (developed by Child Bereavement UK)
- Apart of Me: <https://bounce.works/apartofme>
a mobile gaming app for bereaved children and young people

Website support aimed at young people and including personal stories and supportive activities:

- www.talkgrief.org
- www.hopeagain.org.uk

BOOKS AND RESOURCES

For children

I MISS YOU: A FIRST LOOK AT DEATH

By Pat Thomas. Illustrated by Lesley Harker

A very simple and straightforward book about death and dying aimed at pre-school children.

WHEN DINOSAURS DIE: A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING DEATH

By Laurie Krasny Brown and Mark Brown

This factual book, aimed at 4 to 7 year olds, uses cartoon dinosaurs to explain death in a simple and non-threatening way.

MISSING MUMMY

By Rebecca Cobb

This lovely book looks at the loss of a parent from a child's perspective, exploring the many emotions a young child may experience.

IS DADDY COMING BACK IN A MINUTE?

By Elke Barber and Alex Barber

This book provides reassurance and understanding through clear and honest answers to the questions a boy raises after his father's sudden death.

ALWAYS AND FOREVER

By Alan Durant. Illustrated by Debi Glori

A gentle story for 4 to 9 year olds about the differing ways Fox's friends react to his death and what helps them remember him.

SAD BOOK

By Michael Rosen. Illustrated by Quentin Blake

This book is wonderfully honest and will appeal to adults and children of all ages. It explores what 'sad' means, how it affects us and how to cope with it.

HUGE BAG OF WORRIES

By Virginia Ironside. Illustrated by Frank Rodgers

A lovely story aimed at primary age children to encourage them to talk about and share their worries.

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT DEATH FOR TEENAGERS: HOW TO COPE WITH LOSING SOMEONE YOU LOVE

By Earl A Grollman

This book recognises the many feelings and thoughts teenagers will have after a death and offers reassuring guidance.

'I CAN, YOU CAN' POSTCARDS

Available from The Childhood Bereavement Network

These cards have been developed with the help of bereaved young people and offer suggestions and prompts on how to let a parent, a teacher, a friend and yourself know how you are feeling.

WWW.BOOKSFORMILITARYCHILDREN.INFO

Books for military children is an American-run website with dozens of suggestions of books for children from military families. Few seem to handle a death but other aspects of service life are well represented.

For adults

GRIEF IN CHILDREN: A HANDBOOK FOR ADULTS | GRIEF IN YOUNG CHILDREN: A HANDBOOK FOR ADULTS

By Atle Dyregrov

These two books are written to help adults understand how children feel when someone important in their life dies. They cover areas such as children's responses to grief and developmental understanding, and offer suggestions on how children can be helped in their grief in an open, honest and positive way.

DON'T SAY GOODBYE: OUR HEROES AND THE FAMILIES THEY LEAVE BEHIND

By Fiona Stanford

This is about the families left behind when soldiers are on active service. It covers areas such as the Army lifestyle, the pressure of uncertainty and acknowledges that sometimes loved ones do not return.

HEALING YOUR GRIEVING HEART AFTER A MILITARY DEATH

By Carroll Bonnie and Alan Wolfelt

This is an American book, aimed more at the American military experience but with content relevant to all serving families. It acknowledges the unique mixture of feelings that follow a military death and offers some practical guidance on grieving.

Winston's Wish has a range of publications and resources for anyone supporting bereaved children or those anticipating the death of someone important.

Please see our website for details:

<http://shop.winstonswish.org>

WE ARE HERE TO HELP...

FREEPHONE NATIONAL HELPLINE

Parents, carers and professionals can call our National Helpline for free on **08088 020 021** for ongoing support and advice, Monday – Friday, 8am – 8pm.
Please visit the website for current opening hours.



OUR SUPPORT

When a child or young person from a military family is bereaved, whatever the circumstances, they may need some additional support.

Winston's Wish offers free specialist support to children and young people from military families, wherever they live in the UK, who have had a parent or sibling die who were in the Armed Forces or were Veterans.

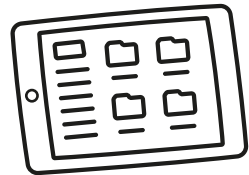
This could include telephone support, meetings with the family as a whole, individual sessions with children and young people and the opportunity to meet other bereaved families in a group environment.

Our experienced practitioners use their understanding of the particular pressures of service life to help grieving families to begin to make sense of what has happened and to find ways of looking to the future with hope.

This work is kindly funded by the service charity Help for Heroes.

Help for Heroes is the charity for wounded, injured and sick military veterans and the Armed Forces community. Their generous support for the work of Winston's Wish with military families means that many children and young people who have had a parent or sibling die while serving in the Forces have received the bereavement support they need.

www.helpforheroes.org.uk



ONLINE

For parents and professionals, visit winstonswish.org
For young people, visit talkgrief.org

TRAINING

Professionals can access our training to give them the tools needed to support bereaved children and families.
Visit winstonswish.org/training



PUBLICATIONS & RESOURCES

We have a range of publications and resources aimed at helping bereaved children come to terms with their grief.
Visit shop.winstonswish.org

**WINSTON'S
WISH WW**

Giving hope to grieving children

This book offers practical guidance for military families after someone has died. It is also aimed at those professionals, including schools, who support these families.

Building on our experience of working with bereaved families, it covers the variety of causes of death that service personnel and their families may experience and offers an overview of some of the feelings and thoughts people may have. Practical guidance, ideas for activities and suggestions for helpful resources are offered alongside where to find support.

"I was four and a half years old when my father was killed on active service so I know only too well how Winston's Wish helps those who have lost loved ones. You never forget losing a parent but, in time and with the right support, life does get better."

Help for Heroes is honoured to have supported this superb book and hopes that it will provide comfort and good advice."

Bryn Parry, Co-Founder of Help for Heroes



WE CANNOT SUPPORT BEREAVED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES WITHOUT YOUR SUPPORT.

BY TEXT:

Text **WISH11£(amount)** to **70070**

BY PHONE:

To make a donation by phone using your card please call our fundraising team on **01242 515 157**

BY POST:

Please download our donation form from our website and send alongside a cheque to the address below. Cheques made payable to 'Winston's Wish'. Kindly post to:
31-33 Worcester Street, Gloucester, GL1 3AJ



Helpline: 08088 020 021 winstonswish.org

31-33 Worcester Street, Gloucester, GL1 3AJ | Tel: 01242 515 157

Winston's Wish is a Registered Charity (England and Wales) 1061359, (Scotland) SC041140 | 0202.v1.4-18

A Winston's Wish Publication © Winston's Wish 2018

Second edition published April 2018

ISBN 978-0-9559539-7-2

Printed and produced with the kind support of Help for Heroes

