Some common reactions of bereaved young people

While children generally have the same understanding of death as adults, they can find it hard to manage their emotions, at times. Outlined below are some of the ways in which teenagers may be affected by or react to bereavement.

Mood swings are often experienced by teenagers, but when they are trying to cope with extreme emotions following a death, these can be more frequent, extreme and difficult to understand. Anger is a normal part of grieving, but for some teenagers this can at times feel overwhelming, which can lead to them feeling out of control and appearing difficult to control. Some teenagers may also exhibit more evident or extreme risk-taking behaviours following bereavement.

An increasing awareness of their own mortality can be frightening for young people. This can lead to increased anxiety and fear of death, both of their own and that of others. Occasionally they may become preoccupied with death focusing overly on morbid things.

Loss of appetite and overeating can also be indicators that a young person is struggling with the emotional impact of the loss of a loved one.

Avoidance can be a strategy that a young person adopts, where they try to suppress their emotions. Avoidance of talking about the person, or spending time with family members, may be ways in which the young person is trying to cope with their grief. Sleep disturbance, difficulty in getting to sleep or staying asleep can affect bereaved teenagers; they may just want to spend long periods in bed.

Fear or feelings that their emotions are getting out of control may also be very distressing for teenagers when they have experienced a significant loss.

What Helps?

Some suggestions about what a parent or carer can do to help:

- Acknowledge that grief is normal and everyone’s loss and reaction to bereavement is personal and unique. Reassure them that their feelings and reactions are ok.

- Give the young person space, allowing them to talk at their own pace. It can be frustrating for adults who want the young person to talk about how they are feeling, but putting pressure on them can alienate them and make it difficult for them to speak when he or she is ready.

- Help a young person find a way to channel their anger. This can be a physical method, through sports or physical activity, art, music or a focussed feelings activity, making a feelings jar or just hitting a pillow or a punch bag.

- Be open with them. Young people can manage difficult information if given to them in an honest and supportive way. Whilst adults may want to protect the young person, it can lead to them feeling excluded or isolated.

- Allow the young person to find respite from the family home if they want it. The opportunity to stay with a friend or relative may give them both emotional space and normality when things are difficult.

- The young person may find it easier to talk to someone outside their family, possibly a peer, teacher or family friend. If a close family member has died, then other family members will be grieving and sometimes young people find it hard to share their grief in case they upset other people.

- Talk about the deceased person, remind young people that learning to live without someone they love doesn’t mean that memories are lost.

- Support the young person to attend the funeral, thanksgiving or memorial service if they want to. Allow them to make up their own mind about what they want to attend.

- Support the young person in finding their own ways of marking the death of a loved one and remembering them, such as creating a memory box, framing a special picture or planting a tree.