

Research to reflect on: Bereavement



Helpful practice for supporting children and young people who have experienced bereavement.

This summary paper draws on the ‘Dual Process’ Model by Stroebe and Schut (2001) which explored how those who are bereaved experience ‘loss orientated’ and ‘restoration-orientated’ behaviour.

- This theory of grief describes two different ways of behaving when people are bereaved: loss-oriented and restoration-oriented behaviour.
- “Loss-oriented” behaviour includes thoughts, feelings, actions and events that help you focus on your grief and painful feelings. It may include overwhelming emotions, such as deep sadness and crying, intense anxiety, inability to settle, continually searching, extreme tiredness and physical pain felt in the body. It can also include numbness, with an inability to access and express grief; loneliness, blame, guilt, and anger; an overwhelming longing for the person who has died, and a feelings of regret.
- ‘Restoration-oriented’ behaviour include things that let you get on with daily life and distract you from your grief for a while. Even for a few minutes, these thoughts and activities will allow you a small break from focusing on your pain.
- Stroebe and Schut argue that without ‘restoration-oriented’ behaviour, you may be completely unable to get on with daily life. In this way, it is a vital part of carrying on after the death of someone important in your life. It is called restoration-oriented because it is behaviour that is trying to restore order and normality.
- Oscillation refers to the behavioural way that a grieving person can move back and forth between the two modes of being. Stroebe and Schut say that the bereaved should embrace this oscillation, as you can move in and out of intense grief and tackle the reality of the loss a little at a time.



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Helping children with their feelings and behaviour when they experience bereavement

- The impact on the child will depend on how closely involved the dead person was in the daily life of the child. The circumstances and how traumatic the death was, will also impact on the child.
- The child's level of understanding and how the news has been communicated to them are major factors.
- Children make up what they are not told about.
- Children often fear they are to blame for the death and need reassurance and physical comfort.
- Even young children need honest and simple explanations.
- Explain to children that when you are dead your body does not work any more.
- It is precisely because children don't fully understand what death is all about that they need to talk about it.
- Each one of us comes from a different culture, our family culture.
- We need to remember that children learn about grief by watching the adults around them.
- Children tend to express their feelings through behaviour rather than words. Children often express themselves through play.
- Most children show anger and anxiety as well as sadness and loss.
- Children might worry that they will forget the person who has died.
- Children need to be able to play and be happy even when something very sad has happened.

Teenagers and grief

- Adolescents are able to understand death in much more adult terms and are aware of the feelings of others.
- For bereaved teenagers, grief comes on top of all kinds of developmental issues as they struggle to find a new identity and a new balance between dependence and independence.
- If teenagers are told to be 'grown up' and support other members of the family and feel a responsibility to 'care for the family' he or she does not have the opportunity – or the permission – to mourn.
- Behaviours to watch for include:
 1. Risk taking behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse, fighting and sexual experimentation.
 2. Denying pain while at the same time acting overly strong and mature.
- Teenagers often need caring adults to confirm that it's all right to be sad and to feel a multitude of emotions when someone they love dies. They also usually need help understanding that the hurt they feel now won't last forever. When ignored, teens may suffer more from feeling isolated than from the actual death itself. Worse yet, they feel all alone in their grief. (Wolfet)



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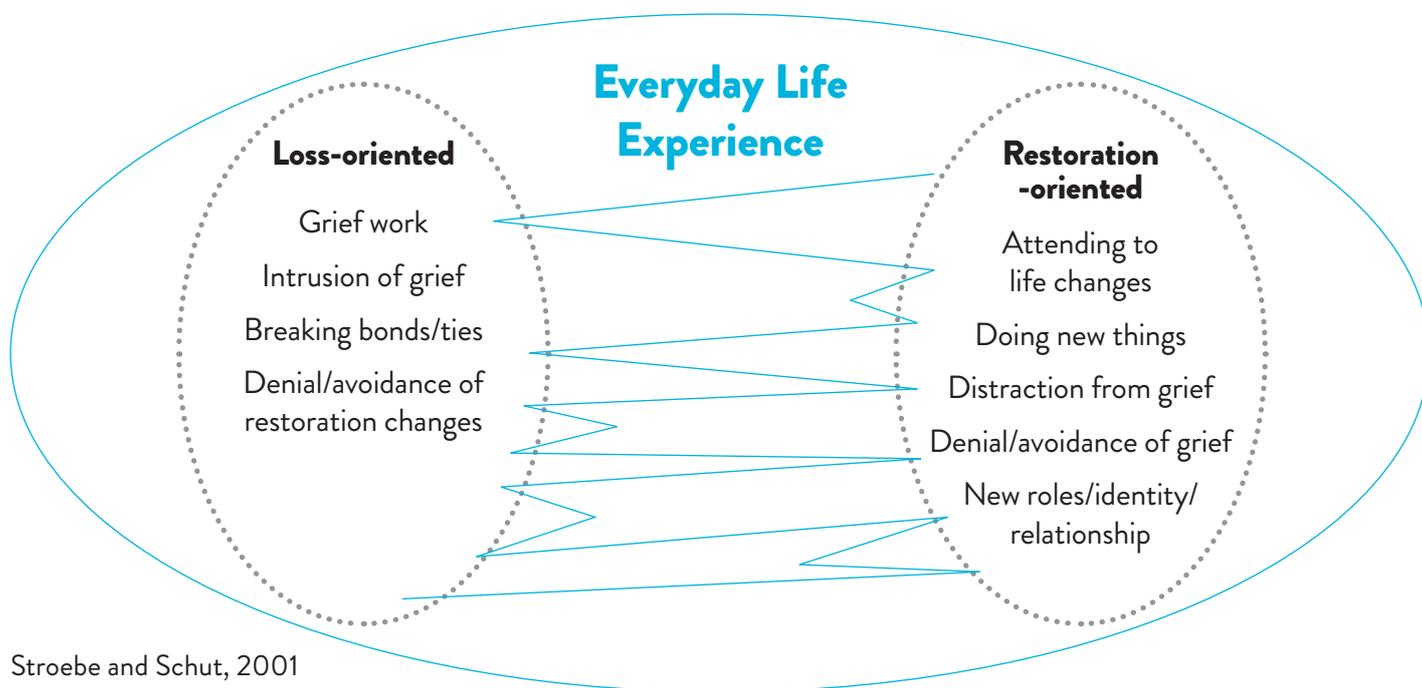
As a professional, when we encounter situations of death and loss and wish to help, we all bring our own:

- Hurts and losses
- Feelings about loss by death
- Desire to care for others
- Ability to reach out and be involved
- Inability, when overpowered by the horror or tragedy of a child grieving and our own sadness.

Resilience Education Model (Grotberg 1995)

We need to support a child's potential for resilience and increase resilience by improving self-esteem and self-efficacy.

- “I am” someone who can be liked / loved
- “I have” someone to depend on / believe in / support me
- “I can” do things really well



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What is the difference between bereavement, grief and mourning?

If bereavement is what happens to you, grief is how we feel and react.

If bereavement is a wound, grief is the inflammation that follows. It causes pain, swelling and disturbance of function. It can last a long time and may leave scars. However, it is the process by which healing occurs.

Mourning is what you do. It is vital to have something to do, to have a ritual

to follow so that there is a recognised role for everyone concerned. Mourning can help to allow reality to be faced.

Children generally have a shorter concentration span and do not tolerate intense emotions for long. They may switch abruptly from crying to playing, which can be upsetting for adults as they appear casual and not to care. This does not mean that children

are unaffected. Their vulnerability may make them suppress feelings which are then manifested through behaviour such as sleep disturbance, clinging, insecurity or bed-wetting.

It is important not to overwhelm children with information but to be guided by them and to answer their questions honestly (Richard Wilson).

This research note is drawn together by Jenni Thomas OBE, who is the Founder of Child Bereavement UK. Jenni is currently working with:

Angus Lawson Memorial Trust - almt.org/grief-support

Rosie's Rainbow Fund - rosiesrainbowfund.co.uk

Patron of Teddy's Wish - teddyswish.org

Patron of Sudden Unexplained Death in Childhood - sudc.org.uk

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