

# THE BEREAVEMENT GUIDE

**SUPPORTING CHILDREN  
AND YOUNG PEOPLE  
THROUGH GRIEF AND LOSS**

**BY DR TINA RAE EDITED BY KEVIN KIBBLE**



**nurtureuk**

## CONTENTS

- 3 About the author
- 4 Introduction
- 4 Death and young people
- 5 The effects of loss
- 5 When children grieve
- 6 Children's understanding of death and loss
- 7 Explaining the death to younger children – the importance of language
- 9 The process of grief
- 11 Possible reactions to grief
- 11 What do teachers and support staff need to look out for when attempting to support a bereaved young person?
- 12 Extra stresses for children
- 13 The need for continual reassurance
- 13 Key points to consider. What parents and professionals can do in the first instance
- 14 Involve children in funerals and ceremonies
- 15 Attending the funeral
- 15 The importance of remembering
- 16 Some ways of remembering
- 17 Returning to school
- 18 The role of teachers and support staff
- 19 Working with individuals
- 20 Golden rules
- 22 Referring on
- 22 The role of the counsellor/mental health practitioner
- 23 Support within the school/setting/family
- 24 Developing the Bereavement Box  
Sample Cards
- 26 Final points to consider
- 27 References and bibliography
- 28 Useful support agencies
- 29 Suggested reading for various ages and stages



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Tina is a prolific author and her 78 publications to date can be accessed via Sage publications, Paul Chapman Publishing, Folens publishers, Jessica Kingsley, Speechmark, Routledge, Hinton publishers, **nurtureuk** and Optimus publications. She is currently working on research into staff wellbeing and resilience and writing two books on this topic including one focusing on peer group supervision systems. Tina also contributes to national and international conferences and events on a regular basis including those for Giraffe Training, **nurtureuk**, BSA and Optimus while also providing training courses and consultancy on a wide range of wellbeing issues and supervision for school-based staff in both special and mainstream contexts and educational psychology services and specialist teaching services across the country and abroad.

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## INTRODUCTION

**‘LOSS OF A LOVED PERSON IS ONE OF THE MOST INTENSELY PAINFUL EXPERIENCES ANY HUMAN CAN SUFFER. NOT ONLY IS IT PAINFUL TO EXPERIENCE BUT IT IS PAINFUL TO WITNESS...TO THE BEREAVED, NOTHING BUT THE RETURN OF THE LOST PERSON CAN BRING TRUE COMFORT’** (BOWLBY, 1988 LOSS, SADNESS AND DEPRESSION)

Feelings of loss are a life experience common to every human being. These experiences touch and affect all of us as we move through the different stages in our lives from early infancy to old age. Apart from witnessing changes in ourselves, we also encounter them in significant others via the events of our lives. Changes for young people may include changing school, moving home or making or losing friends and each experience can promote a huge variety of emotions. Some of these may cause happiness while others facilitate less comfortable emotions that may both challenge our understanding of the world and be a cause of pain. This pain can be physical, emotional or spiritual (Mitchell, 1987). ‘Pain can be physical, emotional or spiritual – whatever aspect it starts with, it will always spread to the others, so the earlier we start dealing with the pain of loss and death the less likely it is to affect the other aspects.’ (Mitchell, L, 1987 International Stress and Tension Control Annual Conference).

We know that children grieve from an early age, but not in the same way as adults. They often grieve in bursts and can show their feelings in their behaviour and play. The support they receive at these times will help them learn how to manage and deal with losses they will experience throughout their lives.

## Death and young people

Like adults all young people’s lives are touched by an array of events that can suggest that movements of life provide very little stability. One of the most stable features in their lives for many young people is often the school context and the role of their teachers. It is adults like these who can help them develop their emotional understanding in their skills in the area of emotional literacy. This may well include the ability to accept the changes they experience and the preparation and development of strategies to effectively cope with change and loss.

## The effects of loss

When attempting to understand the effects of loss it is necessary to understand the concept of attachment. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) underpins the concept of change and loss. Attachment theory advocates that attachment is formed when affections or bonds with others are established and grief is then the reaction when these bonds are broken or threatened. Once bonding and attachment has been established with the care giver, separation anxiety also develops. This anxiety relates to the anxiety about losing or becoming separated from someone loved. Bowlby explains that the concept of separation is a difficult phenomenon to conceptualise, but the important aspect of separation anxiety is the fear of loss, coupled with the actual loss.

A person experiencing the loss of a loved one will have many reactions; the major and most common reactions are shock, anger, grief, sorrow, protest, numbness, disbelief and ultimately the acceptance and the continuation of one's own life. It is important for adults who are working with young people to understand the process of grief.

## When children grieve

**CHILDREN CAN FEEL GRIEF AND LOSS OVER THE SAME THINGS AS ADULTS, E.G.:**

- A parent or family member dying
- Parents separating or the family breaking up
- The loss of a friend or friendship
- Moving house or changing schools
- Having a disability
- Being in hospital
- The loss of a pet
- Loss of culture and homeland when moving to a new country
- Loss related to crises, e.g. fire, flood, accident or other community tragedy.

Children can also grieve over things that seem small to adults but are big to them, e.g. losing a special toy, comforter or other possession.

## Children's understanding of death and loss

### **PRESCHOOL CHILDREN**

IN THE YEARS BEFORE SCHOOL, CHILDREN DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT DEATH IS FOREVER.

- They feel grief when they lose someone close to them.
- The impact of the loss may be greater in the early years because they do not really understand what is happening.
- They do not understand what is real and what is not real and may think they have caused what happened.

They may be more clingy and needy and have trouble separating from key adults.

### **EARLY PRIMARY SCHOOL**

CHILDREN ARE BEGINNING TO LEARN THAT DEATH IS PERMANENT, AND THAT WHEN SOMEONE DIES THEY ARE NOT COMING BACK.

- Some children feel responsible for the death or separation and think it was because of something they did.
- They may also worry about who will look after them. If they have lost a parent they may worry about losing the other parent as well.

They may be very matter-of-fact in the way they talk about death and want lots of information, such as what happens to the body. They may need to hear what has happened on a frequent basis. They may not know what it is they are feeling or know the words to explain how they feel. They may show their feelings in their behaviour and in their play.

### **LATER PRIMARY SCHOOL**

ONCE THEY REACH THE LATER YEARS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN DO UNDERSTAND THAT DEATH IS PERMANENT.

- They can also understand why death happens, e.g. illness, accident or old age.
- They can talk about their feelings better although they might not always do so.
- They are less likely to blame themselves for what has happened but they might blame others, e.g. blame one parent for a divorce.



They have a strong sense of right and wrong and might have strong views about what has happened. They may be interested in life after death and ask questions about it. They may still want to know all the facts about what happens to the body or details of an accident. As they get older, children are more able to understand what other people are going through and the impact of the loss they have experienced.

## TEENAGERS

**TEENAGERS GRIEVE IN MUCH THE SAME WAY AS ADULTS. AT THIS STAGE OF THEIR DEVELOPMENT THEY OFTEN HAVE EMOTIONAL 'UPS AND DOWNS' AND CAN BECOME DEEPLY DISTRESSED.**

- They can grieve over the break-up of relationships, parents' separation or the death of someone close to them.
- They can become withdrawn, depressed and moody.
- They may want to spend more time with friends than family, but they still need to know you are there to talk to if needed.

**YOUNG PEOPLE OFTEN SHOW SADNESS THROUGH ACTING OUT AND ANGRY BEHAVIOUR THAT COVERS UP THEIR UNDERLYING FEELINGS.**

- Some may turn to using drugs or alcohol, driving too fast or doing dangerous things. These young people need lots of support.
- Others just need to do active and noisy things such as go for a run, dance to loud music or play sport with friends to deal with their strong feelings.
- Some may find comfort in music, writing poetry, walking alone or being in a quiet place to deal with their grief.

## Explaining the death to younger children – the importance of language

As stated previously, we know that children feel grief and loss from a young age. They very often need adult help and support to deal with their feelings. Explaining a death to a child can be a difficult and painful task, but it is evident that a concerned adult can help a child manage their feelings of pain and loss.

A first consideration is the language we use when engaging in this way and the need to reflect carefully on providing accurate information that does not confuse the child who may take our language in a literal manner.

**WHEN EXPLAINING A DEATH TO A CHILD IT IS IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING;**

- Try to use the word 'death' or 'dead' rather than phrases such as 'gone to sleep', 'lost' or 'gone to a better place'. These phrases cause confusion for younger children and can lead to unnecessary anxiety.

**“MY MUM TOLD ME THAT MY GRANDAD DIED IN HIS SLEEP. I AM SCARED TO GO TO SLEEP IN CASE I DIE, AND I FEEL I MUST KEEP CHECKING MY PARENTS DURING THE NIGHT IN CASE THEY HAVE DIED”**

**CARA, AGED 8**

- Young children need to be told repeatedly that when someone dies they can never come back. It is important to explain that the dead person doesn't eat, sleep, or feel any pain.

**“WILL MY MUMMY COME BACK FOR MY BIRTHDAY?”**

**FREDDIE, AGED 6**

- Children benefit from having the cause of the death explained to them. This should be done simply and in a language that the child understands. There is a risk that if children are not given a clear explanation, they may blame themselves.

**“MY MUMMY TOLD ME TO STOP RUNNING UP AND DOWN IN THE HOSPITAL WHEN MY NANNY WAS SICK. SHE SAID I WAS TOO NOISY AND IT HURT NANNY. NANNY DIED, IT'S MY FAULT.”**

**SARA, AGED 5**

- It is important that a child understands that everyone dies at some time, but most people don't die until they are older. Following a death, children can become very anxious and often have difficulty separating from family members. It helps them to regain confidence in the world if they can understand the concepts of death.

**“I AM SCARED EVERYONE IN MY FAMILY IS GOING TO DIE NOW AND SO I DON'T LIKE PLAYING WITH MY FRIENDS OR BEING AWAY FROM HOME.”**

**MARCUS, AGED 9**



- Children and young people grieve in a more sporadic way than adults, they switch from being very sad one moment to excited and happy the next. This can be distressing and upsetting to adults and can mislead them into thinking that children are coping better than they really are.

**“I KNOW MY DADDY IS DEAD, BUT I REALLY HOPE WE CAN STILL GO TO DISNEYLAND THIS SUMMER AS PLANNED.”**

ALICE, AGED 11

- Often children blame themselves when someone special dies and they need to hear that nothing we think or say can cause death. It is important to emphasise to them that it was not their fault.

**“I FEEL IT IS MY FAULT MY DAD DIED. HE CRASHED HIS CAR ON THE WAY HOME FROM WORK, HE WAS DRIVING FAST SO WE COULD HAVE MORE TIME AT THE SWIMMING POOL.”**

DAVID, AGED 8

When explaining death to a child it may also be helpful to link it to any previous experiences they have had of death, such as the death of a pet or a plant. It is important that the child has the opportunity to talk often about the death to facilitate their understanding that it is irreversible, universal and has a cause, as often cartoons and computer games portray death as a temporary state.

## The process of grief

The process of grief has many different dimensions and stages and these include shock, denial, growing awareness and the acceptance incorporating readjustment to the new-found reality.

**SHOCK IS THE INITIAL RESPONSE TO MAJOR LOSS AND CAN MANIFEST ITSELF IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS:**

- Lack of response
- Numbness
- Silence or inactivity
- Physical collapse
- Outburst of emotion i.e. screaming, shouting, confusion in speech, change in behaviour

The second stage of grief is denial; this is usually experienced at the onset or the early stages of loss. At this stage the individual attempts to come to terms with the loss and may fluctuate between the reality of the situation and total denial. Denial is in effect a form of coping mechanism to deal with times when the individual is unable to cope with their loss and grief.

The third dimension in the process of grief is growing awareness; this involves becoming aware of the reality and of the change and loss. Many different emotions will evolve at this stage including sadness, yearning, despair, guilt, anger, anxiety and often depression. For children it is normally usual for them to look for what they have lost and they can tend to be touched by some intermittent or prolonged episodes of sadness. Another emotion that the young person may experience is the feeling of despair. This tends to emerge once the young person has realised that they are unable to find the lost object or person and can be manifested in silent behaviour, withdrawal, vocalisation through screams, inconsolable tears and the rejection of affection and comfort from other people around them. Guilt also emerges at this stage and can affect the young person's behaviour in the period of growing awareness. Once the young person understands the loss is permanent they can also have feelings of remorse or guilt. For example, they may feel that they are in some way responsible for this situation or they may have extreme guilt due to their own behaviour towards the person who has died when they were alive.

Anxiety is also a part of developing an understanding of the loss especially if the loss is of a parent through death, separation or divorce. For young people, this often leads to increased levels of anxiety and they feel that their support structures and those they have relied on for security have been withdrawn from them. They are also very often overwhelmed by the fear of possible future losses and that the current loss that they are experiencing may be repeated. Anger is also a common emotion felt by all people after a loss; this can be demonstrated either verbally or physically and directed internally and on some occasions can be directed at a person. There may also be anger directed towards the person who has died which can then in turn cause feelings of guilt and remorse. These emotions can lead to a reduction in self-esteem and eventually to feelings of depression.

As time progresses these intense feelings of loss tend to decrease and the young person will be able to discuss their feelings more readily and return to established routines. The process of acceptance and readjustment enables the bereaved young person to begin to

participate in life once again. The process of grief is not linear and very often people's emotions can change rapidly and they will find themselves moving backwards and forwards in the cycle. For most people, the grieving process can take approximately two years but this is clearly influenced by individual circumstances and contexts and is person specific.

## Possible reactions to grief

There are many possible reactions that young people will have when dealing with the loss of a significant individual in their lives. A bereaved child may exhibit behaviour that suggests they are in a state of shock and they may appear to go through daily activities in a mechanical and automatic fashion. They may also display apprehension and experience periods of total panic. Some young people will become withdrawn from their daily lives and social activities and may engage in prolonged periods of daydreaming i.e. presenting as disconnected from reality. There may also be behavioural issues because of the anger they may be experiencing at this point.

### **WHAT DO ADULTS NEED TO LOOK OUT FOR WHEN ATTEMPTING TO SUPPORT A BEREAVED YOUNG PERSON?**

**THE FOLLOWING LIST DETAILS SOME OF THE RESPONSES THAT MAY OCCUR. THE YOUNG PERSON MAY BE:**

- Equally touched by nightmares, nail biting and speech difficulties.
- Present as anxious, jumpy and restless and concentration may deteriorate.
- Become depressed.
- Be prone to infection such as sore throats, ear infections and tummy upsets (this is particularly likely in the case of bereavement that follows a prolonged illness such as cancer). The child may complain of symptoms similar to those of the dead person, for example, if a mother had stomach cancer and the child was witness to much of the pain she experienced during this period of time then they may encounter significant difficulties in terms of stomach aches and pains.
- They may be reluctant to go to school and be at risk of becoming a school-refuser.
- They may become socially withdrawn.
- They may become very anxious about being separated from the parent or carer who is left with them.

- They may bite nails or cuticles; pick or pull at themselves; twiddle with their hair; rock or suck their thumbs.
- They may develop fears or phobias, for example, fear of the dark or a fear of being left alone.
- They may experience disturbed sleep. Some young people have heard adults describe death as a kind of sleep and may consequently become afraid to go to bed at night for fear that they may die while sleeping.
- Some young people have difficulty going to sleep and become extremely lethargic as a result.
- They may have bad dreams or night terrors.
- They may regress to an earlier stage of development. For example, using a baby voice or losing some previously gained skills.
- They may begin to stammer or have other speech difficulties.
- They may indulge in more daydreaming or fantasy escape.
- The young person may show more aggression than previously.
- The young person may be frightened to ask questions or talk for fear of upsetting others and some may only speak to certain significant adults or friends.

Regardless of the symptoms or behaviours that are displayed, it is vital that adults not only observe these but also provide a safe and emotionally literate and secure environment where young people can journey through this process of grief and loss.

## Extra stresses for children

Each child experiences grief and loss differently. It is important to work out what will best help each child.

### THERE CAN BE EXTRA STRESS FOR CHILDREN WHEN:

- parents or other adults are so upset they are not available to support children
- routines are suddenly changed
- people around them act differently, are upset, crying or not keeping to routines
- there are new situations to cope with, e.g. funerals, moving to a new house
- they are asked to be different, e.g. be quiet, be helpful, be good
- they are not sure what to think or do.



## The need for continual reassurance

### **WHEN A PARENT OR CARER DIES CHILDREN NEED TO FEEL THEY WILL NOT BE ABANDONED.**

Losses are so painful and frightening that many young children – able to endure strong emotions for only brief periods – alternately approach and avoid their feelings so as not to be overwhelmed. Because these emotions may be expressed as angry outbursts or misbehaviour, rather than as sadness, they may not be recognised as grief-related. Furthermore, because their need to be catered for and related to are intense and immediate, young children typically move from grief reactions to a prompt search for and acceptance of replacement persons. Unlike adults who can sustain a year or more of intense grieving, children are likely to manifest grief-related effects and behaviour on an intermittent basis, for many years after loss occurs; various powerful reactions to the loss normally will be revived, reviewed and worked through repeatedly at successive levels of subsequent development. **Thus, in dealing with children who have sustained a loss it is important to be aware of the special nature of grieving in children and not to expect that they will express their emotions like adults or that their overt behaviours will necessarily reveal their internal distress. It is important to remember that the delayed working through of bereavement may require specialised assistance if development seems blocked or psychopathologic symptoms appear.**

### **KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER – WHAT PARENTS AND PROFESSIONALS CAN DO IN THE FIRST INSTANCE**

#### **Help children express their feelings**

- Let children know you understand they are having difficult feelings. Provide an environment where they feel safe to express their feelings in whatever way they can.
- Help them find ways to express their feelings, e.g. through play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting, drawing or music.
- Allow children time to talk, ask questions and share their worries. They might be very confused and need to ask lots of questions. You may have to answer the same questions over and over as children try to make sense of things.
- If a child finds it hard to talk you could open the way by saying something like: 'Some things are hard to talk about but talking things through can really help.'
- If you can't talk about it, find someone you both trust they can talk to, e.g. aunt, uncle, grandparent or counsellor.

If children can't talk about the loss they may feel that it is not safe to talk about it and continue to have muddled or scary feelings.

### Share your feelings

- Share your feelings and tell children you are sad for their loss too – it helps them accept their feelings if they know others feel the same.
- Telling children how you are managing your feelings, even if you are sad, shows them that grief can be coped with. You will help them understand grief is a normal part of life.
- If you are really distressed it may not be wise to share this too much with children – they need to feel you are in control and can keep them safe.

### Be honest

- Tell children what has happened simply and honestly in ways that suit their age and development. This helps them find ways to cope.
- If you do not tell children you may prevent them from dealing with the loss. It may cause problems when they have other losses later in life.
- Children need to know what has happened even if they do not ask.

### Provide routine and support

- Stick to family and school routines as much as you can – doing the same things as usual helps children feel safe. Keep to the same rules about what children are allowed to do.
- Make extra time to spend with children and teenagers – they will need closeness and comfort.
- If your family has a spiritual belief this can be a support to children and adults.
- When the time feels right it is obviously important to help them to move on and try something new.

### Involve children in funerals and ceremonies

- When children or teenagers have lost someone close it can help to have a role in a funeral service or ceremony, or to remember the person in a special way.
- Sharing emotions and feeling connected with others can be a great support.
- Create your own way of remembering the person, e.g. plant a tree or flowers.



## Attending the funeral

Everyone comes from a culture, not only a national culture and a religious culture, but a family culture as well. The bereaved family may have its own traditions that need to be honoured. The best advice is to assume nothing and when in doubt ask.

People outside the family should refrain from forcing their personal beliefs which may contradict those of the parents. It is important to recognise also that adolescence is a time of questioning and challenging, and young people may not share the same beliefs as their parents.

Although some parents and grandparents may feel that children need to be protected from being present at the funeral, children usually find it helpful to be included in the family's rituals of mourning. The funeral is an opportunity for them to witness friends and family show their respect for the dead parent or sibling and for the family together to start to learn to live without the dead person. To be excluded from these events can widen the gap between the grieving parents and the child. However, a child who is frightened about attending a funeral should not be pressured or forced to do so. Some other way needs to be found for the child to say goodbye to the dead person – such as putting a letter or flowers in the coffin, lighting a candle, choosing a poem or visiting the grave. If children wish to attend the funeral, thought needs to be given to preparing them for what will happen and the service needs to be child-friendly. They need to be told that people will be sad and cry, and be given the opportunity to ask questions. They may like to take an active part in the service by choosing a favourite song or reading. It is often a good idea to arrange for a caring adult of their choice to be responsible for looking after them during the service so that the parents do not have to have this responsibility.

## The importance of remembering

To look forward, we need to be able to look back and remember. Grief is not about forgetting the person who has died, but finding ways to remember – and in remembering, healing. When someone dies our feelings for them do not die with them, nor does our memory of them. Our memories and feelings stay alive and active inside us, so we need to find ways of expressing those feelings that can help us internalise the person who has died and through this, allow us to move on with life. One of the most common fears that

bereaved people express is forgetting how the person looked, or that they will not be able to conjure up all the memories. Consequently, these memories can become their most prized possessions, since there are no future memories to be made. It is extremely helpful to be actively involved in creating ways of remembering. This is as true for children as it is for adults.

## Some ways of remembering

- **Memory box** – A special box can be made or bought in which to put precious possessions such as letters or cards from friends, dried flowers from the funeral, photographs or treasured possessions of the person who has died – for example a piece of jewellery, their glasses, a diary or letter.
- **Visiting the grave** – For some people this is an integral part of their mourning for the person who has died. Often it is their way of maintaining a connection with the person, putting the rest of the world aside and communicating with them; telling their news, expressing their sadness, and often showing their love through flowers and other gifts.
- **Memory book** – Creating a special book in memory of the person who has died, in which photographs, poems, letters and thoughts can be placed, can itself be a helpful process for a bereaved person and it will be there for them to look through and remember.
- **Planting trees or shrubs** – Some people like to plant a tree or a shrub as a way of remembering, perhaps commemorating it with a plaque. It is important to make sure that a hardy plant tree or shrub is planted to reduce the risk of it dying. It is also important that it is planted in a place where the family are always able to visit – if they don't have a place of their own in which to plant the tree, parks and other public areas may give permission.
- **Artwork** – Stitching a sampler and framing it can be a lovely option for those who like sewing, or they may like to paint a picture. Making something in memory of someone special who has died helps connect to them in the making of it, and gives the bereaved person something to treasure in the future.
- **Candles** – Lighting a candle and perhaps reading a special prayer or poem can be a simple and yet powerful way of commemorating an anniversary or other special time.
- **Keeping a diary** – Writing a diary of their journey through grief can be helpful for bereaved people for a number of reasons. Putting into words what they feel can help release some of the pain. It is helpful as a reference point for them to look back on how they felt before, and to realise that however bad that was, they survived. It also allows them to look back on what they have been through and what it was like. How people use such a journal is, of course, very individual – some people sketch, others write down memories,





some pour out feelings, or a combination of all of these, or they can do something entirely original to them.

There is a dual purpose in finding ways to remember, both in the task of creating whatever the person chooses and in having something to look back on or to turn to at special times and connect again with the person who has died. There is no right or wrong way of remembering, nor is this a task of seeking perfection. At its best, it is a deeply personal expression of love for this special person in their life who has died and yet lives on inside them. The Bereavement Box (*available from the nurtureuk website and specially designed for teachers and professionals*) consequently aims to provide children and young people with a wide range of remembering and celebrating activities and ideas – including all of the above key suggestions.

## Returning to school

It is extremely important that school-based staff support bereaved children in encouraging them to return to school. There will clearly be individual differences in terms of how much time a person may require to adjust but it's important to understand that a long period of absence from school can cause difficulties and impact negatively on future attendance. The young person may well need support in discussing what the teachers and their friends know about their loss and also access support in learning how to cope with the ways in which these people may treat them in relation to their experiences. It is vital that a bereaved young person knows about any individualised programme of support that they can expect to receive and how this will be structured and provided for them.

### **THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES OFFER SOME BASIC GUIDANCE FOR STAFF AND PARENTS WHO ARE ATTEMPTING TO FACILITATE THE YOUNG PERSON'S RETURN TO SCHOOL:**

- Give the young person opportunities to talk about their feelings and ensure that time is allocated for those.
- Try and involve the bereaved student's close friends in the process, especially when encouraging the bereaved student to talk about their loss, to develop a situation where they can keep their happy memories alive.
- Provide opportunities to answer any questions in a respectful and honest way.
- Encourage the young person to explore his or her emotions and to understand and learn that their feelings are true and real and that they should not be in any sense ashamed to display them.

It is vital that adults supporting young people in the cycle of grieving for their loved ones should refrain from saying: 'You don't mean that do you?'. This, in effect, diminishes the young person's responses and also tends to inhibit an authentic display of emotions and behaviours. It is also vital, wherever possible, that all adults supporting a bereaved young person should help them maintain contact and positive relationships with other family members and carers.

**On returning to school it is helpful to provide a checklist for the member of staff with responsibility for co-ordinating this transition. This includes the following:**

- Inform all school staff about the student's situation and ensure that the student knows staff are aware of their position and current feelings.
- School staff and the students should negotiate a contact person who would be available to the bereaved when he or she needs time to talk.
- A suitable place should be allocated for the student to take quiet time out if he or she needs it.
- The bereaved student's friends should offer support via a possible circle of friends but this should be closely monitored first to ensure appropriate support is provided.
- Younger students may benefit from being assigned an older student who can support them but once again this older student will need to be supported in an appropriate manner by school based staff.
- It is vital to consider any religious beliefs that the student may hold and respectfully incorporate these into the process.
- Contact should be maintained with the student's family to keep them informed about how their child is coping in the school context.
- Ongoing observations should take place to ensure that the level and type of support remains appropriate.

## The role of teachers and support staff

The role that teachers and school staff can play in helping children understand and cope with the concept of death adds an important dimension to their work. Placing death, loss and bereavement on the curriculum can be done in a variety of ways, for example through literature, plays and poems as well as through role plays and drama. Introducing the concept of death and loss can be done in subtle ways through curriculum areas such as English and art – through a process of exploring the experiences of others. In the science

curriculum students can be given the opportunity to understand the life cycle of plants and animals and the history curriculum can shape students' views as to how death and life can take on a historical perspective.

### TOPICS THAT SUPPORT AND GENERATE DISCUSSION TO PROMOTE CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF LOSS, DEATH AND BEREAVEMENT MAY INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Moving home
- Growing and changing
- Losing friends
- Feelings
- Starting or changing school
- New siblings
- Adoption
- Step parents
- Illness and being in hospital
- Death and its rites and rituals



## Working with individuals

Once the child has returned to school and a key adult has been allocated to mentor them in this process it is vital to focus on what is most appropriate. In essence, the best help adults can offer young people is to be available and authentic in their emotional responses and interactions. **IT IS VITAL THAT THE FOLLOWING ARE PROVIDED:**

- **Protection** – at times of change and loss children need to feel that they have both support and companionship allowing them to deal with their emotions in a protected environment with the support of the peer group and significant adults.
- **Empathy** – it is vital for staff and peers to develop a sense of empathy i.e. to see the world through the bereaved child's eyes. It is important that the adults in particular do not convey to the child that their fears may be unfounded as no sense of ridicule should enter the child's experience at this stage.
- **Showing unconditional regard** – when coping with the process of grieving the young person needs to feel that all those around them care for them regardless of what they do. It is also vital that they understand the ways in which the bereaved child may behave in an irrational way at times and not judge them in any sense.

- **Ensuring confidentiality and trust** – the supporting adult needs to ensure that the child feels that there is a level of confidentiality. The relationship needs to be based on underlying principles of confidentiality and truth but this must be shaped by the school's regulations and the local authority's policy. No teacher should place themselves in a position where they promise to keep things secret when they know it is unfeasible to do so because the information they receive may place the child at risk in some way.
- **Avoiding the dependency cycle** – learning to cope with a loss can place the child in a different role in which they may become more dependent on the adults around them. It is vital that teachers and school based staff do not encourage the dependency cycle; there needs to be sense of balance here in which they can share concerns but also simultaneously develop their independence and self-confidence in developing self-coping strategies.

## Golden rules

It is important to recognise that how you can help and support a child to deal with their loss is always difficult. The following golden rules may be helpful to adults and other young people in supporting students to both express their grief and to deal with the pain of their loss. **THESE ARE AS FOLLOWS:**

- Always accept that the bereaved child's feelings may be very different to yours.
- Be there in the silence too as some individuals don't want to talk.
- Be there to listen if they do want to talk.
- Be truthful and always answer questions honestly.
- Empathise but never say: 'I know exactly what you feel'.
- Encourage the student to express emotions rather than keeping them bottled up.
- Always allow time to grieve as there is nothing to be gained by rushing the process.
- If you are too upset to help find someone else who can stand in for you for a while.
- Try to keep to predictable surroundings and routines.
- Always show love, care and consistencies as these will act as healing tools.
- Provide reassurance that strong feelings are a normal part of grieving.
- Try to share positive and happy memories and have a laugh (prompt the student to talk about happy times and good memories that they have.)
- Ensure the child understands that the pain of loss is a part of life and it isn't something to be ashamed of.



- Be sensitive to delayed grief responses and remember that there is no single timescale with coming to terms with loss.
- Support the child in contributing to a book that includes letters, poems, pictures from classmates/peers and staff members.
- Discreetly praise young people who make an effort to support a bereaved child. Focus on the fact that they are using important social skills that will help them throughout their own lives.
- If another student has died it is sometimes preferable to leave a gap where their workplace was and to move around it. This gives students permission to grieve and gradually the space will be filled when the time is right.
- Younger children may benefit from keeping hot water bottles near to them as sometimes when they suffer loss they may feel cold from the shock. Alongside warming them a hot water bottle can give them something to hold on to. Alternatively, soft toys or worry beads can also be a useful tool.
- Ensure that creative outlets are provided for displaying 'hurt' in painting, writing and drama.
- Always check back when talking to a bereaved student that you've actually heard them correctly by summarising the main points of what they've said. You can encourage them to do the summary themselves.
- When dealing with the physical release of anger it is important to respect the energy zone and help the child to devise a permitted expression for these feelings. For example, when you have that feeling that you want to hit out you may not hit your brother or your best friend but you may hit your pillow or bang your fists on the table or 'what you're doing is not safe for you I want you to take care of yourself why don't you try this...'. It is important never to say don't do that.
- Materials to have on hand as a means of release for anger are newsprint, clay, reinforced cardboard blocks, foam bats, punching bags, jointed play people and animals, play hammer and nails.
- Music can be useful in helping distressed students relax.
- Don't forget students may be afraid that they will lose their memory of their loved one and having a memory box can provide the link between the future, present and the past.
- Students should be encouraged to set up their own memory boxes or memory stones can be used to offer the bereaved student an opportunity to reminisce. Rocky stones can symbolise

the memories that still hurt and have sharp edges while those that are smooth can represent the mutual memories. Special memories can be represented by polished gemstones i.e. these are the golden memories that the student needs to hold on to and return to to promote the healing process.

## Referring on

We know that the death of a parent or someone very close to a child or young person can be extremely distressing for him or her. This distress is quite normal and need not mean the child is going to suffer any long-term ill effects. However, bereavement counselling can help a child to be able to talk through words and images about the loved person they have lost as this can be a way to still feel connected to them in a healthy way.

Sometimes a child can seem to become stuck in their grief. It is important to recognise that such individuals may need further support especially when there is a traumatic circumstance surrounding the death. School staff, parents and carers need to vigilantly monitor and analyse the student's behaviours to make a decision regarding the need for further specialist therapeutic support. Mental health services should be accessed if at any stage it appears that the child has become stuck or their behaviours have become extremely irrational.

## The role of the counsellor/mental health practitioner

Children and young people find it hard and frightening to feel their pain on their own. The pain can feel too big and go too deep for a child or young person to be able to feel on his/her own. They will need someone who can be with him/her in their pain and not try to persuade him/her out of these difficult feelings, while not feeling overwhelmed. For some children at this time it is easier for them to go through some of their pain and intense feelings with a counsellor. This is because the counsellor is not a close friend or relation and the child feels less worried or anxious about burdening, upsetting or overwhelming them.

The counselling allows and helps a child or young person's feelings to be processed and digested so that they can move on. If these painful and difficult feelings aren't explored and made sense of, over time a bereaved child or young person is likely to become depressed, or stuck with angry feelings, or display neurotic behaviours. They may find any

future bereavement particularly traumatic and difficult to manage. They may also find it hard to trust loving feelings again, and may link loving someone with losing them; the child/young person may then attempt to cut off from his loving feelings in an attempt to prevent more pain.

A warm and empathic relationship with a counsellor can help a child to dare to feel love again so it is essential to carefully observe the child so as to be able to decide when or if a referral to such a specialist needs to be made.

## Support within the school/setting/family

Some children will prefer to talk to a trusted and known adult and this may very well be someone who supports them within the nurture context, and who has the special bond and attachment with the child that ensures they feel safe to ask questions, express their emotions and work through the stages of grieving in a natural and age appropriate manner. In no sense is the staff member taking on the role of the counsellor but they will most certainly have copious opportunities to work with the child in the natural course of the school day and the interactions that take place within the nurture context. It is therefore helpful to provide the nurturer with some key tools strategies and ideas that have been tried and tested and offer a safe means of exploring the loss. This exploration should be led by the child so that they can take the lead in talking and identifying where they want to go with any interaction/conversation.

## Developing the Bereavement Box

The Bereavement Box has been created specifically for teachers and professionals working with bereaved children and young people. Comprising 60 activity cards that aim to promote authentic and supportive interactions in a nurturing environment. Some are designed to be used by the child independently or with adult support while others are intended for the teacher/professional who can follow the instructions and lead the activity. Some examples of the cards follow that parents and carers may also be able to make use of.

### THE CARDS PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON IN THREE KEY AREAS AS FOLLOWS:

**Understanding** – this includes understanding the nature of death and the fact that it is permanent, the grief process, life cycles and the feelings and behaviours we may have as a result of the death of a loved one and how to manage these using support systems and developing stress and anger management skills.

**Remembering** – this includes a range of activities such as journalling, making memory books and mobiles, writing letters, recalling good and sad times, special times collage, memory chains and candles.

**Celebrating** – this includes designing memorial gardens, portraits, poems and pictures.

## Exmple cards from the 60:

### CARD 1 ALL ABOUT MY SPECIAL PERSON

THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 1

All about *my* loved one

Work with a trusted adult to complete the statements – you can **TALK** or you can **RECORD** your responses.

This **person** was called: \_\_\_\_\_

This **person** was my: \_\_\_\_\_

Things I loved **doing** with them: \_\_\_\_\_

Before my **special person** died we used to: \_\_\_\_\_

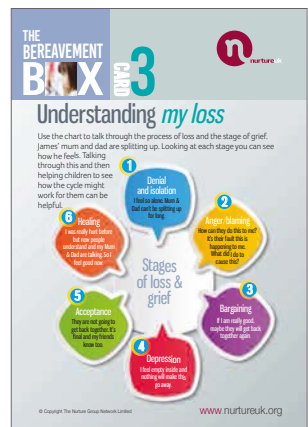
My favourite **memory** is: \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions** I have about my special person: \_\_\_\_\_

Things I **miss** about them: \_\_\_\_\_

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### CARD 3 UNDERSTANDING MY LOSS





## CARD 5 CELEBRATING NEW LIFE

**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 5**

**Celebrating new life**

In the spring everything seems to come alive and grow. Things change quickly and people often feel happier or more hopeful when they see all the new life and beauty around them.

**How does spring make you feel? Try to write/draw about your feelings at this time of year.**

**New life**



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## CARD 7 TAKING TIME OUT

**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 7**

**Taking time out**

Sometimes we need to take time out when we are feeling sad. This is OK - as long as we know that we can talk to others when we need to do so well. Ask the children to complete the following sentence: **I need to be on my own when...**

**I like being on my own because...**

**When I'm on my own I feel...**

**When I'm on my own I think...**

**I know when I've been on my own for the right amount of time because...**

**When I need some company I can find...**

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## CARD 8 A GOODBYE MESSAGE

**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 8**

**A goodbye message**

Sometimes when people die they are placed in coffins which are then buried near to a holy place or another special place of burial. Sometimes people put flowers on the grave and the dead person's family will put a special headstone over the grave to show where they are buried and remember them. Sometimes they will write or engrave a message on the stone.

**What would you say in your message?**



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## CARD 11 THE WORRY JAR

**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 11**

**The worry jar**

Our worries sometimes increase when our special person has died. It is important to identify these and talk to someone who can help us.

The children can create a worry jar - writing down their worries and placing these in the jar so that they can talk about them later with a special person.



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## CARD 13 THE IMPORTANCE OF CRYING

**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 13**

**The importance of crying**

Crying is one way to show that we are feeling sad and to express that sadness. Sometimes we need to cry alone and sometimes it is good to cry with others.

**Ask the children to think of people they can cry with and make a list of them.**



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## CARD 17 IT'S TIME TO TALK

**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 17**

**It's time to talk**

Everyone needs to talk about the special people in their lives. We need to say how we feel about them when they were alive and how we feel about them now they are dead. We need to make

**'time to talk'**

**Ask the children to consider these two questions:**

**Who can you talk to?**

**Who can you talk to?**

**They can record their ideas.**



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## CARD 20 MY PEACEFUL PLACE

**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 20**

**My peaceful place**

When we are feeling really sad, stressed, angry or upset we can sometimes help ourselves by imagining that we are in a beautiful and peaceful place.

**Shut your eyes and drift away...**

**What do you see?**

Draw your peaceful picture below and try to visualise this next time you are feeling down.



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## CARD 35 THINGS I LOVED ABOUT YOU

**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 35**

**Things I loved about you**

The children can draw these in a picture frame and then discuss these characteristics with a trusted adult.




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## CARD 42 BEST BITS

**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 42**

**Best bits**

**Write about your special person's best qualities and share with a friend.**



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## CARD 46 MY MEMORY BOX

**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 46**

**My memory box**

**Make up a special memory box.**

Choose the special things that remind you of your special person - photos, letters and objects.

Place them in the box then look at them when you want to remember the lovely times.



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## CARD 47 MY MEMORY BOOK - PART 1

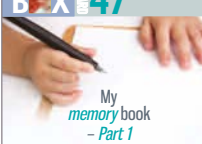
**THE BEREAVEMENT BOX CARD 47**

**My memory book - Part 1**

Sometimes it is helpful to make a memory book to remember a special person. This can include all sorts of things such as your favourite photos, poems, pictures or mementos.

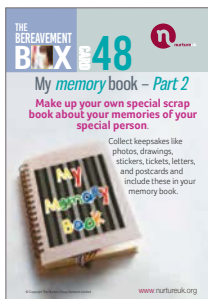
**What would you include in your book?**

Make a list to get prepared to make up your book.



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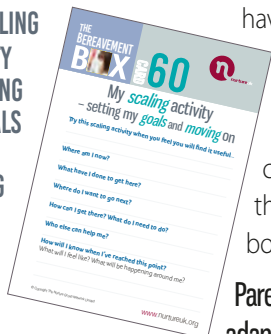
## CARD48 MY MEMORY BOOK – PART 2



## CARD57 I CAN BE HAPPY – IT'S OKAY



## CARD60 MY SCALING ACTIVITY – SETTING MY GOALS AND MOVING ON



## Final points to consider

What is important is to remember that the child does not have to work through the cards in order as they may need to engage with specific activities in relation to their particular needs at the time and where they appear to be in terms of the grieving process. This is why it remains vital for the staff member to be vigilant in terms of observing the child and ensuring that these activities are child-led.

This resource is in no way intended to replace or be a substitute for any therapeutic intervention but rather to ensure that the teacher or nurture practitioner is truly best placed to provide a safe context and approach to supporting the bereaved child at the point of need. It also remains vital to continually observe the child's responses and behaviours and to seek support from the appropriate therapeutic agency/support should there be any concern regarding the child becoming stuck in their grief or displaying irrational behaviours. It is important to recognise that such individuals may need further support especially when there is a traumatic circumstance surrounding the death.

On a personal note, I do hope that this resource can and does become a key part of the teacher's approach to supporting young children suffering with grief and loss. As a young child, having the opportunity to be heard at such a time and to gain an understanding that my responses, fear and anxieties were all normal and that it was important to remember and celebrate my loved one, would certainly have saved me from some very irrational thoughts and feelings of deep and ongoing sadness in both the immediate and longer term.

**Parents and carers can also use these cards and feel free to adapt them to suit your own family circumstances.**

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## Useful support agencies

### **The Alder Centre**

Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital  
Alder Hey  
Liverpool  
L12 2AP

**Tel: 0151 252 5513**

### **Child Death Helpline 0800 282 986**

Offers support to anyone who has been affected by the death of a child. Volunteers and trained counsellors provide help for adults and children. A telephone helpline is available.

### **Bereaved Parents Helpline**

6 Cannon's Gate  
Harlow  
Essex

**Tel: 0129 412745**

### **The Child Bereavement Trust**

Brindley House  
4 Burkes Road  
Beaconsfield  
Bucks

**Tel: 01494 678088**

Support on all aspects of bereavement involving children.

### **The Compassionate Friends**

6 Denmark Street  
Bristol  
BS1 5DQ

**www.tcf.org.uk**

**Helpline 0345 123 2304**

This self-help national organisation offers support to anyone who has lost a child. There are two sub-groups, one for parents of murdered children and one for parents of suicide victims. They also have an extensive library from which you may borrow books and tapes.

### **Cruse – Bereavement Care**

Cruse House  
126 Sheen Road  
Richmond  
Surrey  
TW9 1UR

**Tel: 020 8940 4818**

### **Gay Bereavement Project**

Unitarian Rooms  
Hoop Lane  
London  
NW11 8BS

**Tel: 020 8455 8894**

### **Institute of Family Therapy**

43 New Cavendish Street  
London  
W1M 7RG

The Institute's Elizabeth Raven Memorial Fund offers free counselling to recently bereaved families or those with seriously ill family members. They work with the whole family.

### **Winston's Wish**

Gloucestershire Royal Hospital  
Great Western Road  
Gloucester  
GL1 3NN

**Tel: 01452 394377**

Email: [info@winstonswish.org.uk](mailto:info@winstonswish.org.uk)

**www.winstonswish.org.uk**

The national charity offers a grief support programme for children. It gives children and families the chance to meet others who have experienced bereavement on a 'Camp Winston' residential course. This inspirational organisation also offers ongoing support, training, telephone advice and leaflets.



## Suggested reading for various ages and stages

### Under fives

#### Goodbye Mousie

**Robie Harris and Jan Ormeroyd** (2003)

*Simon and Schuster Children's Books*

A little boy's pet mouse dies and his parents help him to understand what death means by answering his questions.

#### Grandpa

**John Burningham** (2003) **Red Fox**

This picture book (*made into a film*) shows happy memories of a girl and her grandfather. The last picture shows his chair empty – children may need some explanation of what might have happened.

#### When Uncle Bob Died

**Althea** (2001) **Happy Cat Books**

A simple book about a boy whose uncle dies from an illness. Explains the facts around death and explores some of the feelings people have.

### Key Stage 1 (5-7)

#### Badger's Parting Gifts

**Susan Varley** (1994) **Picture Lions**

A story of animals learning to remember their friend.

#### The Best Day of the Week

**Hannah Cole** (1997) **Walker Books Ltd**

Angela and Carole always spend Saturdays with their grandparents. Their Granny becomes ill and dies, and the book shows the family coping and managing to have fun, while still remembering her.

#### Remembering My Brother

**Ginny Perkins and Leon Morris** (1996)

**A&C Black**

A boy finds ways to remember his brother in positive ways.

### Water bugs and Dragonflies: explaining death to young children

**Doris Stickney** (2002) **Continuum International**

This book uses the analogy of a water bug transforming into a dragonfly to illustrate the idea of life after death. Written from a Christian viewpoint, children may need an adult to help understand the relevance of the story.

#### What do we think about death?

**Karen Bryant-Mole** (2000) **Hodder Wayland**

Talks about life, death and the feelings associated with bereavement. Useful as a general education book as well as for bereaved children.

### Key Stage 2 (7-11)

#### Charlotte's Web

**E B White** (2003) **Puffin Books**

A classic story of Wilbur the pig and other animal friends of Fern who live on a farm. Charlotte the spider saves Wilbur's life, but dies herself after her babies are born.

#### The Golden Bird (*Yellow Bananas*)

**Berlie Doherty** (1995) **Heinemann Young Books**

When Andrew's father dies, he finds he cannot talk to his friends or teachers about it. His teacher casts him as the golden bird in a school play and he learns to express himself again.

#### Milly's Bug-nut

**Jill Janney** (2002) **Winston's Wish**

A short story of Milly, whose father has died, and the way her family finds through bereavement. She knows that when people die they can't come back, but she keeps a wish to see her Dad one more time.

#### Someone has died suddenly

**Department of Social Work** (1999)

**St Christopher's Hospice**

Describes emotions likely to occur after bereavement and what happens to a body after death.

### Two Weeks with the Queen

**Morris Gleitzman** (1999) **Puffin Books**

When Luke gets cancer, his brother Colin is sent to stay with relatives in the UK from their home in Australia. He has adventures trying to get the Queen to lend him the best cancer doctor to treat his brother.

### What on earth do you do when someone dies?

**Trevor Romain, Elizabeth Verdick** (1999) **Free Spirit Publishing**

Describes the overwhelming emotions when a loved one dies, and discusses how to cope.

### Key Stage 3 (11-14)

#### The Charlie Barber Treatment

**Carole Lloyd** (1997) **Walker Books Ltd**

When Simon's mother dies suddenly from a brain haemorrhage, he clams up. His new friend Charlie helps him to talk again to his family and friends, and to find ways of enjoying life.

#### Facing Grief: Bereavement and the young adult

**Susan Wallbank** (1991) **Lutterworth Press**

Deals with the particular experience of losing a parent, sibling, partner or friend between the ages of around 18 and 25.

#### The Lost Boys' Appreciation Society

**Alan Gibbons** (2004) **Orion Children's Books**

When Gary and John's mother dies suddenly, the boys and their fathers are thrown into turmoil. John feels responsible for Gary who starts hanging out with the wrong crowd.

#### Someone close to you has died

**Candle Project** (2001) **St Christopher's Hospice**

Describes feelings experienced by bereaved teenagers and issues including not being understood, wondering if normality can be possible again, changes and unfinished business.

#### Straight talk about death for teenagers

**Earl Grollman** (1993) **Beacon Press**

Reassuring the reader that grief is normal, this book covers a range of feelings and reactions in response to different deaths.

#### Vicky Angel


**Jacqueline Wilson** (2001) **Corgi Children's Books**

After Vicky was run over and died, her best friend Jade is confused to find that Vicky is an even more distracting presence than when she was alive. Covers the power of friendship and the overwhelming feelings around a sudden death.

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# THE BEREAVEMENT GUIDE

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**SUPPORTING  
CHILDREN AND  
YOUNG PEOPLE  
THROUGH GRIEF  
AND LOSS**

**WRITTEN BY DR TINA RAE  
EDITED BY KEVIN KIBBLE**

