



# Save the Children



## Mourning for a loved one when you cannot attend funeral services

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Losing a loved one is always a painful experience. Many people who lose a person they love describe their emotions as too painful and complex to describe with words. Healing from loss is a process that takes time. For healing to start, we need a moment of closure. One of the functions of a funeral service is to provide this moment.

For human beings, it is important to say goodbye to start the long road to readjusting and recovery.

However, in exceptional situations people will not be able to attend a funeral or similar service. In that case, there is often not a concrete moment in which they can start the walk on that long road of recovery. The lack of a concrete start will greatly complicate the healing process for both you and your children. We present you here some options that will help you to create a moment of closure despite not being able to attend a funeral. Next, we will also provide you with ideas how you can have remembering services for the deceased person. Such moments are of particular importance to children.

- **Using a candle:** Gather around a small burning candle with the people living in your house. If you have a picture or drawing from the person who passed away, you can display it during this ceremony. One person leads the ritual. While the candle is burning, everybody takes turns in talking about the person who passed away: specific memories, how the person was, what the person meant to them, how the person changed their life, what they still would like to say to the person. When everybody is finished, you can wait together in silence until the candle is finished, or you can jointly blow out the candle.
- **A last meal with an empty chair:** With the people who live in your house, you can organize a last meal with one empty chair or one empty space. The empty chair belongs to the person who passed away. If you have a picture or a drawing, you can put it at the place of the empty chair or space. You prepare the meal well beforehand, so that all the attention can go to the person who passed away. One person leads the meal. Everybody gets the opportunity to say things they find meaningful to the person who passed away.
- **Letter:** Writing a letter to the deceased person is a more individual way to have closure. You can write a letter with everything that you still wanted to say to the

person who passed away. You can also encourage your children to write a letter or make a drawing. Writing a letter can take from several hours to several days. When the letter is completed, you can decide what to do with it, e.g. you can bury or burn the letter, throw it in a river or simply keep it together with heirlooms of the deceased person in a safe place.

- **Burying a small possession:** Most people have small possessions that they particularly care about or often carried them with them. This can be anything from a pen, a shirt or a ring. You can select one item of the person who passed away and decide to bury it. You can bury items in your garden or land plot. You can follow a similar ritual to the one of a funeral service. Here it is also good to give everybody the opportunity to say a few words to the deceased person.
- **Burning things:** in many places, funeral services go hand-in-hand with burning small things. Burning things can also be done separately from funeral services and can help you and your children find closure. You can for example burn letters or drawings of things that you wish for the loved one who passed away.

You can also find other ways suitable for you to find closure. A good way to have a moment of closure includes the following:

- Agree with all the people who are involved about why you organize this special moment.
- Communicate with all relevant people in your community on how and why you will create this ceremony. It can be important to get the approval of local and religious leaders. Also, it can be important for other people to know how they can pay their respects and how they can support you.
- Agree with all people who participate how and when the ceremony will take place.
- Make all preparations, including assuring that you will not be disturbed. It can be helpful to dress and decorate yourself like for a normal funeral.
- Have a formal start of the ceremony and a formal closure.

We can find comfort in remembering the people we have lost, and this is also true for children.

Here we give some examples on how you can do that.

Sometimes we are tempted to shield children from difficult feelings by not mentioning the deceased person or avoiding our own expression of grief in front of children. Of course it is good to not overwhelm children, but children need to learn from us how to make sense of their feelings, and they also need to have the chance to express emotions so that they do not keep them “bottled inside” and become confused.

Sometimes children do not ask questions or talk about a deceased person because they are afraid to upset the grown-ups.

In general:

- If the deceased lived in the household, keep some of his/her items, wait a while before you clear possessions etc. You can involve even very young children in sorting/giving away and keeping things.
- If possible, keep an item from the deceased to give to the child later in life.
- Death does not stop us from loving those we have lost. The love stays with us.
- Show children that the relationship you shared with the person is important and worth remembering and sharing with others.

### **Infants aged 0-2 years**

Children this age may search or ask for the deceased person, especially if the deceased lived in the household. You may experience that the child is more irritable, cries more easily and has trouble sleeping. Even very young children pick up and respond to the emotional “climate” in the family. Although the child does not have the language, you can still talk to your child, such as:

- Baby: “*nanna..*”

- You: “*yes we are thinking about grandma*”.

If you have objects that belonged to the deceased, you can place them in the house where the child can see them. Place a picture of the deceased in your home and look at it with your child.

### **Preschool children aged 2-4 years**

If the child asks what happened to the deceased, you can make a drawing together with the child explaining what death means. Some will want to hear about the funeral.

Introduce small rituals, such as:

- a. Stories where you remember the deceased: *Do you remember when....*
- b. Expressing gratitude. *I loved it when....*
- c. *We will miss him because.....*
- d. Place a flower (if available) or light a candle by a picture of the deceased.
- e. Ask the child to make a drawing of the deceased or a memory of something they did together. You can display it next to the picture.
- f. Include the deceased during the mealtime or time of prayers.
- g. You can remind the child if he/she has something in common with the deceased, such as “*oh you have eyes like your grandmother*”.

### **Preschool children aged 4-6 years**

Although children do not understand the permanent nature of death, they can benefit from explanations such as “*auntie is dead and not coming back, but we can still remember her*”.

- a. Avoid saying that the deceased is sleeping, this can make the child fear that you disappear during your sleep.
- b. If available, read children’s books to your child about death. Children this age still need visual or other materials to help them understand and these tools are good for starting a conversation.
- c. Use the same memory activities as for the slightly younger age group, but you can give the child more responsibility, for example to help light the candle.
- d. It is important to remember stories about the deceased.

- e. If available, talk on the phone to family members. Show the child how to express empathy for example with the spouse of the deceased, such as *“I also miss grandma, grandpa”*.
- f. Children this age may ask questions about the deceased that they already know the answer to or something you have already answered. This is children’s way of starting a conversation about the deceased.
- g. Create a memory box. Let children draw memories and help them write stories, keep these in a box or a tin with pictures or items. Open the memory box once in a while.

### **Primary school age children aged 7-12 years**

Most children this age understand that death is permanent. Moving forward in life also means going back to memories and thinking about the deceased. Make sure your child knows that this is ok.

- a. Use rituals and stories as mentioned for the younger age groups.
- b. Use the same memory activities as for the younger age groups, make rituals and give the child his/her responsibilities.
- c. Use memory boxes and talk to people who knew the deceased. Some families create story books based on interviews with friends and family.
- d. The child can keep a journal and note down every time they think of the deceased or remember something.
- e. Celebrate the birthday or other occasions to honour the deceased. Take time to be grateful for the positive impact they had and the joyful moments.
- f. Remind the child what they learned from the deceased.
- g. Create a “memorial dinner” once in a while: cook the favourite dishes of the deceased and discuss what else the person liked and appreciated.
- h. If possible, set up a permanent memorial: plant a tree for example.

### **Adolescents**

In general, there are no right or wrong ways to grieve, but each culture and each family have their traditions and customs. Part of becoming an adult is understanding and mastering the expression of emotion and grief as it is appropriate in the given context. Adolescents understand symbols, and the use of symbols can be very helpful in recovering from grief.

- a. Use rituals and stories as mentioned for the younger age groups.
- b. Use the same memory activities as for the younger age groups, make rituals and give the child his/her responsibilities.
- c. Symbols express love. Sending and receiving flowers, cards or food is a symbolic way of expressing sympathy. You can give things to the adolescent who is grieving.
- d. Remember that it’s not about giving a logical gift, it’s about what the gift represents. Symbols communicate emotions that are sometimes difficult to express.
- e. Be a good role model, show how to use kind words and symbols of support. Involve the adolescent.
- f. The adolescent can create their own journal/memory box. Take time to look at it together as a family. This helps celebrate the relationship.

- g. Some adolescents are shy to express emotion. Do not push but communicate that you are willing to listen and that it is ok to have memories “inside”.
- h. Remember that adolescents can have mixed feelings. Tell your adolescent child that this is ok and that it is nothing to be ashamed about. Some memories are best shared with a few close persons, others can be shared more widely.

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