



A Special Guide  
for Parents  
and Caregivers

# talk, listen, connect



## When Families Grieve™

Sharing & Talking • Finding Comfort Together • Moving Forward  
Plus: Caring Cards

A creation of

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# Family Matters

Military families such as yours are extraordinarily strong and resilient. You have to be, given the challenges you face every day. Somehow you rise to overcome them, working together. Now you are facing an enormous challenge: the death of your loved one. Sesame Workshop, the educational organization behind *Sesame Street*, would like you to know you are not alone. We have created *When Families Grieve* to support you and your children during this time. Discover which of the following sections might be most useful; choose the ideas that best suit your family's situation:

- **Sharing and Talking** explores children's understanding of death and strategies you can use for communicating with them.
- **Finding Comfort Together** presents ideas to help you and your children cope with emotions and changes.
- **Moving Forward** offers ways to use memories of your loved one to help create new family memories.
- **Caring Cards** provide inspiration and reassurance throughout the day.





## Sharing and Talking

As a member of a military family, you probably always had a sense that the possibility of death was a part of the job, that this moment could come. Even with this possibility, the death itself may feel overwhelming. Handling death is difficult for both children and adults. Talking to your children can create an open and comforting environment that allows them to ask questions and freely express their thoughts and feelings. It's best to be gentle yet honest when explaining what happened.

For many young children, grief, the intense set of feelings associated with death, is temporarily interrupted by a normal feeling state, only to be replaced again by grief a few hours, days, or years later. Teachers or other adults may tell you that children "should be over" their grief, but grief is an ongoing process.





**Explaining What Happened** While adults have a greater understanding that death is part of a cycle, young children often do not have the same level of understanding. They need your guidance. Since each child is unique, a parent’s way of discussing death can vary. Here are some tips that might help you:

- **Gently explain what death is.** Try to be as concrete as possible. For example, you might say, “When a person dies, his or her body stops working. The heart stops beating and the body stops moving, eating, and breathing.”
- **Children may not realize that death is permanent.** They may ask questions or make statements, such as “When is Daddy coming back?” or “I am going to show Mommy my new picture.” Try to use terms such as “died” and “dead.” Although such phrases as “went to sleep,” “your loss,” and “passed away” may seem gentler, they may also be confusing. Since young children often think literally, they may think that, if others look hard enough, a “lost” parent could be found.
- **Your children may worry about you,** thinking that if one parent can die, the other might, too. Reassure them by saying, “No one can promise that he or she won’t die, but we take care of ourselves by staying healthy and strong, and I expect us to be together for a long time.”



### Providing Comfort

You might not be able to take the hurt away. And it's all right to let your children know that you don't have all the answers to their questions. However, by being honest, listening to, and validating their feelings, and even relying on your cultural or religious beliefs, you can provide them with the reassurance they need.

- **“Who will take care of me?”** may be a big question on your children's minds after the death of their parent. Offer examples that demonstrate how you and other special individuals will

be there for them (“I will tuck you in at night and read a bedtime story” or “Grandma will now pick you up at school”).

- **Even if the service member is seen as a hero, it is important to recognize that your children might feel angry at or disappointed with their parent for dying.** Allow them to express their feelings openly and tell them that these feelings, too, are OK (“I know you're upset that Mom died. Sometimes I feel like that, too”).





**Mixed Emotions** *“It is normal for your feelings to get all mixed up when your mom or dad dies. I remember being angry, sad, and even thinking somebody must have made a mistake....[but] it made me feel better to talk to someone about my feelings, and now I know that my feelings are normal. Even though I’m still sad sometimes, I know it is OK to be happy again.... He would want me to be happy!” — Vanessa*

## Magical Thoughts

It’s common for young children to believe that things happen for a reason; they may have difficulty separating fact from chance, resulting in magical thinking.

- **Your children might draw inaccurate conclusions.**

For example, they may blame themselves for the death (“If only I did not get mad at Daddy the day before, he would not have died”) and think they could bring that person back if only they behave. Remind them that nothing they did caused the death or can reverse it.

- **Your children might assume** that if they can’t see their parent’s body, he or she isn’t really dead. You can explain by saying, “Even though we can’t bring back the person who died, his [or her] memory can live on in our hearts.”

Your loved one signed up to serve on behalf of the country. This was a mark of true patriotism, selflessness, and courage. No matter how the death occurred, whether in battle or not, it is no less meaningful or important.

## Noticing Signs

Observing your children's behavior may also help you understand their needs. Sometimes children's reactions when coping with the death and absence of a parent can be especially severe. Some common feelings or behaviors might persist, grow in intensity, or occur more frequently, signaling a need for extra attention. Children:

- **may have nightmares or scary thoughts**, either in general or about the way the parent died,
- **may not want to talk about the death** or the deceased person (even happy memories), and
- **may experience difficulties** such as trouble sleeping, poor concentration, excessive irritability, or developing new fears. They may also regress, exhibiting behaviors such as thumb sucking or clinginess.

If you notice that any of these signs are occurring to a degree that concerns you, seek professional help right away.



Observing your children while they play can help you understand some of the thoughts, ideas, or feelings that might be hard for them to express in other ways.





Above all, take time to listen. This will help you know where to lead the conversation. While you can't take away your children's difficult thoughts and feelings, you can make sure they know that you're listening to them.



**Expressing Feelings** Children experience a wide range of feelings – anger, sadness, hopelessness, disappointment, confusion, loneliness, guilt, worry – but they may not always have the words to identify these emotions. Assure your children over and over that everyone, including yourself, has big feelings, and there are no feelings too big – or too little – to talk about.

- **It may take some time** before your children want to talk about what happened. They may try to spare you and others by keeping their feelings inside. Create a time and place for sharing and talking each day. For example, at bedtime, you might sit with them and say, “I’m feeling \_\_\_\_\_. How are you feeling?”
- **Using dolls and puppets**, make up stories and act out feelings with your children.
- **If necessary, provide an outlet** for your children to express anger or frustration. You might allow them to run outside, or give them play dough to pound on, beanbags to throw, or musical instruments with which to create noise. Listening to slow, soothing music and taking deep breaths can also help children feel more calm and relaxed.
- **Drawing pictures** could be a great way for younger children to communicate. For older children, writing in a journal may be helpful.



Working together to plant a garden bed of your loved one's favorite flower or a tree in his or her honor can help you and your children connect with your loved one's memory — and with one another.

**Saying Good-bye** Your children may need lots of time, sometimes even years, to understand the permanence of death and to say good-bye. The funeral or memorial service may be the occasion for taking the first step in the grieving process. Explain the memorial service to your children to help them understand the meaningful traditions. You might try some other ways of saying good-bye and sharing memories:

- **Plan with your children a smaller memorial gathering for close friends and family.** If you need help planning, you could call your chaplain or command structure for assistance. During the gathering, allow everyone to share memories and stories. It's OK to share funny memories and laughter, too!
- **Listen to or sing a favorite song** or eat a favorite meal dedicated to the memory of your loved one.
- **Gather pictures, clothes, or favorite things of your loved one.** Then take turns telling stories or writing about each item to remind all of you of the good times you shared. You could also record stories on your video camera or cell phone.

Even in grief, all of you can celebrate the deceased person's life and important place in your family.







## Finding Comfort Together

Each family member may grieve differently and at a different pace. Grief may go away briefly and then return and then go away again. Feelings may come one at a time, or together, in waves. There is no one way or length of time to grieve. Regardless of how grief is experienced, you and your family can find comfort and strength through other loved ones around you.

### We're Still a Family

Spending time together, reassuring and taking care of one another, and keeping to routines can help your children understand that although much has changed, you still are a family. Make sure to let your children know – every day – that they are loved. Hugs help, too!

- **Take care of yourself**, so you can better take care of your children. Try to maintain healthy routines. Do activities that you enjoy and that help you feel calm. Find someone you can talk to about your grief.





- **Allow your children to just be children.** This applies especially to older children, who may have new responsibilities but still need opportunities for fun and play.
- **It's OK to let your children see you cry,** or even to cry together. Explain why you are crying. Reassure them that you are just feeling sad, that you are all right, and that it sometimes helps to let the feelings out in this way.
- **Offer hopeful ways of thinking** about the future (“We’re going to be fine. We’re still a family, and we will heal”).

#### A Special Journey

*“[My son and I] have had many tears over the years, but the closeness we share is priceless... He continues to be my inspiration, my courage, and my faith to live on and [reminds me] that life can be found after loss... Our journey is the glue that binds our love stronger than steel and what propels us to love and take care of each other forever.” — Bonnie*



Remind your children, “Change is hard for everyone, but I’m still here to love you, and we’ll get through this together.”

## Getting Through Change

Home life may feel very different after the death of a loved one. You may need to move, for instance, or need to get a job. Your relationship with your loved one’s parents and family may change. You and your family may face big adjustments. Here are a few suggestions that can help support your family:

- **Seek help** from family, friends, and community (“Uncle Joey can take you to the park today” or “Cousin Emily can help with your homework”). For support, search for counseling or reach out to religious organizations,



grief camps, support groups, and hospices. For National Guard and Reserve families who live off base, reaching out to the community is especially important. Reassure your children that no one can ever take the place of their parent who died and that others want only to help your family.

- **Give children the information they want.** As children grow older, mature, and develop their own world views, they may ask for more details.
- **Update your children’s teachers, other caretakers,** and extended family about what’s going on. Ask them what they are observing in your children or your family. This can add to your understanding of what children are going through.

# Adapting to Circumstances

Sometimes a long illness might give your family time to confront the possibility of death. At other times, the death of a loved one can come suddenly, as in the case of an accident or suicide. Depending on the circumstances, you may approach the situation differently.

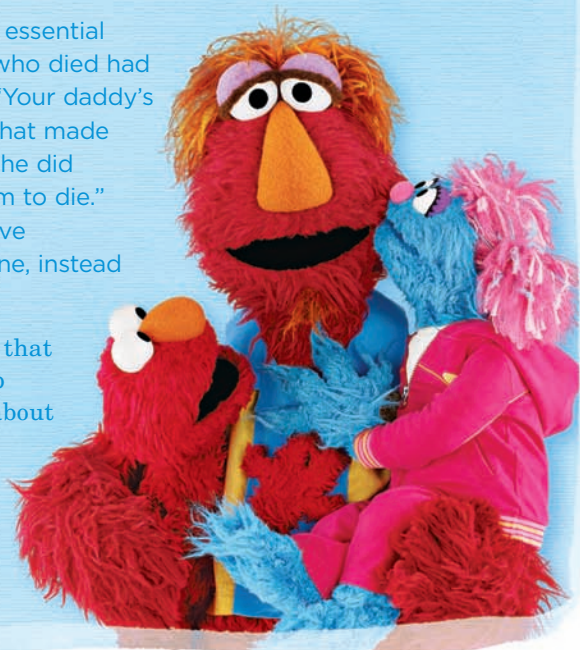
## If your loved one dies after a long illness:

- It still may not be possible to prepare fully for the death of a loved one and the emotions that may surface. It is fine to feel overwhelmed.
- Your family may feel that some things have become easier. It's not uncommon for children to even feel excited about doing things they couldn't do during a parent's illness.

## If your loved one's death is sudden:

- It's not unusual for children to develop very strong fears about their personal safety or about the death of the surviving parent. If this is the case, allow them to address these fears so they can move forward.
- Children might idealize their parent and think that all heroes die. In such cases, you could explain that, although their parent was a hero and died, not all heroes die.
- In the case of suicide, it is essential to stress that the person who died had an illness. You might say, "Your daddy's brain wasn't healthy and that made him feel so confused that he did something that caused him to die." Try to focus on the positive memories of your loved one, instead of how he or she died.

It is highly recommended that you seek professional help when you have concerns about your children's behavior. Seek immediate help if your children exhibit actions that are harmful to themselves or others.





## Moving Forward

Feelings of grief may never completely go away, but with time, they can be easier to endure. At some point you may notice that you and your family are taking “grief breaks,” moments when you forget your sadness. Give yourself and your children permission to feel happy again. Be assured that the memory of your loved one can live on in the hearts of your family.

**Being the Best Me** *“I have figured out a way for people to learn about my dad....It’s by being the best me I can be. I try to make choices that my dad would be proud of, to help others when I can, and give people something to smile about! I like to think that when people look at me and all the things I’ve done, they see my dad, too!” — Vanessa*

### Creating Memories

Celebrate your loved one’s life and important place in the family. Create and continue traditions to help keep the memories alive. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Keep celebrating your loved one’s birthday.** Eat a favorite meal, light a candle, or look through family photos together.
- **If religious traditions** are part of your family’s life, include them in your memory celebrations.
- **Carry in your pocket** a small seashell or stone from a place you liked to visit together.
- **Volunteer** or find simple ways of helping others — in memory of your loved one.







### A “New Normal”

As your family heals, you can begin to think about the future in a positive way.

- **You can create new routines.** Remember, you can still have fun and love the person who died.
- **After a while, you may plan** vacations or special occasions, giving your family something to look forward to.

- **A new family structure may emerge.** You might find that you are open to living in a new place, or feel that you want to share your life with others who have gone through similar experiences.

As you move forward, you may find your family laughing and having fun together more often. Trust that the memories you and your children create and celebrate will go a long way toward building a sense of emotional resilience that can last a lifetime.



# Caring Cards

Cut out the Caring Cards on the next page. Use them with your children to find strength as a family. >>>>



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## talk

If children need help talking about feelings, use markers and paper plates to make some “feeling faces”: sad, mad, worried, happy. The faces can be good conversation starters.

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## listen

Let your children know that you are truly listening. When any one of them is ready to talk, stop what you’re doing and sit down. Listen to your child’s words, and try to sense the feelings behind the words, too.

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## connect

# connect

Help your children connect to their deceased parent. Encourage them to think of qualities they share with their deceased parent (“I have Dad’s smile,” “Mom was a great singer, like me”).

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## laugh

# laugh

Start a laugh-a-day club. Let one child be responsible each day for telling a silly story, sharing a joke, or even just making a funny face that everyone else can copy.

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**remember**

remember

With children, pick a few daily activities that your loved one enjoyed: walking the dog at sunset, singing a favorite song. Then make that activity a family routine and a way to remember.

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**cry**

cry

Let your children know it's OK to cry. If they see you crying, that's fine, too. You can say, "I'm just thinking of Dad, and missing him makes me cry. But I'm still here for you."

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**hope**

hope

Have children trace around one hand. Within the outline of each finger, they can write about or draw something they are looking forward to. Start small: the first butterfly of spring, learning to ride a bike.

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**change**

change

Changes, even the difficult ones your family is going through, can lead to growth and even to fun adventures. Try an activity you've never done together or visit someplace new.

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