



## Parenting Through Grief: Sleep Disturbances

### Common Concerns When Parenting Children and Teens Through Grief

#### Sleep Disturbances

Sleep disturbance is a common experience for the bereaved (Bugge et al, 2014, 2012; Wheeler & Austin, 2000). Bed time is often the first time in the day when a young person is in a quiet space, alone with their thoughts and feelings.



It follows that distressing emotions can come up and lead to difficulties in falling asleep, night time waking, nightmares, and the concerns that come along with a tired household the following day. This is part of a normal grief response and often indicates that our minds and bodies are feeling the impact of the loss.

Many families begin bed-sharing after a loved one has died. Some parents find this comforting and helpful while others hope to get their children back in their own beds sooner than later. Either way, young people may need more physical touch and affection than they did before the death. Children need their parent/caregiver's support in making sense of their grief and their guidance in dealing with sleeplessness.

#### Some Helpful Tips:

- Provide time and space for young people to talk about their feelings and experiences from the day before they go to bed. Try a worry box or journal to record thoughts before falling asleep.
- Support your child to find a comforting linking object to sleep with; this might be a blanket, stuffed animal or something that belonged to the person who died.
- Establish a bedtime routine that allows time for winding down before bed. Power down electronics and instead try a progressive muscle relaxation, meditation or breathing exercise to help calm the body and mind.
- Know that you are not alone in navigating these challenges as a grieving parent/caregiver doing your best to support a grieving child.

#### Further Reading:

<https://sleepfoundation.org/ask-the-expert/electronics-the-bedroom>

<http://www.whatsyourgrief.com/grief-and-sleep/>

Bugge, K.E., Darbyshire, P., Rokholt, E., Haugstvedt, T., & Helseth, S. (2014). Young children's grief: Parent's understanding and coping. *Death Studies*, 38: 36-43.

Bugge, K.E., Haugstvedt, K., Rokholt, E., Darbyshire, P., & Helseth, S. (2012). Adolescent bereavement: embodied responses, coping and perceptions of a body awareness support programme. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 21: 2160-2169.

Wheeler, S. & Austin, J. The loss response list: A tool for measuring adolescent grief responses. *Death Studies*, 24: 21-34.