



SLEEP, FEARS, AND SEPARATION ANXIETY AFTER A LOSS

*Helping a Grieving Child Feel Safer at Night and
During Separation*

After someone dies, a child may become more fearful about bedtime, sleeping alone, being separated from caregivers, illness, accidents, or the possibility that someone else will die. Nighttime can be especially difficult because distractions fade and the child may feel more vulnerable. These reactions can appear even in children who were previously confident and independent.

WHY SAFETY CAN FEEL DIFFERENT AFTER A DEATH

A death can challenge a child's assumption that the people they love will always be there. If one person died, the child may begin wondering whether others could disappear too. At night or during separation, those fears can become louder.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Difficulty falling asleep, waking during the night, nightmares, or wanting to sleep near a caregiver.
- Following adults from room to room, distress at school drop-off, or repeated checking that caregivers are safe.
- New worries about illness, accidents, travel, weather, or ordinary separations.

GENTLE REMINDER

Reassurance is most helpful when it is honest. You cannot promise that nothing bad will ever happen, but you can tell a child what is being done to care for them today.

CREATE PREDICTABILITY AROUND BEDTIME

A calm, consistent routine can help the body and mind settle. Keep bedtime steps simple and familiar. A night-light, comfort object, photograph, quiet music, brief check-in, or agreed plan for what happens if the child wakes may provide reassurance without turning bedtime into a long negotiation.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: "You are worried something might happen to me." "I expect to be here in the morning, and Grandma is also someone who can take care of you." "Your body is having a hard time relaxing tonight. We can help it settle." Avoid guarantees that no one will ever die.

A DEEPER LOOK

Fear after a death is not always expressed as fear. A child may complain of stomachaches before school, resist sleeping alone, become controlling about schedules, or repeatedly ask where adults are going. These behaviors may reflect a need to know that important people are still available.





HELPING WITH SEPARATION

Tell the child where you are going, when you expect to return, and who will be with them. Keep departures calm and dependable. Repeatedly sneaking away to avoid tears can increase uncertainty. A brief goodbye ritual can make separation more predictable.

WHEN NIGHTMARES OR DEATH IMAGES APPEAR

Nightmares can occur during periods of stress. Listen without demanding details, offer comfort, and help the child reorient to the present: where they are, who is with them, and that the dream is over. Avoid frightening media or overheard adult conversations that add unnecessary images.

REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS

Young children may need more physical reassurance, while older children may hide fears because they believe they should be mature. Invite conversation without assuming that independence means the child is no longer worried.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

After loss, predictability can become a form of comfort. Small routines tell a child, “There are still things you can count on.”

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What time of day or type of separation seems hardest? What predictable routine, reassurance, or caregiving plan could help the child feel more secure?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

Seek guidance when sleep or separation problems are persistent, worsening, causing substantial daytime impairment, or accompanied by severe anxiety, panic, unsafe behavior, or significant physical symptoms.

A GENTLE CLOSING

A child's sense of safety may take time to rebuild. Consistent caregiving, honest reassurance, predictable routines, and patient repetition can help the world begin to feel dependable again.

What time of day or type of separation seems hardest? What predictable routine, reassurance, or caregiving plan could help the child feel more secure?

