



# ANSWERING A CHILD'S QUESTIONS ABOUT DEATH AND DYING

## WHAT DOES DEAD MEAN? IS DEATH LIKE SLEEPING?

No. When people are dead they often look a bit like they're sleeping because their bodies are still and their eyes are shut. But they just *look* like they're sleeping. When someone dies they actually stop breathing, their heart stops beating, their bodies completely stop working and they lose the life in them. They cannot feel anything anymore and they have no pain at all.

## ARE THEY COLD OR HUNGRY?

No. When a person's body dies they can't feel things like cold or hungry or thirsty. When someone's died their mind and body doesn't work anymore.

## WHY DO PEOPLE DIE?

All living things, like animals, birds, fish, plants and people, are first born, then they live for a certain time – a life time – and then they die. Sometimes lifetimes are very long, sometimes they're just short, and many are in between. Think about a leaf. In Spring it starts off as a small bud on a tree's branch. Then in Summer it grows, in Autumn it turns brown and in Winter it falls from the tree back down to the earth. Dying can be sad sometimes, but it's the way things happen. However long or short a person's lifetime is, it matters because every person is important.

**Because grief happens and support matters...**

## **WAS IT MY FAULT?**

No. The person died because they got very ill/ injured/old and their body just wasn't working properly any more. No one did anything to make that happen.

## **DOES DYING HURT?**

When someone dies suddenly they often don't feel pain because their death is so quick. When people die because of an injury or an illness, they are often given special medicine that makes them feel less pain and be more comfortable.

## **CAN DOCTORS STOP SOMEONE FROM DYING?**

Doctors can't stop death all the time. They try to help people stay alive when they are very ill or badly injured, but they cannot stop death happening when it's time for that person to die.

## **CAN I SEE THE PERSON AFTER THEY'VE DIED?**

Sometimes families visit the body of the person who has died. It's a good way of getting used to the idea that they have really died. They don't look alive anymore. They don't look like they used to. It can be a time to say goodbye to them.

## **WHY DID SOMEONE I LOVE HAVE TO DIE?**

Death does feel unfair because we don't want it to happen, but everybody in the whole world will die one day. It's part of life.

## **WHY DO SOME GROWNUPS DIE BEFORE THEY'RE REALLY OLD?**

They might have an illness or injury, or a sad event might happen. We never know how long we will live. Death happens in its own way, in its own time.

## **WHY DO SOME CHILDREN DIE?**

People die at all ages. We expect younger people will live until they're old, but sometimes children become sick or injured and their bodies cannot work anymore, and they die. This reminds us that death can happen at any age, but most often it happens to people when they're older and have lived a long life time.

## **WHAT'S SUICIDE? WHY DO SOME PEOPLE MAKE THEMSELVES DIE?**

Suicide doesn't happen very often and it's hard to understand. Every person is different, but mostly when someone dies by suicide they are very unwell with an illness called depression. This illness means that they cannot think clearly, and they can get muddled thoughts. The world seems such a difficult place that they don't know how to keep on living. Not everyone who has depression will want to die, just those who are very, very unwell. If someone ever feels like they want to die, it's very important that they get some help straight away from a doctor or a counsellor so they can get well again.

## **WILL THE PERSON WHO DIED COME BACK AGAIN?**

No. When someone dies and their body stops working, it means that they can't come alive again. They can't be with us like they were before.

## **WHERE DO DEAD PEOPLE GO?**

People believe many things about what happens to people after they die. Some people believe that after they die their life is over. Other people believe that people's bodies die, but their spirit, or their soul, lives on forever. Some people think people's spirits go to heaven, where they can be happy, without pain, sickness or sadness. What do you think? What does your family think?

## **WILL I EVER SEE THE PERSON AGAIN?**

No one knows if we will see the people who have died again. Some believe that they will, after they've died themselves. Others believe they never will. Some people believe they can sometimes feel the presence of someone who has died around them.

## **WHAT HAPPENS TO A DEAD BODY?**

When a person has died, their body is no longer any use to them and it begins to break down – to decompose – like a leaf or a flower does when it dies. This is why living people choose to bury or to cremate the body.

When a body is buried in the ground, it slowly and naturally break downs and becomes part of the earth.

When a body is cremated it means it is turned into soft ashes by a hot fire. Afterwards the ashes are usually put into a container and given back to the family. The ashes look quite a lot like grey sand. They can be kept in a special place, or spread around somewhere special, like a garden or at the beach.

## **WHY DO I FEEL SO SAD?**

You feel sad because you can't see, talk with or be with someone who's been special to you, because they've died. They've gone. You will miss them. Grief is all the thoughts and feelings we have when we lose someone or something that's important to us. You'll probably still have times when you can smile and laugh and be happy, but for a while you'll also probably have some times of feeling sad. You might feel angry they've died too. You might feel all kinds of things and that's okay. It takes a while to get used to someone not being there anymore.

Sometimes your feelings might make you feel like you're on a see saw – going up and down, up and down. Inside your feelings will come and go. Something might remind you of the person, like a photo or a place, and suddenly all your feelings might come back. It can be difficult for a while, especially if other people in your family are sad too. But you won't always be grieving. Slowly, it will get better, one day at a time.

## **WHY DO PEOPLE CRY WHEN THEY'RE SAD?**

Crying is a natural way people use to let out sad feelings that are inside. The tears make people feel a bit better. Some people find crying easier than others. Some people don't mind crying in front of other people. Other people would rather cry in private places. Everyone's different.

## **WHY DO PEOPLE GO TO FUNERALS, TANGI OR MEMORIAL SERVICES?**

When people have a birthday we celebrate with a party. When people die we have a different kind of party. We choose a special time and place to meet with other people who knew them, and we remember their life together and all the good things about it. People go to these special times so they can honour the person and show respect for them. They're very glad they knew them when they were alive. And it's also a time when people can give support and encouragement to the family and close friends of the person who has died.

These times can be very sad, but they can also have happy times when people remember good moments, and tell stories about the person that everyone enjoys hearing about. It's helpful having people around who knew the person too.

## WHAT ABOUT ME? AM I GOING TO DIE SOON? ARE OTHER PEOPLE THAT I LOVE?

When someone dies sometimes you might wonder if other people you know are going to die too, or if you are. It's a good thing to talk about this with someone you trust, because it can become a big worry for you. No one knows exactly when they, or anyone else, is going to die. We can try to be sensible about not doing dangerous things, but it doesn't help us to worry about death. You can make the most of your lifetime and spend it doing things you enjoy, and spending time with people you care about. It's good to plan for things in the future, like a special trip or something you'd like to do. When someone dies we get reminded of how precious and special life is and how important it is to enjoy it, and the people we know. What can you do soon that you'd really enjoy doing?

## A FEW TIPS

Experiencing the death of someone loved is always difficult. Instinctively we look for answers, and children do too. It can be an especially confusing time for them, especially if they haven't experienced death before. It can be a learning time for everyone.

- Accept that conversations with a child about death may feel uncomfortable or sad. Even if the words come out clumsily at first, talking with them about it will let the child know that their question does matter. They will learn from you, and follow your lead.
- Try to use simple, straight forward answers appropriate to their age and stage – and keep it brief. Give them bite sized information. Repeat key ideas.

- Talk in a quiet, relaxed place, without distractions if possible.
- Be honest. Use language they'll understand. Don't use euphemisms, like saying death is like 'sleeping' or 'gone away for a while'.
- If you get upset, take a breath, then when you're ready keep talking together. Death is sad and grief is normal.
- Some find it helpful to first rehearse what they'd like to say.
- Listen well, and give them room to respond in their own ways. Every child is different.
- Make the most of teachable moments – those times when there's a real connection and good understanding. Look out for times when death happens in the world around you, so you can point out how it's a natural part of life. Perhaps read a children's book about it. (Skylight has some to offer at [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)).
- Some children can ask very blunt questions, even about unpleasant details, and be naturally curious. Don't tell them off for this. Answer what you can. If you don't know, just say so.
- Check they don't have any confused ideas about death that might be worrying them or leading them to incorrect conclusions.
- Children can come back later to ask more questions...let them know that's okay and be responsive if that's what they do.
- Offer ongoing reassurance, encouragement, love and affection in this sad time.
- You can see many helpful articles, useful info and support resources on Skylight's website ([www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)).

**Because grief happens and support matters...**

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