

How First Responders Can Support Newly Bereaved People

The death of a child is a life-altering event. Individuals who interact with bereaved parents, siblings, caregivers, and other family members in the aftermath of tragedy have a unique opportunity to provide meaningful support during this crucial time. This fact sheet provides tips for firefighters, law enforcement, emergency medical technicians, paramedics, and other first responders when connecting with newly bereaved families.



First Responders Can Make All the Difference

Responding to the scene of a child fatality takes great skill, situational awareness, and compassion. Often, first responders and law enforcement must work together to secure the premises, provide care, and transport victims to hospitals while maintaining the integrity of a possible crime scene. First responders are among the first professionals to come face-to-face with families after a child's death. Your interactions will have a powerful and lasting impact on families. Whether this is your fifth or 500th fatality, it is important to remember that it may be the family's first, and you have a unique opportunity—and responsibility—to manage the interaction with compassion and respect.

Impact of Grief on Cognition and Understanding

Grief, particularly traumatic grief such as the death of a child, significantly affects brain functioning. Newly bereaved individuals are not just sad; their ability to understand, process, and comprehend information is impaired.

Grief negatively impacts short-term memory: Parents, siblings, caregivers, and other family members may not be able to access information as basic as their child's date of birth or middle name. They also may not be able to provide a linear account of the events leading up to the child's death.



Written Guidance

Providing written information is critical to help newly bereaved people who may not be able to accurately recall or recount details after the fact.



Repeat Information

Repeating yourself at least 2-3 times will help newly bereaved people remember facts.



Cultural and Religious Practices

Honoring cultural and religious practices is paramount, as it respects family values and mourning rituals, reduces trauma, and builds trust.

Practical Tips

- 1. Use the child's name.** Confirm with the family that you are saying the name correctly and ask if there is another name they would prefer you use (i.e., a nickname or other term of endearment). Using the child's name honors the child and their importance to the family. When with the family, *always* avoid clinical terms such as "decedent."
- 2. Understand relationships.** At the scene of a fatality, it is important to work with law enforcement to quickly determine who the child's legal next of kin is.

3. **Pay attention to the health status of the bereaved.** Listening and acknowledging the difficult decisions parents and caregivers face in the aftermath will help you determine what they need. Newly bereaved parents and caregivers are at increased risk of cardiac events and other health conditions.
4. **Present the death notification with care.** Find a quiet and private space to meet with the family, sit down, and ask the family to also sit down (this is to avoid someone falling should they faint or become weak). Young children should not be present. Using clear words to describe a disease or cause of death can lead to a better understanding of what led to their loved one's death and what was (or was not) within their control. Answer all questions honestly.
5. **Care for the child's body.** Thoroughly explain what steps will be taken to care for the child's body and explain when they may see their child again.
6. **Allow people to say goodbye.** Provide the family with an opportunity to spend time with their child's body and say goodbye in a way that does not compromise the death scene. Also, gently remind family members they will have another opportunity to see their child's body at the funeral home, which may ease some of the concern that this will be the last time they can see their child.
7. **Offer stability.** Make eye contact and, if appropriate, hold their hand or touch their shoulder to personally connect and convey your sincerity. If possible, identify a neighbor or friend who can help a loved one arrange transportation to a hospital or morgue.
8. **Suspend judgment.** First responders have the responsibility to maintain a chain of evidence custody while administering or ceasing care. Even when suspicion is appropriate or individual behaviors are inappropriate, demonstrate compassion. This is very likely the worst day of their life.
9. **Be honest.** Being direct and honest and setting appropriate expectations will build confidence and trust in your skills and intentions.
10. **Peripheral conversations.** Avoid collegial side conversations—such as lunch plans, weekend plans, or how the team played—when overheard, this disvalues the life of the child who has died.



Importance of Self-Care

First responders often experience a higher level of stress than other professionals. Support may be required to cope with the continual exposure to stress, death, and trauma. Simple steps such as taking a walk, getting enough sleep, drinking water, and spending time with the people you care about can be powerful preventative acts, as can reaching out to a professional to support your mental health. Taking care of yourself is fundamental to serving your community.

Resources

- **988: Free Mental Health Hotline.** If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 to be connected to crisis intervention and suicide prevention resources. Learn more at 988lifeline.org/get-help/.
- **Federal Bureau of Investigation** offers Compassionate Trauma and Death Notification Training. For more information, visit fbi.gov/traumanotification.
- **The National Center for Fatality Review and Prevention (NCFRP)** is the technical support and data center serving Child Death Review (CDR) and Fetal and Infant Mortality Review (FIMR) programs throughout the United States. For more information, visit <http://ncfrp.org/>
- **National Prehospital Pediatric Readiness Toolkit.** Provided by the Emergency Medical Services for Children's Innovation and Improvement Center. Bereavement Support Resources for Families and Professionals. <https://emscimprovement.center/domains/prehospital-care/prehospital-pediatric-readiness/pprp-toolkit/fcc/general/bereavement-support/>.
- **Evermore** is dedicated to improving the lives of bereaved people. For more information, visit evermore.org. To access a national free Grief Support Directory, visit evermore.org/grief-support-directory.