

Coping with Unconfirmed Death:

Tips for Caregivers of Children and Teens

What is an unconfirmed death?

Unconfirmed death refers to a situation in which the family does not know for sure whether the person has died and has no guarantee that the person will return. (Experiences of an unconfirmed but possible death may also be referred to as *unresolved loss* or *ambiguous loss*.)

Situations of **unconfirmed death can occur as a result of kidnapping or war, or in the context of natural disasters** such as floods, wildfires, or earthquakes. In cases such as these, the lack of certainty can be confusing, and can mean that traditional rituals such as a funeral are delayed or never occur.

How do children respond to unconfirmed death?

Unconfirmed death can be traumatic for children, in part because the **lack of certainty about the death makes it difficult for children to complete many of the tasks of normal bereavement**, including:

- Accepting the reality and permanence of the death
- Adjusting to changes in their lives and identity that result from the death
- Maintaining a sense of attachment to the person who died through activities such as reminiscing, remembering, and memorializing

- Making some meaning of the death, including coming to an understanding of why the person died

Children who have lost someone close to them due to an unconfirmed death are at risk of developing an intense reaction called *childhood traumatic grief*. Children experiencing traumatic grief may develop symptoms characteristic of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including:

- **Intrusive thoughts** about the person and his or her death; for example, experiencing nightmares about the death, not being able to stop thinking about how the person might have died, imagining how much the person suffered, or imagining rescuing the person and reversing the outcome.
- **Avoidance** of things, places, people, or even feelings that are reminders of the person; for example, avoiding pictures of the person, not wanting to remember or talk about the person, shunning activities that used to be done with that person, or being emotionally numb
- **Increased arousal**. For example, being nervous and jumpy or having trouble sleeping, being irritable or angry, feeling “on alert,” being easily startled, and developing new fears.

Children experiencing traumatic grief may also have trouble concentrating at school and may withdraw from family and friends.

How can I help a child deal with unconfirmed death?

Accept that you and the child may have very different beliefs and feelings about what has happened. Individual family members may process an unconfirmed death in different ways. Some may maintain hope that the person will return, others may quickly accept that the person has died but have complex feelings about the lack of a body.

When a death is unconfirmed, children may continue to hope, imagine, or plan on the person’s return, and feel guilty or disloyal when engaging in rituals such as celebrating holidays without the missing person. To help a child cope with these complex reactions:

- **Validate the child’s feelings**. There is no right or wrong way to feel. In addition, feelings may change over time. Expressing and sharing feelings with the child and modeling appropriate ways to cope with them can be empowering.
- **Keep the person’s memory alive** regardless of your particular thoughts about the final outcome. Don’t try to “erase” the missing person’s existence by removing all pictures and

belongings in the hopes that the child will forget about the missing person. Removing these reminders will not erase memories or ease the pain. It is okay to talk about the missing person with your child and to share positive memories.

- **Consider the child's feelings before making changes.** For example, it may be upsetting for some children to leave everything exactly as it was (vehicle in the driveway, clothes in the closet, etc.), but others may find such physical reminders are comforting.
- **Maintain consistency** in routines and relationships. Due to the traumatic and uncertain nature of this loss, children may feel their lives are very unpredictable and unsafe. Providing structure and a return to normalized activities increases a child's feeling of control.
 - Consider developing a realistic and age-appropriate safety plan for the child. Work with the child to develop a list of safety resources such as meeting places, cell phone numbers, and addresses for trusted friends and neighbors. Such a plan may help the child feel more secure.
- **Limit exposure to media reports about the loss** (TV news, newspaper stories, etc.) and **be cautious when discussing the loss with other adults.** Children are naturally curious, concerned and prone to listen to adults' conversations, especially when there is an upsetting situation. Keep in mind that your child may hear things but not fully understand what is being said or may distort the information.
- **Engage in open and age-appropriate communication** that addresses the unresolved loss. Younger children may have more difficulty processing this because of their limited ability to understand the abstract concept of someone being missing and unable to return. Older children may need help coping with the vagueness of the situation and teens may be angry at others being unable to provide definite answers.
- **Take care of yourself.** The stress of unconfirmed death is not limited to children. Coping with your own grief will strengthen your ability to provide care and support to the child.
 - Take time to engage in activities you enjoy, talk to friends, read, exercise, etc.
 - Make use of community support such as grief support groups, church groups, or programs at organizations specific to individuals who have experienced similar unconfirmed deaths. For information on how to find support, see **Table 1: Additional Resources.**
 - Seek the help of mental health professional for yourself or children when feelings continue to be overwhelming or when behaviors are interfering with everyday activities.

Table 1. Additional Resources

Organization	Contact Information
Center for Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents, Allegheny General Hospital	http://www.pittsburghchildtrauma.org 412-330-4328 Serves children and families experiencing traumatic or stressful events by offering evaluation and treatment, especially of children who have experienced traumatic life events including death of a family member; site offers resources and research on child traumatic grief; member site of NCTSN (see listing below)
GriefNet.org	http://griefnet.org Internet resources for grieving caregivers and a special section with a community of support for children
Military OneSource	http://www.militaryonesource.com 800 342-9647 (Stateside, CONUS) 877-888-0727 (en Español) 24/7 toll-free information and referral telephone service available to active duty, Reserve, and National Guard military members and their immediate families as well as to deployed civilians and their families, providing information on a wide range of concerns including coping with the loss of a military spouse
National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)	http://www.nctsn.org The NCTSN is dedicated to raising the standard of care and improving access to services for traumatized children, families, and communities nationwide. Offers extensive and comprehensive resources on child traumatic grief and PTSD.
National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)	http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events/index.shtml 866-615-6464 (NIMH Information Center) Go to the “Coping with Traumatic Events” page, which has a list of resources on trauma and PTSD
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Mental Health Information Center	http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases 800-789-2647 Link to state-by-state Mental Health Services Locator map and further links to other resources

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

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