



SOMETIMES NIGHTS ARE

THE HARDEST

After the death of someone special, children react in many ways. Sometimes children are anxious about leaving our sides. They might unexpectedly start to cry, or stop taking part in activities they once enjoyed. Or they might revert to some behaviors that we thought they had already outgrown.

Many adults find that these actions can be confusing, and sometimes even challenging, as they begin to impact activities like going to school, following schedules at home, or getting back to bedtime routines. That can be especially true when children want to sleep in the same bed with their adults again.

It is quite common for children, both young and old, to want to sleep again with their adults after a death. This can seem understandable with very young children, but it becomes more confusing with older children, after they've slept on their own for years, especially when it's with children in their teenage years.

NIGHTS ARE SCARY

What we've heard from children and adults over the years is that nighttime can be the hardest time of day.

It's a time when we're most alone, most separated from people we feel safe with. It's a time when things slow down and we aren't as busy, so our thoughts and emotions begin to flood our brains – oftentimes revolving around the person who died. It's a time when we fear we may be about to have unpleasant nightmares. And for some children, going to bed brings up scary thoughts like, *"What if I never wake up again too?"*

Beyond that, after a death there is also the fear that someone else who the children love will die too. One way children feel like they can protect against that happening is to be with their family members as much as possible – including at night. This is a way they can alleviate their fears, at least to some extent.



Teenagers (and even many adults) share in these fears.

As we think back to our own childhoods and remember what it felt like to be very scared – maybe of the dark, or of shadows, or a nightmare we had – our instinct was to go to the ones we loved in order to feel safe.

This instinct can be seen in all ages. Babies in distress need to be held. Toddlers or preschoolers that scrape their knees run to their adults for comfort. Children in school who get in trouble often turn to an adult to help them make sense of what happened. Even teenagers, during those complicated first breakups, look towards someone to be with them for comfort.

We are hardwired from birth that when things get scary, we find those things and people that make us feel safe again. That instinct never leaves us.

So, during the night, when things are scariest and we need the most safety, it is only natural for children of all ages to find comfort with their adults.

While it may be inconvenient for a time, and maybe even seem surprising, keep in mind that this is a common reaction by children of all ages after a death. And it doesn't last forever. What our children are really saying to us through their behavior is that they are scared or worried, and that they're looking to us for comfort.

GOODNIGHTS FOR CHILDREN

Here are some helpful activities we can do around bedtime to help our children feel supported, safe and loved:

- Make an alternate plan before attempting to have your child not sleep with you. An immediate move back to their own beds with nothing else in place can make it more difficult for them to manage their feelings and behaviors.
- Acknowledge children's feelings of fear or worry about bedtime. Giving words to their behavior can help them make sense of it and can help them work through it. You might say something like, "I wonder if you want to sleep with mommy because you're scared of being alone." Or, "I wonder if you want to sleep with grandma because you're worried about her too."
- Spend time with your child before bedtime. Create a ritual or routine you can share together that makes them feel comforted before they go to bed. Great activities for younger children are reading books together or singing a song. For older children you can create a personal goodnight routine.
- Practice coping and calming strategies for when children get anxious or scared – breathing, visual imagery and grounding techniques are great for all children.



- Ask your child what may be helpful for them to sleep in their own bed again. Giving them some control over the situation can help them in managing strong emotions.
- If you would like to set a limit, remember the ACT rule – **ACKNOWLEDGE** the emotion, **COMMUNICATE** the limit, and **TARGET** alternative choices. An example of this is, “**(A)** You want to sleep with mommy because you’re scared of being left alone, and **(C)** we need to sleep in our own beds each night. **(T)** What I can do is stay with you in your bed until you fall asleep or keep our doors open so we can hear each other. Which would you like?”

Remember that nights can be hard for all us, at any age. After a death, nights can feel even darker and scarier than before. On top of all that are the increased anxieties of living with a pandemic. It makes sense that our children might be reaching out for comfort more than usual during these days. Giving them some extra support can be a way of helping them to get through these dark nights.

If you need extra support for yourself or your family, don’t hesitate to get in contact with the Highmark Caring Place. And look into our social media for more resources.

