

Steps to respond well to the sudden death of an infant or young child

**red
nose**
grief and loss

The sudden unexpected death of an infant or young child is very distressing for families, and the health professionals involved. This guide aims to give you the tools to know what to do, and how to best support yourself, your team and the bereaved parents/caregivers.



Health



[Supporting yourself and your team](#)

[Supporting bereaved parents/caregivers](#)

Supporting yourself and your team

Note: if the deceased infant is aged 0-12 months, [Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy policy](#) applies

1 Prepare



Stop, take a deep breath and be self-aware. Understand your limitations and needs so you can better care for the parents and caregivers in this situation.

- Acknowledge to yourself that you are entering a difficult and challenging situation, but you have resources and strategies to help you cope
- Support yourself first, so you can do your best work to support others
- Consider who is on your team, and what they might need (e.g. check in or debrief)
- Assess the resources available to support you and your team, and use these (e.g. social workers, pastoral care, chaplain).

2 Acknowledge



- Remind yourself strong, complex and unexpected emotional responses are normal, but it is also normal to feel calm and focused on your work
- Understand you or your colleagues may react differently to some deaths
- Assure yourself there is no right or wrong way to feel, and your reaction is not a reflection of how much you care
- Remind yourself it's OK to need support.

3 Respond



- Do the practical tasks of your job as needed
- Use resources and policies designed for this situation
- Don't be afraid to show your humanity, but ensure the family's needs are central to all you do
- Support your team with practical measures (e.g. debriefs, rostering and peer support).

4 Recover



- Remember, reactions may be prolonged, change over time or be delayed
- Ensure support and self-care are in place for the long term (e.g. accessing EAP, fostering peer support)
- Remember your EAP is available.

Supporting bereaved parents/caregivers

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1 Foster an emotionally safe environment



A calm and empathic approach helps parents and caregivers to feel less rushed or pressured, at a time when they are in shock and often overwhelmed.

- Adopt a composed, calm demeanour
- Listen empathically
- Validate emotions
- Be flexible
- Affirm and respect religious and cultural practices where possible.

2 Honour people's relationships with the child



Acknowledging and respecting relationships helps parents and caregivers to remain connected to the child, when they may otherwise feel their role in the child's life has been taken from them.

- Acknowledge and affirm parents' and caregivers' love for the child
- Treat the child with respect and dignity
- Use the child's name
- Support parents and caregivers to explore options for memory-making, in line with forensic obligations.

3 Share information



Keeping parents and caregivers informed can help them understand what to expect and why, so they feel less alienated from the process.

- Speak slowly, calmly, clearly, honestly and sensitively
- Say "I don't know" if you need to, then reassure the family you will follow up
- Allow silence to occur - it enables a space to process thoughts and feelings
- Provide information in small segments and repeat it
- Describe the plan clearly at each stage, including what will happen next and why
- Be open about the coronial process. Encourage families to write their questions down, because some things will still be unknown
- Where parents' or caregivers' wishes can't be enacted, explain why compassionately
- Explain that requests that are not possible now (like memento creation), may be possible later
- Provide written information.

4 Facilitate wrap-around support



The child's death is the beginning of a long grieving process and will have a life-long impact for parents and caregivers. Planning ahead for medium and long-term support is crucial to safe and healthy grieving.

- Draw on hospital support services early. Make sure you and the families have access to social workers/pastoral care workers as soon as possible
- Provide details for a hospital contact person
- Encourage parents/caregivers to use personal support networks and resources
- Provide contact details for the Forensic Medicine facility and bereavement supports.



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