

## Collaborative approach to working with children affected by grief

This case study follows the story of Ben, who we met when he was six at the [‘Co-ordinating mental health care for people experiencing suicide bereavement’ webinar](#).

### History

We last met six-year-old Ben when his father Daryl (38) died by suicide.

Daryl was married to Melissa and they also had a daughter Madeline who was four at the time of Daryl’s death. Daryl owned a plumbing business and Melissa worked part-time in a fashion store and helped Daryl with bookkeeping for the business. Daryl’s work had been slowly leaving them under financial stress with debt collectors calling constantly. Daryl was drinking more and refused to see a counsellor or GP, despite Melissa’s insisting he sees his GP.

At Daryl’s funeral, Melissa was struggling and the children were grief-stricken. For Melissa, the months after Daryl’s death were a blur and she was operating on auto-pilot thinking “I’ll never be able to do this alone”. Melissa felt guilty for not realising something was wrong with Daryl. She was not eating well, losing weight and finding it difficult to sleep. She was constantly thinking of what she could have done to prevent Daryl’s death.

Melissa returned to work but found it difficult to deal with people who knew her circumstances. At school, friends would look away and they would only text rather than dropping in to visit. Melissa felt alone and confused.

Immediately after Daryl’s death, Melissa was also isolating herself from friends because she felt embarrassed about how Daryl died and found it difficult to talk to friends.

Ben was a kind and gentle boy, but after his father’s death, he started lashing out at his sister and became withdrawn often, having regular nightmares and going to sleep in his mum’s bed. He was also saying he felt sick and not wanting to attend school. Melissa discussed strategies with Ben’s teacher but she was often too tired to follow through with them.

At the time of Daryl’s death, Melissa told the children, “Daddy has gone to heaven and won’t be coming home anymore”.

Melissa went to her GP but after a couple of consults, she felt she could soldier on. Although the GP recommended psychological services, Melissa decided against them as she was concerned about the expense.

Two months after Daryl’s death, the police came on two occasions to talk to Melissa. Ben

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asked his mother after they left, “why were the police here mummy?” On the first occasion Melissa told Ben, “It’s nothing to worry about, they were looking for the neighbour who wasn’t home.” On the second occasion she responded, “Oh, don’t worry it’s just about the neighbour again”.

### Current situation

Ben is now eight years old and his sister Madeline is six. Ben continues to have stomach aches and doesn’t want to go to school. Melissa hasn’t seen anyone about the tummy aches as a few hours after Ben is home from school they seem to go away.

Ben’s problematic behaviour has escalated over time with him becoming easily angered when playing with his sister. He is still having nightmares and will not tell Melissa what they are about. The only way she can comfort him is to let him sleep with her.

Melissa does not know how to address Ben’s behaviour. She has missed a lot of work due to Ben continuing to be unwell with stomach aches and not wanting to go to school. Consequently, she is being offered minimal shifts at work making her financial situation more difficult. She has had to put the house on the market as her mortgage payments are so far behind.

Ben recently overheard his mother talking on the phone one night while he was lying awake. Melissa was talking to a friend and said, “I just don’t understand why Daryl had to hang himself”. Ben didn’t tell his mum that he heard what she said but he has been thinking a lot about what he heard.

Melissa is finding it very tiring when Ben sleeps with her as he tosses and turns. She decides for her own health and wellbeing that she should go to the GP to discuss Ben’s sleep issues.