



Grief and Bereavement

What to expect when someone significant to you dies and what may help support you through this time.

What is grief?

Grief is something anyone can feel when they experience the loss of someone or something close to them, such as the death of a loved one, or even loss of a significant relationship, or sudden change in our lives which can lead us to feel empty, deprived or bereft.

We most often regard grief to be at its most painful when we lose someone to whom we have had a very significant and close attachment. Losing someone from our lives can feel devastating, and it takes time to process such events in our lives.

How does grief affect us?

Grief can affect people in very different ways. The news of someone's death can be a shock and very unexpected, catching us unaware; or sometimes we witness someone's death as a process over many months such as with terminal illnesses.

But how we then process that person's death and their loss from our lives, can differ from person to person. Whichever way we experience our own feelings of grief is individual to us.

Some people find they are very tearful when someone dies and find it hard to manage such intense feelings, with frequent crying and deep sadness. They may be inconsolable and unable to keep their emotions back – some people can find this very scary, as though they are going 'mad' with grief, as though it may never pass. Others find that they feel numb and struggle to cry or feel any emotion. This might make them feel like there is something 'wrong' with them. Others feel very angry about the circumstances of the loss, and sometimes anger at the person who has died. But it is important to remember that whatever we feel when we lose someone, is normal, and also essential, to the process of grieving.

Feelings of sadness or anger

Emotions, no matter how intense and painful they may be, are part of being human and reflect how significant the person was to us when they were still alive. Crying is a natural reaction when grieving and helps us to relieve tension and bottled up emotions. Some people will start to feel like they should stop crying as they think they should be feeling better now, or that they should hide their pain from loved ones, so they don't upset them. Some people feel that if they allow themselves to cry, they will never stop. However, denying ourselves the need to cry can make us feel worse – if you feel the need to cry, then do so if you can. Tell family or those around you that this is something you need to do and try not to be afraid of it.

It is common for people to also feel a whole range of emotions, such as anger, bitterness and regret, perhaps over things we wish we had said to the person who has died whilst they were still here.

Anger may arise because their death seems so unfair to us, or untimely. Again, these feelings are okay to feel and part of the grieving process. Such feelings may almost seem too much, or too overwhelming, but these feelings are normal and acknowledging them can help us get through the long process bereavement often involves – this is the same whether it is days, months or even years after someone's death.

Feeling numb or unable to cry

Feeling numb, empty, or sometimes 'flat' can also be part of going through the grieving process. We may wonder why we feel very little, or unable to cry or express anything, even frustrated by this. Some people describe this as though everything is in 'black and white', with no colour, or as though they are in another world or not connected to anyone. The world can feel unreal and it can be hard to accept someone close to us has died.

There is no pressure to cry if this is something you feel unable to do. It does not mean you miss or loved the person any less.

Difficult or complicated relationships with the person who died

Not all relationships with people who die have been easy or harmonious. Relationships may have been strained and the death of a person under these circumstances can bring negative or unexpected emotions. Sometimes our relationships to the people who die are complicated. There may have been experiences of abuse, distrust, disappointment, dislike, or a falling out. Sometimes people do not experience feelings of grief or may feel relief or happiness that someone is no longer here. Your relationships are your own and relationships can be complicated. Bereavement is a personal experience and you do not always feel grief when someone dies. Be compassionate to yourself.

Finding it hard to concentrate and focus on things

Grief can affect our thinking. Memory, concentration, focus and attention are typically challenging when grieving. While going through the bereavement process, we can expect to feel easily distracted and lost in our thoughts. We may find ourselves distracted by memories of conversations we have had with our loved one, events, smells, things we wish we'd said at the time.

We can sometimes feel an overwhelming need to make big changes following a bereavement. It is usually best to not make any major decisions during the months following a loss, as our sense of reality can feel distorted because we are still very much adjusting to a new situation.

For the first few days after we lose someone, it is typical for people to feel too preoccupied to think of what needs to be done, the changes that are happening, people we need to contact and the funeral to arrange. It can be hard to function the way we usually would do, and asking for help with this in any way, will make a difficult task that much easier. Again, at such a time, we may find it impossible to focus on what needs doing. Being able to delegate to another family member or friend can really help. Others find comfort in doing these tasks and can find that grief starts once the funeral has happened.

Physical effects of grief

Appetite

Physically we may become rundown. Our eating patterns can change. It could be that we start to eat more in order to comfort ourselves, or we can eat less due to feeling nauseous or not having any interest or motivation to do anything, in turn, leaving our body feeling even weaker.

Due to the huge emotional impact of losing someone, this affects our body the same way extreme stress would, for example, it can raise blood pressure and lower our immune system.

We may be more likely to become ill as a result. Take time and care where you feel able to rest and try to eat as regularly as you are able.

Sleep

It is also common during grief to find it hard to sleep at night. Thoughts and worries can cause us to feel unable to rest, and our anxiety levels can be high. Dreaming about the person who has died can be common and some dreams can be upsetting.

At other times, we may feel more of a need to sleep due to feeling exhausted or our minds may be unable to shut down as we overthink. We may find all we want to do is stay in bed as though sleep is a way of shutting the pain away. We

may sleep too much during the day due to feeling down and finding it hard to function as we used to.

What to expect going through the grieving process

Good and bad days are both part of the grieving process. Some days may feel easier than others, giving us a sense that we are coping well and carrying on as normal, sometimes feelings of guilt can arise when we have a 'good' day or find ourselves laughing at something.

Some people feel bad on days when they feel able to function as though nothing had happened. However, days can be very different from each other and this is normal. The following day such people may find they feel as devastated as ever and find they are unable to cope.

There may be days when we can almost forget the person has died and when the reality returns the feelings of loss can hit hard and we feel like we have returned to square one. Briefly forgetting the person has died is normal and not a reflection on how much they meant to you. It is a natural element of the grieving process.

Such fluctuations in how we feel or cope are typical with any bereavement and the process from day to day is unique from person to person. The best thing we can do is accept how we feel at any one time. It is part of the process and it's important to be kind to ourselves when we need it most.

The five stages of grief:

It is commonly acknowledged that there can be five different stages of grief.

Some people may find they experience such stages one after the other, whilst others experience them in a slightly different order, and many at times find they go back to earlier stages. These stages are:

Denial – this is a normal reaction to the overwhelming pain of losing someone. It is an attempt to soften the blow and the shock of loss. Typically, we feel unable to really believe the person has died.

Anger – the numbing effects of denial wear off, and the reality of our loss starts to take hold. We start to look for who to blame, as well as feeling guilty about things we feel we could have done differently, as well as feeling irritable and angry about how unfair death is.

Bargaining – this stage involves looking at other possibilities, a chance to escape from the pain we feel, feelings of hope, and again helps us to manage the distress caused by the stark reality of what has happened.

Depression – this stage is where the reality of losing someone we were very close to takes hold – feeling immense loss and emotional pain, loss of appetite, little motivation and intense sadness.

Acceptance – the reality of the person we miss having died and that they are not coming back. Moving on with our grief involves us finally accepting the person is dead.

Things that can help

Looking after ourselves

Self-care still has an important role at such a time. We still need to function, so trying to eat a little even if we feel unable to and looking after ourselves can help us to keep going, even if we feel our heart isn't really in it.

Try to follow a routine, even though this may be very hard to do. Aim to get out of bed each morning, shower and get dressed. Try to stick to regular meals as much as you can. Aim to go outside at some point each day to get some natural light – a walk is ideal. And allow yourself to rest too.

You may find meditation helpful to help calm your mind, a useful website for this is <https://mindfulnessandgrief.com/meditation-for-grief/>

Allow others in your family or close friends to look after you – regular contact by phone or via social media or video messaging helps to still feel connected if others are not close at hand. Friends and family may not know what to say but knowing they are there can sometimes be enough. It's ok to try and let them gently know what you need at the moment if you are able to.

Contacting your GP is also a good idea if you feel you are really struggling with low mood – always contact your GP if you are worried about not being able to cope as they can help monitor symptoms of depression, anxiety, panic or lack of sleep.

Your GP can also refer you to other resources available for help such as a professional to talk to either in person or by telephone, or medication to help you feel more able to function again.

If you feel so low that find yourself considering suicide as a way out, you should visit <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/mental-health-services/dealing-with-a-mental-health-crisis-or-emergency/> or seek support from your local Crisis Team.

You can also contact the Samaritans on their freephone number: 116 123

Understanding grief

Trying to make ourselves forget the person we held dear or feeling we should be doing that in order to 'get over it' is never helpful. Letting go of someone who was probably part of our daily lives over many, many years, can almost feel impossible to do.

When we grieve for someone we have lost, we are having to adjust to an upheaval in our lives – sometimes nothing will ever be the way it was because that person is no longer here with us in the world. Therefore, it takes time and that is why the grieving process can take weeks, months or years. We are having to gradually learn to live in the world without someone who may have been a significant person in our lives. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts we can take in this process. We cannot avoid the grieving process or go around it; we simply have no choice but to go through it.

Writing a letter or keeping a memory box

Some people find it useful to write a letter to the person they loved as though they were sending it to them – the note can be as simple or long as needed, there are no rules. It could consist of simply saying what has happened that day, conversations you have had, memories of when they were together, or simply how much they miss or love them.

This idea may sound odd in some ways, but it can help to feel connected to the person who has died at a time when it feels they have been taken away from us.

Some may find it easier to talk to a photo of their loved one or continue daily rituals that were important between them when still together. Creating a **memory box** of letters, photos, keepsakes, and mementos again helps us through the grieving process. It provides a place we can visit, when we feel up to it – this can feel difficult at times, but at a later point it may feel more comforting. Death means someone is no longer with us in this world but the relationship and life we had with them before they passed very much existed. Every moment of it was real and it is ok to keep their memory alive and remember them in whatever way comforts you.

Talk about it with others

Talking with others you trust about how you feel can really help. This can sometimes feel difficult as you may feel the desire to withdraw and be alone with your grief. However, talking with someone and sharing your thoughts, feelings and memories can help to ease the pain of grief. It may be that you need to talk and have someone listen to you or to have a space with someone else to be upset or tearful. It also maybe you want to go over happy memories you shared of the person who has died with someone else who knew them.

Friends or other relatives may seem distant after the initial flurry of support, but it is ok to contact them if you need to talk. Good friends are usually only too keen to lend a shoulder.

Sometimes people will not share with their family or friends for fear of upsetting them, however this can mean that two people share their grief alone when really they wanted to share it together. Try testing the waters by asking if its ok to talk

about. We might find that our family or friends do want to connect and share, even if it is upsetting.

It is also ok to not feel like your usual self – this will take time. However, with that time you will gradually, at some point in the future, start to feel a bit more human again. This may feel difficult to imagine initially, but life will start to feel a little less hard after a while, and you will eventually start to feel as though you are functioning again. Be patient and kind to yourself. **There is no normal when it comes to grief and no right or wrong way to go about it.**

If you feel stuck in your grief or would like to talk to somebody not directly connected to you, professional help is available. We recommend talking to your local Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) Service.

The IAPT Service will provide an assessment and offer you the most appropriate form of therapy. You can refer yourself or ask your GP or health care professional to refer you. Please see useful contacts at the end of this document for more information.

Grief during social isolation

On Monday 23 March, the UK government instructed us all to go into 'lockdown'. As a result, most of us have had to remain at home with our family, friends or whoever we usually live with – personal visits from home to home have not been allowed; we have been unable to physically be with those who don't live with us. This has proven to be very hard – grandchildren unable to share cuddles with grandparents, and regular visits to close relatives denied. Getting together with partners or friends forbidden, apart from via social media and Apps. Many people who already lived alone before the Coronavirus pandemic, now face an unknown amount of time with no physical or social contact.

In addition, people have found their freedom of movement has changed. Some people are facing economic uncertainty and people may feel at risk of themselves or people they love becoming ill and not being able to make physical contact with those they love. These can make us feel like we have or are at risk of losing many things, including our sense of security, our freedom and our motivation, all which can impact our mood.

Losing somebody at this time, whether that is through Coronavirus or something else, can feel even more difficult and traumatic than usual. People can become severely unwell and unfortunately die within a very short space of time and this does not allow us time to adjust or prepare for their loss. We can be restricted from visiting or speaking to our loved ones whilst they are unwell or being with them at the moment they pass away and this can make the pain and shock even more acute, with people unable to say goodbye in the way they would want to at such a sad time.

As a result, grieving and bereavement has become that much more difficult. At such a sad time when someone dies, physical proximity to others when in mourning can provide enormous comfort and these may not be readily available.

During lockdown, there have been some restrictions on how many people can attend a funeral, and the time mourners typically spend together afterwards, known as a wake, has not been possible. Being unable to say goodbye to the person who has died and comfort each other at such a time, can prevent us achieving a sense of 'closure'. This is a part of helping each other acknowledge someone's death, such rituals help us to mark someone's passing, celebrate that person's life and their meaning to us, be able to share memories and express what we feel. It can be an essential way to help us to accept what has happened. Without this it can sometimes feel hard to move on, and hard to take in what has happened.

This can be eased a little by keeping in contact in other ways. This has become paramount for helping us all to cope during lockdown, but particularly for those already going through very difficult times having lost someone. Those grieving alone may feel all the more lonely. It maybe they have lost their partner or spouse and are having to stay in the same house where their loved one died, and subsequently having to face frequent reminders alone, with no one there to comfort them.

We may have lost a parent, but still feel the need to have to manage the stresses and anxieties of the rest of the family during isolation. Finding time alone with grief when tensions are high and few opportunities to be alone with our feelings, is also testing. We may feel we have to hide our grief to protect our children and to look like we are coping when we are not, further complicating the bereavement process.

TV, newspapers and social media will unfortunately be broadcasting regular updates regarding those who have died from Coronavirus, images of hospital staff and ambulances, and stories of others grief. Such a constant stream of upsetting images and information can confuse our own individual experience of grief and loss. It may be helpful to reduce the amount of news and information you look at, and if you do engage with this, only do so from reliable sources.

What can help during isolation?

Consider how you may like to remember your loved one once lock down has passed, for example with a memorial service, a celebration event or even just hugs with loved ones. Be assured this time will come.

Be compassionate and patient with yourself. Ask for help. Allow yourself to be looked after by those wanting to help.

Grieving during this time is natural and potentially even more impactful than ever given the circumstances. Know the intensity of emotions will ebb and flow and in time you will adjust to a new way of being. People who die can never be replaced or forgotten and you can carry them forever in your memories.

Remember, professional support is still available if you need it, even during this time.

Helping somebody who is grieving

Offer your time to the person who is grieving – give them your number or other ways of being able to contact you. It may be they worry they may be a burden to you or others and that others have enough problems of their own to cope with – reassure the person you are there at any time they need to talk. During a bereavement, those living alone may feel overwhelmed and unable to cope with such intense feelings – a need to connect with others is all the more important, so they do not feel as vulnerable during such a painful time. There is a lot you can do to help them feel less alone.

Remind them that you are there for them by phoning or sending a text or a card. Don't worry about saying the right thing – say what you feel and reassure them you are there for them. Ask the person what they need you to do for them. They may just need to talk over events, or just to cry knowing you are there at the other end of the line can still be immensely comforting.

If you live with somebody or know somebody who is grieving, be patient. They are likely to be experiencing a wide range of emotions and they may even reject your help which can feel personal and even hurtful. Be assured your support will be invaluable to them and being there to listen when they need to talk will be helpful.

Also be gentle to yourself, you may also be impacted by this and it's important you seek support where you can if you need to.

Useful contacts to help with bereavement

Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT):

- Durham and Darlington Talking Changes
 - Website: <https://www.talkingchanges.org.uk/>
 - Phone: 0191 333 3300

- North Tyneside Talking Therapies
 - Website: <https://www.northumbria.nhs.uk/our-services/mental-health-services/talkingtherapies/>
 - Phone: 0191 295 2775.

- Sunderland Psychological Wellbeing Service
 - Website: www.sunderlandiapt.co.uk
 - Phone: 0191 566 5450

- Talking Matters Northumberland
 - Website: <http://www.tmnorthumberland.org.uk/>
 - Phone: 0300 3030 700

- Talking Helps Newcastle
 - Website: <https://www.talkinghelpsnewcastle.org/>
 - Phone: 0191 282 6600

Age UK Advice & Info line: 0800 169 6565 <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/>

Cruse National Freephone Helpline – call 0808 808 1677. Opening hours Monday-Friday 9.30-5pm, extended hours Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday evenings until 8pm. <https://www.cruse.org.uk>

Child Bereavement UK - a service for adults to help support children and young people – call 0800 02 888 40 or visit <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

Bereavement Trust Helpline: 0800 435 455, from 6-10pm, 365 days/year

Bereavement Advice Centre: 0800 634 9494

Samaritans: 116 123, open 24hours 365 days/year www.samaritans.org.uk
Email: jo@samaritans.org

NHS – <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/coping-with-bereavement/>

Crisis Support: <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/mental-health-services/dealing-with-a-mental-health-crisis-or-emergency/>

For advice, information, and support around an inquest:

Tel 0207263111 www.inquest.org.uk