



## **SUBJECT:** Bereavement

**RECIPIENTS:** All Service areas (including schools)

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## **Coping with Grief & Loss**

### **Why do we need to grieve?**

The death of someone close to us may be one of the greatest losses we will ever have to endure and is often emotionally devastating. Although death is an unavoidable part of our lives, the longing for the dead person can affect us in many different ways – emotionally, physically, spiritually and socially.

Mourning the dead person is one of the ways we come to terms with bereavement and part of that process is gradually letting go of what we have lost. At the time, this might seem almost impossible but 'letting go' does not mean 'forgetting' the dead person, rather that we come to accept that we will never see them again. Our pain and suffering is one of the prices we pay for loving.

In Victorian times, the bereaved person wore black clothing for a year following someone's death and although this may seem very old-fashioned today, it gave other people a visual sign that the bereaved person needed to be treated more gently than usual. Nowadays, it often seems that we are urged to 'get over it' within weeks of someone's death. However, there is no time frame for grieving and everyone is different in the way they grieve.

### **How people react differently**

One of the things that people find most difficult is that there are no rules regarding grieving. Everyone reacts differently because we all have different personalities, ways of coping and past experiences. These differences can become apparent from the moment a loved one dies. Although most people experience numbness and shock at first, it is this that usually helps them plan and work towards the loved one's funeral. Whilst some people will be very organised and telephone relatives and friends, register the death and make funeral arrangements, others will feel completely demotivated and want to leave it to other people to arrange everything that needs to be done. The funeral itself is a very important part of the grieving process and offers people a chance to remember the life of the person who has died in the company of others who are also mourning. The full reality of the death may not always hit people until after the funeral and then the real pain of grief begins.

Grieving is not always understood or acknowledged in our society and doesn't always draw family and friends together as might be expected. Previously, when people lived in smaller communities and death was more commonplace, losing someone was something that most people experienced from a young age and they were able to see how families dealt with this and how rituals sometimes helped with extreme grief. This is rarely the case now and some people may well reach middle age before they experience the death of someone close.

The circumstances of grief can also affect mourning inasmuch as the death of an older person who has lived a long and fulfilling life, although very sad, may feel more appropriate than the death of a child or partner who dies young. Making sense of this can be very hard for a lot of people and for someone who has been bereaved by suicide, the circumstances can be almost unbearable. (See *Useful Organisations*)

## **Different responses**

*“I can’t believe it”*

It may take a long time to grasp what has happened. It is hard to believe that someone important won’t be coming back into our lives

*“Why did it have to happen?”*

Death can seem cruel and unfair, especially when you feel someone has died and you had plans for a future together

*“I go over and over it again”*

You can’t stop thinking about the events leading up to the death

*“I feel nothing”*

The shock can make you feel numb, as if you’re living in a different world from everyone else

*“I feel so depressed; life has no meaning; I can’t go on”*

Many people say that there are times after a death when they feel there is nothing left for them and they feel like ending it all

*“If only.....”*

Many people feel guilt about things they had done or said

*“One minute I’m angry and the next minute I can’t stop crying”*

A lot of people find the mood swings, which they may never have experienced before, very frightening

There can be a variety of possible physical and emotional responses to losing someone. Apart from feeling depressed, physical symptoms may include: hollowness in the stomach, over-sensitivity to noise, tightness in the chest or throat, weakness in muscles, lack of energy, a dry mouth, fatigue and breathlessness. Feelings may include: sadness, anger, guilt, self-reproach, anxiety loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, shock, relief, numbness and yearning for the dead person.

There may be behavioural changes including: insomnia and sleep interruption, appetite disturbances, absent-minded behaviour, social withdrawal, dreams about the dead person, avoiding reminders about that person, sighing, restless over- activity, crying, visiting places or treasuring objects that are reminders of the loved one.

Thoughts may include: disbelief, confusion, preoccupation, a sense of the presence of the dead person, auditory and visual hallucinations. Apart from feeling very weepy, people often become apathetic, withdrawn or very tired. They may lose their appetite or find difficulty sleeping despite feeling exhausted. Although it may be difficult to realise, there can also be a feeling of relief, perhaps because someone’s suffering is at last over or because a period of uncertainty has ended. Although these effects can be frightening, they are not, in themselves, any cause for concern, as long as they don’t continue for too long. After the initial impact, there may be a time of being up one minute and down the next. This too is normal and may be accentuated when friends and family may have moved away and the real pain of grief begins.

Strange though it might seem, there can also be a feeling of relief, perhaps because someone's suffering is at last over or because a period of uncertainty has ended. Guilt can play a big part in the mourning process and sometimes people get stuck with regrets about things left undone and unsaid. In addition, people can become more aware of danger and develop a stronger sense of mortality, leaving them feeling insecure. If we have suffered other losses in the past, we might need to grieve again for all that went from our lives at that time.

Grief often gives way to anger and the bereaved person may feel very angry with the person who has died, leaving them with such pain. Alternatively, the anger may be levelled at a member of the family who isn't grieving in the same way or a member of the medical profession who appeared not to do as much as possible in the time leading up to the loved one's death.

As the weeks and months pass, most people become increasingly aware of their loss and the sense of isolation and loneliness grows. The numbing effect of shock has faded and a feeling of mental and physical exhaustion can become more apparent.

### **How long does the mourning period last?**

There is no set time for mourning someone who has died and although other family members, friends or colleagues may try to 'hurry' this process along, a bereaved person needs time to deal with all the varied emotions. This stage cannot be 'hurried' and some factors may prolong the grief:

- There had been a quarrel with the dead person which was never resolved
- The death was in very difficult circumstances. For instance, the death was due to a car accident in which the other driver was found to be under the influence of drink or drugs
- There was no funeral to attend or the bereaved person couldn't attend the funeral perhaps because they lived in another country or because they were not told about the death in time
- Their relationship to the dead person was not publicly acknowledged as in the case of the lover of a dead person who was married to someone else
- The person is missing as in times of wars or disasters
- The dead person committed suicide
- The grieving person has little social support to fall back on or no spiritual practice/belief system

All these factors can prolong the depression that enfolds people after a death. It's important that the person finds someone to talk to about these feelings. Emotionally, most people need to express their grief but this doesn't mean that they are depressive personalities – they may well be depressed but that is reasonable if they have suffered a great loss. Talking can be very helpful in finding a way to a more joyful life in the present.

### **How can relatives and friends help?**

Previously, it was thought that the purpose of grief was to sever ties with the dead person so that new attachments and a new identity could emerge. However, it is now thought that maintaining bonds with the dead person is healthy. Relatives and friends can help in this process by allowing the bereaved person to talk and without trying to find a 'solution' e.g. allowing the person to come to terms with their loss in their own time rather than suggesting new hobbies and interests 'to help them forget'.

Everyone needs to recognise that there is no single set pattern to grief so there is little value in making statements about how a person should grieve, how long they should grieve or what is thought to be normal or abnormal. The way to help someone most of all is to understand the person who is experiencing it. Some of us may find this type of support difficult to give and may not know how to react to such strong emotions. It's not at all uncommon for those who have suffered a death to describe how people who would usually speak to them now appear to avoid them. Although this behaviour is usually the result of embarrassment, it is dreadfully hurtful for the bereaved person, especially as this may be a time when they need to talk to someone.

Sometimes, practical support can be just as helpful as emotional support and many bereaved people say that, looking back, they really appreciate the way some friends cooked a meal for them on a regular basis and other friends helped out in different practical ways. This can be very supportive, especially if the bereaved person is feeling overwhelmed and exhausted.

## **Other help available**

### *General Practitioner (GP)*

It is quite possible that the family doctor will have cared for the person during their last illness or, under other circumstances, will have had contact with the dead person and therefore they are in an ideal position to give help after the death. Through their profession, they encounter a lot of death and this can make them good people to talk to.

### *Support groups*

Support groups offer an opportunity to meet up with others in the same situation which can help break down feelings of isolation and show how others have coped.

### *Counselling*

Bereavement agencies such as Cruse use 'counsellors' or 'befrienders' who have been trained specifically in helping bereaved people and will be particularly good at listening to the bereaved person's story. Whatever is told to them will be kept in confidence. Counselling involves talking to someone who is trained to listen and make appropriate responses as well as showing empathy and acceptance. This enables the bereaved person to explore troubling issues and develop a greater understanding of their feelings.

### *Medication*

The GP may offer anti-depressants or sleeping pills which can be helpful for a short period of time. It is important for the bereaved person to discuss side-effects and possible withdrawal symptoms thoroughly with their GP before deciding to go down this route.

### *Other support*

Some people will find that they drink or smoke more which may seem to help them in the short-term but can have a disruptive effect on their bodies over a longer period of time.

Not everyone will have family or friends to support them and may have to find their support elsewhere, perhaps from a health visitor, social worker or local priest. There are organisations like MIND and The Compassionate Friends that can offer information and advice on practical matters such as housing or benefits.

## How long will these feelings last?

Like any sort of healing, coming to terms with loss takes time – bereavement is a journey during which many changing emotions are experienced and for some, the strength of these emotions and the speed at which they change can leave people feeling helpless and confused. Even when some of the intensity of these emotions has passed, there may still be a fair way to go on the journey. Again, this will happen in different ways for different people.

When trying to get on with life and establish some new form of normality, people may find themselves in situations where they momentarily manage to ‘forget’ their grief, only to feel their heart sink as something reminds them – shopping for two, for instance.

The most important thing to remember is that the intense pain does pass. It’s not so much ‘getting over it’ or ‘gaining closure’ but more a realisation of how much the experience has changed life and learning to live with and accept those changes.

As time goes on, most bereaved people begin to realise that they are dwelling less on the past and looking ahead to a new future. Although life will never be exactly the same again, most people do eventually realise that they have a future and look forward to it with hope again.

## Lincolnshire County Council Employee Support and Counselling

[Employee Support and Counselling Leaflet](#)

[Employee Support and Counselling Poster](#)

## Useful Organisations

### Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse House, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond TW9 1UR

Tel: 020 8939 9530

Website: [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

### The Compassionate Friends (support for bereaved parents)

53 North Street, Bristol. BS3 1EN

Helpline: 08451 232 304

Website: [tcf.org.uk](http://tcf.org.uk)

### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House, 15 St. John’s Business Park, Lutterworth LE17 4HB

Tel: 0870 443 5252

Website: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

### Victim Support – telephone directory gives local addresses and numbers

Tel: 0845 303 0900

Website: [www.victimsupport.com](http://www.victimsupport.com)

### Support After Murder or Manslaughter (SAMM)

Website: [www.samm.org.uk](http://www.samm.org.uk)

**Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)** (a self-help, voluntary organisation)

Volserve House

14-19 West Bar Green

Sheffield S1 2DA

Helpline: 0870 241 3337

Website: [www.uk-sobs.org.uk](http://www.uk-sobs.org.uk)

**If you require further assistance or clarification on the subject please contact:**

**Corporate Health & Safety Advisers (see George section: Corporate > Information for Working > Risk Management > H&S Advisers)**