

Coping With Bereavement

Advice and Guidance from Cruse Bereavement Care

For most of us, bereavement will be the most distressing experience we will ever face. Grief is what we feel when somebody we are close to dies. Everyone experiences grief differently and there is no 'normal' or 'right' way to grieve. This section explains how you may feel when you lose someone close to you.

Feelings when someone dies

You may feel a number of things immediately after a death.

Shock:

It may take you a long time to grasp what has happened. The shock can make you numb, and some people at first carry on as if nothing has happened. It is hard to believe that someone important is not coming back. Many people feel disorientated - as if they have lost their place and purpose in life or are living in a different world.

Pain:

Feelings of pain and distress following bereavement can be overwhelming and very frightening.

Anger:

Sometimes bereaved people can feel angry. This anger is a completely natural emotion, typical of the grieving process. Death can seem cruel and unfair, especially when you feel someone has died before their time or when you had plans for the future together. We may also feel angry towards the person who has died, or angry at ourselves for things we did or didn't do or say to the person before their death.

Guilt:

Guilt is another common reaction. People who have been bereaved of someone close often say they feel directly or indirectly to blame for the person's death. You may also feel guilt if you had a difficult or confusing relationship with the person who has died, or if you feel you didn't do enough to help them when they were alive.

Depression:

Many bereaved people experience feelings of depression following the death of someone close. Life can feel like it no longer holds any meaning and some people say they too want to die.

Longing:

Thinking you are hearing or seeing someone who has died is a common experience and can happen when you least expect it. You may find that you can't stop thinking about the events leading up to the death. "Seeing" the person who has died and hearing their voice can happen because the brain is trying to process the death and acknowledge the finality of it.

Other people's reactions:

One of the hardest things to face when we are bereaved is the way other people react to us. They often do not know what to say or how to respond to our loss. Because they don't know what to say or are worried about saying the wrong thing, people can avoid those who have lost someone. This is hard for us because we may well want to talk about the person who has died. It can become especially hard as time goes on and other people's memories of the person who has died fade.

Supporting yourself

It is important that you take care of yourself following a bereavement.

One of the most helpful things is to talk about the person who has died and your relationship with them. Who you talk to will depend on you. It may be your family, friends, a faith/spiritual adviser, your GP or a support organisation.

Do...

- Talk to other people about the person who has died, about your memories and your feelings.
- Look after yourself. Eat properly and try to get enough rest (even if you can't sleep).
- Give yourself time and permission to grieve.
- Seek help and support if you feel you need it.
- Tell people what you need.

Don't...

- Isolate yourself (unless you have to, eg due to illness).
- Keep your emotions bottled up.
- Think you are weak for needing help.
- Feel guilty if you are struggling to cope.
- Rely on drugs or alcohol – the relief will only be temporary.

How to help someone bereaved

If you know someone who is grieving the death of someone close you may wonder how best to support them. Read on for some suggestions of what to say and do.

People who have been bereaved may want to talk about the person who has died. One of the most helpful things you can do is simply listen, and give them time and space to grieve. Offering specific practical help, not vague general offers, can also be very helpful.

Do:

- Be there for the person who is grieving - pick up the phone, write a letter or an email, call by or arrange to visit.
- Accept that everyone grieves in their own way, there is no 'normal' way.
- Encourage the person to talk.
- Listen to the person.
- Create an environment in which the bereaved person can be themselves and show their feelings, rather than having to put on a front.
- Be aware that grief can take a long time.
- Contact the person at difficult times such as special anniversaries and birthdays.
- Mention useful support agencies such as Cruse Bereavement Care.
- Offer useful practical help.

Don't:

- Avoid someone who has been bereaved.
- Use clichés such as 'I understand how you feel'; 'You'll get over it'; 'Time heals'.
- Tell them it's time to move on, they should be over it - how long a person needs to grieve is entirely individual.
- Be alarmed if the bereaved person doesn't want to talk or demonstrates anger.
- Underestimate how emotionally draining it can be when supporting a grieving person. Make sure you take care of yourself too.

Coping and adapting

When someone close to us dies we have to cope and adjust to living in a world which is irreversibly changed. We may have to let go of some dreams built up and shared with the person who has died.

The length of time it will take a person to accept the death of someone close and move forward is varied and will be unique to the mourner. How we react will be influenced by many different things, including:

- age
- personality
- cultural background
- religious beliefs
- previous experiences of bereavement
- personal circumstances.

No one can tell you how or when the intensity of your grief will lessen; only you will know when this happens. It is not unusual for bereaved people to think they are finally moving towards acceptance only to experience the strong and often unwelcome emotions they experienced shortly after the death.

Life will never be the same again after a bereavement, but the grief and pain should lessen. There should come a time when you are able to adapt and adjust and cope with life without the person who has died. The pain of bereavement has been compared to that of losing a limb. We may adapt to life without the limb but we continue to feel its absence. When a person we are close to dies we can find meaning in life again, but without forgetting their meaning for us

Many people worry that they will forget the person who has died; how they looked, their voice, or the good times they had together. There are, however, many ways you can keep their memory alive.

Anniversaries and reminders when you are bereaved

There are many events that will evoke memories of the death of someone close. Some are personal and obvious, such as a wedding anniversary or birthday, and others are more unpredictable, like a piece of music, a smell or a particular TV programme.

Anniversaries and reminders can evoke powerful memories and feelings which are distinctly personal. These days or events, which mean so much to one person, may be ordinary to others who may not understand what is happening.

Just as each relationship and each bereavement is unique, so too are the feelings evoked by reminders. For some people, anniversaries can evoke fond and happy memories, while for others they can create feelings of sadness, grief, fear, regret and anger. Another disturbing feeling that can be evoked by a reminder is guilt - guilt at what has been said or done, guilt concerning what was left unsaid, and even guilt at having forgotten or not thought about the dead person for a period of time.

What can help?

- It helps to accept that, when grieving, there are some occasions which will be very difficult and then to work out how best to manage them. Spend some time trying to

work out, well in advance, which arrangements will best suit your needs and the needs of others who share your loss.

- Some people try to avoid the pain of certain events by making sure they are away from the people and places which bring sad thoughts and memories. But you may feel it is important to mark the day in a way that is special for you and for the person who has died and whose loss you mourn. What is important is that what you do will have some special private meaning for you and those close to you.
- Some people find it comforting to take part in religious and cultural practices which help individuals and groups remember the dead and celebrate their lives and work.
- Others find they prefer something more personal, and others do nothing at all other than maintain routine and normal life.
- The uncertainty and anxiety surrounding death may lead to fixed ideas and thinking, but it is important to remember that people remember and forget the dead in their own ways and what bereaved people need is acceptance from others.
- As time passes, anniversaries and reminders can help us to begin to focus on happy memories of good times shared in the past.

Coping with a crisis

In a crisis someone close to you may have died unexpectedly. You may have been injured yourself or you may have witnessed the death and injury of others. Your experience is a very personal one but here you can read about how others have reacted in similar situations. We also suggest ways in which you can help healing to occur, and how you can avoid some pitfalls.

Feelings after a crisis

To begin with, you may feel numb. The event may seem like a dream, or something that has not really happened. People can sometimes (wrongly) see this as being 'strong' or 'uncaring'.

You may also feel:

Fear: of damage to yourself and those you love; of being left alone; of having to leave loved ones; of 'breaking down' or 'losing control' of a similar event happening again.

Sad: as a result of deaths, injuries and losses of every kind.

Longing: for all that has gone.

Guilty: for being better off than others, for being alive and not injured, for feeling regrets about things not done.

Ashamed: for having been exposed as helpless, 'emotional' and needing others, or for not having reacted as you would have wished.

Angry: at what has happened, at whoever caused it or allowed it to happen, at the injustice and senselessness of it all, and at other people's lack of understanding and inefficiencies.

Helpless: powerless, or as if you don't know the right way to react.

Let down: disappointed at all the plans that cannot be fulfilled.

Hope: for the future and for better times.

You may find you have strong memories, of feelings, of loss or of love for the other people in your life who have been injured or who have died. You may also find yourself repeatedly dreaming about what happened. A disaster may become the main thing that you think about for a long time. The stress of this and the lack of ability to focus on the here and now may make you more accident-prone.

The extra tension may lead you to increase your intake of substances such as alcohol or drugs. You may feel this will dull the pain temporarily, but it is important to seek help if you repeatedly turn to alcohol or drugs to cope.

It is common to have some or all of these feelings after a disaster and you may experience them immediately or some time later. The feelings can be very strong and frightening, especially if a death was sudden or violent, or if a body was not recovered, or if many people died. It can feel as if you are losing control or 'going mad', but for most people the feelings become less intense over time. Many people find that crying can give relief but it is also common to experience other responses, such as a desire to be alone.

Relationships after a crisis

A crisis can bring people together and lead to new friendships, but it can create tensions and strains. Some families are able to support one another, but this not always possible and conflicts may emerge. Relationships between partners can also be affected.

What can help after a crisis

Reality: attending funerals, returning to the scene and talking to people who know what happened are all ways in which a situation which seems unbelievable may be made more credible and easier to bear.

Talking: many people find it helpful to talk about what happened and how they feel. This can be an important part of the healing process.

Support: sharing with others who have had similar experiences can help.

Privacy: some people want to be left on their own.

Traumatic loss

When someone we care about dies in a sudden and/or traumatic situation, there are additional problems which add to the grieving we feel when anyone we love dies. You may have witnessed the death, or the deaths and injury of others. Everyone's experience and responses will be different and there is no right or 'normal' response. However there are some common reactions and feeling you may experience in the hours, days, weeks and months after a traumatic event. These feelings can sometimes be very strong and frightening.

There are four main types of problems which may arise after someone close to you dies in a traumatic circumstance:

- Problems of trauma
- Problems of grieving
- Problems of anger and self-reproach
- Problems of change

Problems of Trauma

'I can't believe it's true'

Losses for which we are unprepared, particularly if we can't be present or to hold or touch those we have lost, are difficult to make real.

What helps?

It takes a long time to take in what has happened. Spend time talking it through with others and don't worry that you are being a burden to them, that's what friends are for. Many people might find it helpful to:

- visit the place where the disaster took place
- talk with others involved
- place a wreath in a significant place
- attend memorial services or other rituals of remembrance.

In the end, there may be aspects of the loss that will never be explained. Be prepared to live with the uncertainty of not knowing; we cannot explain or control everything.

'I can't get it out of my head'

Many people are haunted by pictures in their minds of the traumatic event. While this is most likely to become a problem for eye-witnesses, television or other pictures can also 'bring home' the awfulness of the way a person might have died. Such images may occur spontaneously or, in a distorted form, as recurrent nightmares. They may be triggered by any reminder of the loss, e.g. loud noises, cries or shouts.

Some people go to great lengths to avoid any such reminders because the images are so painful. They may shut themselves up at home, avoid talking about the loss, and distract themselves with hectic activity. This kind of reaction is not uncommon and will usually improve with time. However in severe form it may become so disabling that it becomes known as 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD).

What helps?

Haunting images can sometimes be eased by talking to others, going over the events again and again until you get used to them. The images will not disappear but they will become less painful and easier to live with. If the images are stopping you from grieving or getting on with your life, then you should consult a psychiatrist or psychologist. Very effective treatments for PTSD have been developed in recent years. They do not necessarily require prescription medication, although this may help.

Problems of Grieving

'I feel numb'

Numbness is our mind's way of protecting itself from mental pain that threatens to overwhelm us. Sometimes we may be unable to think clearly, or become confused and lose our bearings. At other times we may be unable to express feelings of any kind. In an emergency it is such 'dissociation' that enables us to keep going, searching for a lost person or engaging in the rescue of others. It is only if it continues after the disaster is over that it becomes a problem. Usually this reflects a fear that, if we do not keep our feelings firmly under control, they will take control of us.

What helps?

Grief is the natural response to the loss of a loved person. It is more likely to give rise to problems if it is bottled up than if it is expressed. At times of loss it is normal and appropriate to express grief in any way that feels natural. Some people need to cry, others will rage and others just talk endlessly about what has happened. Try to find someone you can trust who will be a good listener and don't worry if, for a while, you look or feel helpless, that will pass. In grieving we do not forget the people we love, we gradually find new ways to remember them. Memories of the past are sometimes painful but they are our treasure, it is best not to bury them for too long. Paradoxically, if we allow ourselves to lose control of our feelings, for a while, we shall find ourselves better able to live with and to control them.

'I can't stop crying'

Grief can continue much longer than most people expect. We need to recognise that fact and not expect too much of ourselves. This said, there are some types of grief which become "stuck". Sometimes this reflects our need to punish ourselves – 'Why should I be happy now that he or she is dead?' This is most likely to arise if it is a child who has died, or

if we blame ourselves for their death or for not being there for them when needed. At other times it reflects long-standing feelings of depression or helplessness.

What helps?

Grief is not like the measles, we do not go back to being the person we were before our loss. We learn to live with it, and, little by little, the pain will diminish. Grief is not a duty to the dead, those we love would not want us to suffer. Again, talking it through with a friend or bereavement volunteer from Cruse will usually help. If that is not enough or you feel continually depressed or suicidal, you should not hesitate to seek specialist help. Several treatments including Cognitive Therapies, Psycho-therapies and anti-depressant medications will be of help and it is worth discussing with your GP which of these alternatives are available and appropriate to you. Don't give up.

Problems of Anger and Self-Reproach

'I feel so angry'

Anger is a very natural reaction to loss, particularly if it was caused by terrorism or other human hands. It may be directed against the perpetrators of the trauma, or against all authorities or the people nearest to hand. Some people may find themselves hitting out wildly at the people they love the best. Occasionally ill-directed anger may even feed into or bring about a cycle of violence.

What helps?

Remember that anger can be a force for good if it is controlled and directed where it can do well rather than harm. Try to hold back from impulsive outbursts and, if you have said or done things that have hurt others, don't be too proud to apologise. They will understand.

'I blame myself, I feel so guilty'

None of us is perfect and it is easy to seize on something that we did or didn't do in our attempt to find someone to blame. Often, people end up blaming themselves. At the back of our minds we may even cling to the idea that, if we punish ourselves we will make things right again and get back the person we have lost. Sadly this magical thinking is doomed to fail.

What helps?

Sooner or later we have to accept that what has happened is irrevocable and that punishing ourselves won't change anything. Friends will often say 'You shouldn't blame yourself', and maybe they are right. But you do not choose the way you feel. Guilt and anger are not feelings that can be switched on and off at will. Rather we should try to find a creative use for our grief, to bring something good out of the bad thing that has happened.

Problems of Change

'I feel so frightened'

We all know that disasters happen, but most of the time we go through life with confidence that we are safe, protected from harm and immune from significant trauma. Then disaster strikes, all in a moment the world has become a dangerous place, we can take nothing for granted, we are waiting for the next disaster. Fear causes bodily symptoms including tense muscles, racing heart, sweating, breathlessness and sleeplessness - all symptoms which, in the environment in which we evolved would have helped us to stay alive in situations of danger. But in today's world they do no such thing and are more likely to be misinterpreted as symptoms of illness.

What helps?

The first and most important thing is to recognise that the symptoms of fear are a sign of normality, at such times a racing heart is a normal heart, headaches, back aches, indigestion, even feelings of panic, are natural reactions that will decline as time passes, they are not symptoms that will lead to something worse. In addition you are not as helpless as you feel. Relaxation exercises, meditation techniques, aromatherapy or whatever helps to relax you will put you back in control.

This said, you should not expect to go back to being the secure, confident person that you were before the disaster struck. You have learned the hard way that life is never - and never was - completely safe. You have lost the illusion of invulnerability and will never quite regain it. You are older and sadder as a result. But you are also more mature. You have learned that life has its dark side, but that does not mean that you need live your life in perpetual fear. The world today is no more dangerous than it was before the disaster. Previously you had an illusion of safety, the feeling of danger is equally illusory, and it will grow less. Human beings evolved to cope with a much more dangerous world than the one in which we live today. You, and those with you, will survive.

'Life has lost its meaning'

Each person's sense of purpose and direction in life arises from a hundred and one habits of thought and assumptions about the world that we take for granted. Then, all of a sudden, we can take nothing for granted any more. Perhaps the person who died is the one we would have turned to at times of trouble and now, when we face the biggest trouble in our lives, they are not there, or, if they are, they are so overwhelmed by their own grief that we cannot burden them with ours.

What helps?

Those who have a religious faith may find it helpful to seek pastoral support; others may find spiritual help outside of formal religious frameworks. When faced with a disaster of this magnitude it takes time and hard work to adjust. It is rather like learning to cope with the loss of a limb. For a while we will feel crippled, mutilated, as if a part of ourselves is missing.

We feel as if we had lost every good thing that relied on the presence of the person we love for its meaning. But take heart, all is not lost. Now is the time to take stock, and ask yourself what really matters? When we do that we may be surprised to find that many of the things that made sense of our lives when the lost person was with us continue to make sense of our lives now that they are away. Indeed they may make more sense because they are away. When people say 'He (or she) lives on in my memory', this is literally true.

Tips for coping from children and young people

This page gives some suggestions for coping with bereavement put forward by children and young people who have been bereaved.

Some of the ideas were volunteered by bereaved children and young people who used the Cruse website, RD4U (now replaced by 'Hope Again') to share coping strategies with bereaved peers.

- Get creative. Write a poem or letter to your loved one who has died. Keep a diary of how you are feeling so that you can pour your feelings on to the page.
- Make a memory box. Gather together letters, badges, photographs, and keepsakes you have from your loved one and put them in to a special memory box that you can reopen and reminisce over when you need to.
- Try to focus on some of the good times you and your loved one shared together.
- Remember that people react to loss in different ways.
- Talk to people; don't let your hurt grow until you break down.
- Just take one day at a time.
- Visit the grave if you are ready to. It might make you feel closer to your loved one.
- It is OK to feel sad, angry and scared and to cry. It is also OK to feel happy and enjoy things.
- It is OK if the loved one you have lost is not in your thoughts all the time.
- Hug those loved ones who are still here.
- Remember that you are not alone and that help is out there if you need it.
- Bereavement can seem to last forever, but it does get easier with time.

Further information

Our site 'Hope Again' is a website designed for young people by young people.

If you are a young person and someone you know has died why not send a private message to one of our trained volunteers at hopeagain@cruse.org.uk who will reply to you by email.

If you want to talk to someone direct, call our FREE phone helpline on **0808 808 1677**.

We offer a number of leaflets and publications to help children and young people.