



About Bereavement & Grief

This leaflet tells you about loss and grief. It gives you information about:

- the feelings you may have
- things that may happen to you
- how you can help yourself
- how a family can help each other
- where and how to get help if you need it

ABOUT GRIEVING

Someone close to you has died. They may have been a relative or a friend, a neighbour or a pet. Their death may have been after illness. It may have been sudden or expected. It may have been as the result of an accident or a suicide attempt.

Every death is different. The way you experience the loss is different from anyone else. We are all individuals, and we grieve in different ways. There is no *right* way to grieve. But there is a similar pattern for most of us. The pattern goes from shock and disbelief, through all kinds of feelings, but usually there comes a point where we can live with what has happened.

Children grieve just as adults do. But they show it in different ways that adults don't always recognise. It's important to remember this.

HOW MIGHT I FEEL?

Grief has been described as like being on a roller coaster ride. This describes very well how quickly your feelings can change and how up and down it can be. It also describes how helpless we may feel. But this is a ride we did not choose to take, and we can't get off.

Here are some feelings you may have:

'It hurts so much.....'

Pain and sadness can be so strong at times that it feels like a bodily pain

'I'm so angry.....'

You may feel angry:

- about what's happened
- with medical services
- with whatever or whoever you feel caused the death
- with the one who has died and left you

'I'm afraid.....'

You may feel afraid of:

- being alone
- losing control of your feelings
- not being able to cope
- harm coming to you or others that you care about
- life in general

'I feel so guilty.....'

You may feel guilty for:

- having survived
- having been snappy and irritable
- not 'being there'
- feeling you didn't do enough
- feeling fed up and angry with the one who's died
- feeling relieved when they died

'I feel excited.....'

Death comes as a shock. It feels different, out of the ordinary. This can lead to feeling excited or 'high', which can feel very odd in the circumstances.

'I don't feel anything much.....'

You may just feel numb, empty. Or you may feel oddly normal. Sometimes it can take a while for feelings to surface. Sometimes we have learned to keep our feelings under control so much that it's hard for them to surface. We may even unconsciously block them as they feel unbearable.

You may experience all of this. You may experience just some, or hardly any. Each of us is different. Our circumstances are different. The relationship we had to the one who has died is different. All this will affect how we feel and how we grieve.

AM I GOING CRAZY?

The period after a death can feel very strange. This can affect our behaviour. This is normal. Death is felt as a shock, even when it is expected. It changes lives. It takes time to adjust to loss and change. This means that we may not be able to function in the same way that we did before. What has happened can take up most of our attention. At first it's hard to forget it, even for a short time. You may notice some, none, or many of these things happening to you:

ABSENT-MINDEDNESS: you may find it hard to concentrate. You may lose things, forget things.

DISTURBED SLEEP: you may find it hard to sleep, or find you want to sleep more than usual. You may have vivid and sometimes disturbing dreams. You may find that strong feelings come up when you try to rest or relax.

DISTURBED APPETITE: you may find that you don't feel hungry. You may not want to eat, or be able to eat, or you can't be bothered with food. Or you may find that you eat more, finding comfort from eating.

GOING OVER AND OVER EVENTS: you may find yourself going over and over the events leading to the death, and the death itself, whether you want to or not. This may not be pleasant, but it is a normal way that we cope with shocking events. It is how the event becomes more real to us. In time you should find yourself doing it less and less. Writing or talking about it can help.

A SENSE OF PRESENCE: it is quite common for some people to have a sense of the dead person being around after death. This may range from hearing their voice, to a sense of touch or a familiar smell. It may be an exceptionally vivid dream or seeing the dead person (sometimes thought of as a vision or an hallucination). You may find this comforting or disturbing. You may find it hard to talk about these experiences.

REMEMBERING PAST EVENTS: sometimes a death can bring back memories from the past, especially memories of traumatic and disturbing events. It can be memories of other deaths. You may find yourself going over these, as well as more pleasant memories.

INCREASED ANXIETY: You may find yourself tense and on edge. You may feel worried about all sorts of things. This is partly the effect of the shock of the death. It is also partly to do with all the different things you may have to cope with after a death. It may also be the newness of the situation.

AVOIDING GOING OUT: you may find it feels hard to go out and face the world. We can feel as if everyone is looking at us. We can feel that somehow it's wrong to be doing something 'normal' like shopping or going to work. So it can become easier to stay indoors and hide away.

AVOIDING STAYING IN: it can feel very painful to stay in a place associated with the person who's died. Their clothes and belongings remind us of what's happened. It can feel easier to go out, to go away, even to move house.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Grieving is a normal, healthy and natural reaction to the death of someone close. This is true whether the relationship between you was warm and loving or not. It also feels painful and uncomfortable. The best way to cope with grief is by grieving rather

than avoiding the pain and upset. Here are ways you can help yourself (and others):

IN THE EARLIER DAYS:

- Share how you feel, talk about what has happened. If you are alone, writing helps.
- Try not to hide your feelings, or pretend to feel things you are not feeling. There are no rights or wrongs about feelings – they just ARE. Express them in a way that feels right for you, without harming yourself or others.
- Have patience with yourself and others. Everyone grieves in different ways at different times. There are no rights or wrongs about this.
- Try to keep your everyday life as near to normal as possible. It helps to cope with the feelings and changes if some things stay the same. Try to have a regular routine.
- If at all possible, avoid any major changes for at least the first six months – a major bereavement is enough to cope with.
- Take extra care of yourself physically. Grief affects the whole body. Do your best to eat regularly and sensibly – even if you don't feel like it. Get some exercise regularly. Check up on any health worries. The time around a death can be exhausting. This makes you more at risk of illness and accidents.
- Take everything one day at a time. Looking ahead can feel very daunting.
- Accept help from others, but don't do things that don't feel right for you, or that you're not ready for. Listen to your OWN needs.
- Get help, including professional help, if and when you think you need it. It's a real strength to be able to ask for help.

LATER ON:

- Don't feel pressured into 'shoulds' and 'oughts'. Grieving is very individual – for some the time of grieving is short, for others it continues well into the second and third years, or longer.
- When you feel stronger, begin to try out new things. Get to know new people. Change things that YOU want to change. You may begin to find you have skills and strengths you didn't know you had.

- Remember that it is quite normal for grief to be stirred up again by unexpected reminders (a song, a visit to a familiar place), or anniversaries and other significant events (a birth, a wedding, a new relationship). Grieving is much more like a spiral than a straight line.
- Don't be afraid to let go of your sadness and grief when the time feels right for you. Letting go is an important part of the process – but it does not mean letting go of the memories you may treasure, or forgetting the one who has died.

'HOW WILL I KNOW IF I NEED MORE HELP?'

This is a hard one to answer, as no two people are the same. However, the following guidelines may help:

- if you cannot handle the intensity of the feelings you are having
- if you feel chronic tension, confusion or tiredness beyond the first few weeks
- if you continue to feel numb or empty
- if you continue to have sleep disturbances or nightmares
- if your relationships seem to be suffering
- if you become clumsy and have accidents
- if you are smoking, drinking or taking drugs more than usual
- if your work performance continues to suffer
- if you experience an unexpected return of very strong feelings and difficulties after they seemed to be easing
- if you have experiences of the one who has died that upset, puzzle or frighten you, and you feel unable to talk to family or friends
- if you want to talk confidentially to someone other than family and friends

.....then it would be a good idea to talk about what's happening with your GP, a counsellor, or a bereavement support worker. You will find information about how to access help and support at the end of this booklet.

Sometimes, other things about our lives can affect the way we grieve. You may find it harder to grieve if:

- you lost someone close, especially a parent or sibling, when you were young
- you had either a very close or a difficult relationship with the person who has died
- you have had a number of deaths and/or other life changes quite close together

- you had a difficult or insecure childhood
- you have always found it hard to cope with strong feelings
- you have always felt you need to be strong for others
- you do not feel supported by those around you

If you're not sure if you need help or not, it can still help to talk this over, with GP, a counsellor or a bereavement support worker. This can either reassure you, or help you get support if you do find you need it.

HOW CAN I GET HELP?

CRUSE BEREAVEMENT CARE – a national organisation offering help with bereavement. <http://www.cruse.org.uk>
Cornwall Cruse: tel: 01726 76100
cornwall@cruse.org.uk

Your GP can refer you to a counsellor in the practice, though there may be quite a wait.

MACMILLAN cancer support runs support groups for different types of cancer.
<http://www.macmillan.org.uk>

PENHALIGAN'S FRIENDS - a Cornish charity supporting bereaved children, young people, parents and carers throughout the county.
<http://www.penthaligonsfriends.org.uk>
01209 210624