

Bereavement

A self help guide

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Who is this booklet for?

- This booklet is for anyone who has experienced a bereavement either recent or in the past.
- It may also be useful to people facing the certain loss of a loved one. Although it is sometimes hard to face these issues in advance, this can be helpful.
- Relatives or friends of a bereaved person may also find this booklet useful.

Coping with bereavement and grief

“My father died six weeks ago after an 18 month struggle with cancer. Now, I can’t get the picture of him at his worst, out of my mind. I wish I could remember him as he was when he was well, but I can’t. I feel so guilty; I wish I could have done more...”

“I lost my wife six months ago after 45 years of marriage. She only had a short period of illness during which she never regained consciousness. It was so sudden I don’t seem to be able to cope with it. I keep expecting her to walk through the door. I sometimes feel she is present during the night but I always wake up disappointed...”

“My husband was killed in a car crash earlier this year, and I am left on my own to bring up my two small children. I feel so lonely and isolated. Sleeping is a big problem. At times I feel angry with my husband for leaving me to cope on my own even though I know this is the last thing he would have wanted for us...”

“This is the last thing I expected. I just don’t believe it. I feel completely numb. I don’t know what to do next.”

These are the experiences of four people who have suffered bereavement.

As you can see, people can have quite different experiences when they lose someone close to them. This booklet gives some basic details of what needs to be done when there is a death. It aims to help you understand some of the emotions which may be faced during a bereavement or loss. It also makes some practical suggestions which may help you get through this difficult time. At the back of the booklet there are some addresses and telephone numbers of organisations which may be helpful to you.

What practical things need to be done if there is a death?

- When someone dies at home a doctor must be called to sign a medical certificate. If the death has been sudden, the doctor will have to talk to the police who will report it to the coroner. A post mortem examination may be arranged.
- When someone dies in hospital, the doctor there will give you a medical certificate.
- Once you have the medical certificate, you must take it to the register office and register the death within five days. The registrar will issue a death certificate and notification of disposal, which should be given to the funeral director. Ask for a few copies of the death certificate. You may need these for pension and insurance purposes.
- A funeral director can be chosen before or after you have registered the death. Most people obtain a name from the telephone directory or by word of mouth. He or she will advise on the procedures for the funeral.
- Contact your local Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to arrange pension and other entitlements. You may be eligible for funeral payment or widow's payment. The Directgov website www.direct.gov.uk provides information about benefit entitlement.
- Inform the tax office about your change in circumstances.
- You may want to put a death notice in the local or national papers.
- If there is a will, the executors will make sure it is carried out. Contact the solicitor. If there is no will, contact the Probate Registry for an application to administer the 'estate'. Your local Citizens' Advice Bureau can help you if you are not sure.

Understanding grief

How do people feel when they have experienced bereavement?

Serious loss is something which we will all face at some time in our lives. This may be because of the death of someone close to us or it may be because of other circumstances such as the loss of our health or our home.

Many of us will not experience bereavement or loss until later in life and may have little opportunity to learn about death and about how people are affected by grief. It can be difficult to know what is “normal” and to understand how we or our families respond when we face a loss.

You may think you are the only person who has felt the way you do. Whilst everyone’s response to a loss is a very individual experience, there are some common experiences that many people will share.

How do people feel in the hours and days after the death of a close relative or friend?

People often describe shock soon after the death of a loved one. They may feel numb, panicky, very weepy or unable to cry at all. Some people find it difficult to sleep, others may have physical symptoms such as heart palpitations. Some people find they calmly go through the practical tasks surrounding the death, and worry that they may be seen as uncaring. This is just one of the signs of shock and it is most likely that they will feel the impact of the death at a later point. Some people find themselves completely unable to cope and need a lot of practical and emotional support from those around them at this point.

What sorts of feelings do people have weeks and months after a bereavement?

Some people feel a sense of agitation for quite a long time after the death. People may become very active at this time, doing things like cleaning out the whole house. This agitation can sometimes amount to panic, and symptoms of anxiety, such as breathlessness, palpitations, dry mouth, tingling and dizziness, can be present.

People may feel they are “going mad” because they have such odd experiences. People often report seeing, hearing or feeling the dead person near them or in the distance. These experiences are not unusual following a death. These feelings may alternate with depression, weepiness, tiredness and low mood.

People may think or wonder “what’s the point in going on?” They may feel guilt, and review the circumstances of the death, and their relationship with the person who died. They may wonder what they could have done differently which might have helped the situation. Guilt is also common when there has been relief at someone's death following a painful and prolonged illness. It is worth remembering that many people feel relief when suffering ends.

People also often feel angry after a death. This can be directed at the dead person; “why has he left me?”, or at those around. Family members or people involved in caring for the dying person may be the target for the bereaved person's anger. They might think or ask, “Why didn't you do more?”

Other people's reactions may be difficult for the bereaved person. Sometimes people will be clumsy in what they say or do. Occasionally people will avoid contact with the bereaved person. These reactions are usually because people do not know what to do or say in the face of someone's grief. Sometimes other people do not realise that it can take a long time to begin to recover from a death.

When do people begin to recover from bereavement?

Coming to terms with a death is a very gradual process which can take a considerable time. People usually find that gradually they are able to get on with their lives and think a little less about the person they have lost. Most people begin to feel like this within one or two years of the death of someone close to them. It may be difficult to accept the death of a loved one but still be possible to move on with life in spite of this.

It is important not to feel guilty if you are beginning to build a life for yourself following a death. It is quite normal to begin to recover and start to rebuild your life, and is not in any way disloyal to the memory of the person who has died.

Can tablets help?

Your doctor may offer tranquillisers, to help through the early phase following the death. They can make you feel calmer and may help in the short term but are not helpful for longer term use. Some people find that the numbing effect of tranquillisers does not allow them to experience grief during this time, and grief is an important part of healing. Antidepressants can be helpful if depression following bereavement becomes severe or prolonged.

What can a bereaved person or someone facing the certain loss of a loved one do to help themselves?

Bereavement is always a difficult time, but there are things you can do to help yourself through it.

Before someone dies

- If you have the opportunity, prepare for the death of someone you are close to. It is important emotionally and practically to talk things over. If you are preparing for the death of your partner and it is ok with them, discuss such things as the jobs they do that you will need to take over, and sort out finances etc. Say all the things you would want to say.

Directly after a bereavement

- Carefully consider whether you want to see the body of the dead person. Some people may feel this is too distressing but can regret it later on if they have not done this. Follow your own feelings. There is no right or wrong thing to do, but do think it through.
- Funeral arrangements should be considered carefully. Try to have someone with you. Don't feel pressured into a funeral that is too expensive for your budget. Try and think about what you really want.

In the days, weeks and months following a bereavement

- Don't make major changes in your life, such as selling your house, moving areas, jobs, etc. until you have had time to adjust to the death. This is a time when people may make changes they can regret.
- Do make sure you look after your own health. This is a time when you may become prone to illness. Eat well, rest properly, take extra care. You may want to take vitamin supplements if your appetite is very poor.

- Talk to people about how you feel. Don't bottle things up. Go to your doctor if you feel you have no one you can talk to. He or she may suggest speaking to a counsellor. Ask for help if you feel you are not coping.
- If your health is not good, consult your doctor.
- Keep up contacts and relationships. Accept invitations, invite people to visit, keep in touch with family and friends. Find out about local events, clubs and classes.
- Do not enter into new financial arrangements without proper advice. Talk to a friend, family member or an advice organisation such as Citizens Advice.
- Do not turn to drinking alcohol to get you over this difficult time.
- Plan what you will do on anniversaries such as birthdays, Christmas, anniversary of death. It will help if you decide in advance how you want to spend these occasions, which are likely to be emotional times.
- If you feel you are stuck or not coping at all well with your grief then contact your doctor to discuss this. Other organisations which may help are listed at the back of this booklet.

What can family and friends do to help?

Family and friends can help at this difficult time.

- Spend time with the bereaved person if that is what they want.
- Talk and listen to the bereaved person. Don't be afraid of saying the wrong thing - this is a situation many of us feel awkward about. It may help to admit that you don't know what to say if that is how you feel.
- Don't be surprised if the bereaved person wants to talk and go over the same ground again and again, this is quite usual.
- Don't take anger or irritability personally, it's part of the bereavement reaction.
- Talking about the dead person can be helpful for the grieving person. Don't try and avoid mentioning them in everyday conversation.
- Offer practical help if the bereaved person wants this. Caring for children, help with shopping etc. may be useful, especially in the early days following a death.
- Don't expect too much of the bereaved person initially even if they look as if they are coping.
- Include your relative/friend in social events.
- Support your relative/friend in building new links, social contacts and interests.
- Try to discourage the bereaved person from making any major decisions, such as moving home soon after the death. Support them in thinking through the options and implications of this.
- If your friend or relative seems 'stuck' and not coping at all well, encourage them to seek help. The family doctor is a good place to start. Other organisations that may help are listed at the back of this booklet.

Useful organisations

Local Support

- Barnardo's Child Bereavement Service, Belfast.

Tel: 028 90668333

Website www.barnardos.org.uk

- Bereaved by Suicide

SHSCT Protect Life Coordinator

Tel: 028 37412882

Offers a signposting service into bereavement support services in the Southern area.

- British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Tel: 01455 883 316

www.bacp.co.uk

Offers an information service providing contacts for counselling in Northern Ireland.

- Carer's Matter:

Tel: 028 40627581

Website: www.carersmatter.org.uk

Provides confidential advice, information and support to carers in the Southern Trust.

- Citizens Advice (CAB)

Armagh Tel: 028 37524041

Banbridge Tel: 028 40622201

Craigavon Tel: 028 38361181

Newry Tel: 028 30262934

Provides support and advice on a range of issues including benefits, housing and employment.

- Compassionate Friends NI

028 87788016

Supporting bereaved parents and their families.

- Miscarriage Association, Northern Ireland.
Tel: 028 93363384/07743950566
Website: www.miscarriageassociationni.org.uk
Provides support and information for those suffering the effects of pregnancy loss.

- Southern Area Hospice Service
Tel: 028 30267711
Website: www.southernareahospiceservices.org
Provides bereavement support for those whose loved ones received hospice care.

- Victim Support
Tel: 028 90243133
www.victimsupportni.org.uk
Victim Support is an organisation which offers support and practical help for people who have experienced trauma as a result of a crime.

- Child Death Helpline
Helpline: 0800 282 986
Freephone number for mobiles: 0808 800 6019
www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk
Freephone service for anyone affected by the death of a child.

- Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths
Helpline: 0808 802 6868
www.fsid.org.uk
11 Belgrave Road, London, SW1V 1RB
Working to prevent sudden death and promote health in babies.

- CRUSE Bereavement Care
Bereavement Line: 0844 477 9400
Armagh and Dungannon: 028 8778 4004
Newry and Mourne: 028 3025 2322

- Mental Health Matters

Tel: 0191 516 3500

www.mentalhealthmatters.com

A national organisation which provides support and information on employment, housing, community support and psychological services.

- Mind Infoline

Tel: 0300 123 3393 Helpline available Mon - Fri, 9am - 6pm.

www.mind.org.uk

Provides information on a range of topics including types of mental distress, where to get help, drug and alternative treatments and advocacy. Also provides details of help and support for people in their own area.

- National Debt Line

Tel: 0808 808 4000

www.nationaldebtline.org.uk

Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt.

- National Association of Widows

Tel: 024 7663 4848

www.widows.uk.net.

Provides support and advice for widows.

- NHS Choices – Your health, your choices

www.nhs.uk

Information about conditions, treatments, local services and healthy lives.

- Samaritans

Tel: 0845 790 9090

www.samaritans.org.uk

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Confidential support for anyone in a crisis.

- Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

Helpline: 0844 561 6855

www.uk-sobs.org.uk

Provides helpline and support for people affected by suicide.

- Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society

Tel: 0207 436 5881

www.uk-sands.org

Supports anyone affected by the death of a baby and promotes research in reducing the loss of babies' lives.

- The Way Foundation

Tel: 0300 012 4929

www.wayfoundation.org.uk

An organisation for people who have become widows or widowers at a young age. The Foundation has a support group and the site has links to other relevant sites.

- Terence Higgins Trust

Helpline: 0808 802 1221

www.tht.org.uk

314 – 320, Grays Inn Road, London, WC1X 8DP

Website promoting good health, sexual health and mental wellbeing for those affected by HIV and AIDS.

Useful books

- **What to do after a death in England or Wales**
Leaflet DWP1027 January 2009
A guide to what you must do and the help you can get.
www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/dwp1027.pdf
- **What to do when someone dies**
Anne Wade
Which? 2012
A guide to the practical arrangements that must be made following a death.
- **Through grief: the bereavement journey**
Elizabeth Collick
Darton, Longman and Todd 1986
A sensitive account of the stages of grief, showing that while there is no way round it, there is a way through.
- **All in the end is harvest**
Agnes Whitaker
Darton, Longman and Todd 1984
Published in association with CRUSE, an established source of inspiration for those who suffer grief, with edited extracts of prose and poetry that have been of help to the bereaved.
- **Bereavement**
Age UK information guide www.ageuk.org.uk
- **Facing grief - bereavement and the young adult**
Susan Wallbank
James Clark 1991
This frank, sensible and compassionate book examines in detail the particular needs and experiences of young adults.

- **The early days of grieving**

Derek Nuttall

Darton, Longman and Todd 2006

This self-help book covers the practical, emotional and social aspects of bereavement when a loved person has died.

- **A grief observed**

C S Lewis

Faber 1961

C.S. Lewis's honest reflection on the fundamental issues of life, death, and faith in the midst of loss.

- **You'll get over it: the rage of bereavement**

Virginia Ironside

Penguin 1997

Virginia Ironside deals with this complicated and sensitive issue with great frankness and insight, drawing on other's people's accounts as well as her own experiences.

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