

# Bereavement



**“The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing ... not healing, not curing ... that is a friend who cares.”**

Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and writer (1932-1996)

**“Nobody ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”**

C.S. Lewis, Irish novelist and scholar (1898-1963)

**“Death leaves a heartache no one can heal, love leaves a memory no one can steal”**

From a headstone in Ireland.

There is a paradox in modern life when it comes to death. On the one hand, we are constantly exposed to images of people dying, both in the news that we consume and in the films and television that we watch. Yet on the other, we have become increasingly separated from the reality of death in our everyday lives.

Previous generations were far more accustomed to death than we are. Because many more people died young, the rhythm of birth and death, of celebration and grieving, was much more familiar.

Thanks to modern medicine, we can all expect to live much longer now. Thanks to plastic surgery and a culture generally obsessed by youth, we have also been sold the myth that we never really have to grow old. Yet sooner or later, everybody dies.

Bereavement is always a shock, especially if the death is unexpected or violent. Yet our society does little to prepare for us for it. Some people appear to take grief in their stride. For others, however, the death of a loved one can come as a devastating blow. Whatever the response, bereavement will – sooner or later – come to us all.

Working through grief is inevitably a painful process, but it is an intrinsic part of what it means to be human. No matter how overwhelming the feelings, life goes on. No one can ever replace the lost loved one, but with the right help and support, it is possible to restore a sense of meaning to life. If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the **CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline** is available for practical and emotional support.

## The stages of grieving

For most people, the process of coming to terms with the death of a loved one will take some time. We call this process mourning, and it can take us through a range of different emotions and responses.

There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to mourn. For some it can be rollercoaster of wild mood swings, for others it is an altogether quieter experience. Despite the huge variations in the way people respond, however, it is possible to identify some common stages. There is no set time-scale for these stages, they may well overlap, and sometimes they may even occur in a different order. But it can be helpful to know what they are and that they are all completely normal.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists cites the following:

**Shock.** Most people feel stunned in the hours or days following the death of a loved one.

**Numbness.** A sense of being separated from one's own emotions can be useful when it comes to getting through practical challenges such as arranging a funeral, but it becomes problematic if it goes on for too long. Actually seeing the body can help overcome this. The funeral itself is often the 'wake-up call' that someone has truly gone. It is also an important opportunity to say goodbye.

**Yearning.** After a while, numbness can give way to a profound pining for the person who has died. This can make it difficult to sleep or concentrate on even the simplest tasks.

**Anger.** At this stage, the loss can seem brutally cruel and unfair. People can often feel anger towards the medical staff who could not prevent the death. Confusingly, it is also possible to feel real anger towards the person who has died for having gone away.

**Guilt.** This is very common. People find that they can't stop thinking about things they should have said or done. More uncomfortably, people can experience enormous guilt if part of them feels relieved that the person has died, say after a long and painful illness.

**Agitation.** This is usually strongest about two weeks after the death. This strong emotion can be interspersed with bouts of intense sadness, silence and withdrawal. People often find themselves bursting into tears for no apparent reason. No matter how strong the temptation to isolate, it is crucial to find normal activities to do during this phase and talk to others.

**Depression.** This can reach its peak after about six weeks, again interspersed with bouts of intense emotion. While it can appear that the bereaved person is doing nothing during this phase, they are usually absorbed in thought about the person they have lost.

**Letting-go and acceptance.** Eventually depression begins to lift and a sense of vitality returns.



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## How long does the process take?

It is almost impossible to tell for sure how long it will take to get over a bereavement. Some say that most people recover within one or two years, but the length of the process depends on a variety of factors.

The severity of the grief will, of course, be largely dictated by the person's relationship with the dead person and how close they were. Aside from this pivotal consideration, there are two key areas that can affect the grieving process; the circumstances of the person that is grieving and the circumstances of the death itself. Let's look at them separately.

Some of the factors that make it more difficult for individuals to move through the grieving process include:

- The grieving person is socially isolated and has little support from community, family or friends.
- They have unresolved business with the person who died, such as old quarrels or unexpressed anger or love (or the person who died was estranged from the mourner).
- The mourner could not attend the funeral, or there was no funeral.
- The relationship with the person who died is not legally recognized or socially accepted (e.g. the person who died was a same-sex partner or partner from an extra-marital relationship).

Circumstances of the death that might make it difficult to accept and process:

- The death was sudden or unexpected.
- It was the parent of a child or adolescent who died.
- It was a child or baby that died or miscarried.
- The death was caused by suicide.
- The cause of death was violent or particularly traumatic, such as a bombing or a plane crash. (This can be even more difficult to deal with if the people responsible are not brought to justice.)
- The person is missing, and there is no definite news of their fate. (This is common during wars and natural disasters.)

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## Early loss and unresolved grief

One aspect of grieving that is often overlooked is the impact that unmourned childhood losses can have in later life. As the mental health charity, Mind, points out, obviously traumatic losses are easy for adults to recognise, such as a serious illness or the death of a parent. But there are also many events in the life of every child that can be difficult to cope with. These can include the death of a pet, moving house, or the experience of being bullied.

What is significant here is not the severity of the incident, but the degree to which the child is able to talk about the experience and process it with those that care for him or her. Unresolved early losses can have a dramatic impact in later life. They can also make it much harder for the adult to cope

with other losses and setbacks, which may trigger feelings associated with the early grief.

People who get “stuck” in grief can be very prone to depression, which is often a response to unmourned losses. For many people, the process of counseling or psychotherapy provides the necessary setting and support to identify and work through these areas.

For both adults and children alike, it is imperative that people have someone to talk to when they experience any kind of serious loss. Only when the loss has been mourned can a full life continue and flourish.

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## How should we respond?

As we have seen, there are many factors that can influence how we respond to grief. There are no standard responses and it is a different experience for everyone. It is a natural process that needs to take its natural course.

Grieving is not about reaching a point where one no longer feels the loss, it is about working towards a place of acceptance that life as you know it has changed. The intense pain eventually passes, and people find a way of accepting the fact that someone close to them has gone. Grief only becomes harmful when it is bottled up, so it needs to be worked through.

There are many different ways of achieving this, but there are certain strategies that are known to be helpful, if not essential.

**Reach Out.** There is pretty much universal agreement that grieving is not a process that can be fully negotiated on one’s own. There may well be phases in the grieving processes that call for time spent alone; for reflection, for crying or just for some peace and quiet amid the emotional turbulence. But it is critically important that people who are mourning find others with whom they can share their grief. Children, who may not have the language to express feelings, will often need to do this through some other form of expression, such as drawing. Grief often gets stuck if the story behind it is not told (this is especially true of deaths that are unexpected, traumatic or violent). This might be done with a trained bereavement counsellor, or it might just be with a close friend. However one does it, bereavement gives rise to complicated and often conflicting emotions that need to be brought out into the open before they are driven into the subconscious, where they can fester unresolved.

**Get practical help.** The burden of grief can make even simple everyday tasks seem daunting. It is important that people who are grieving ask for the help that they need. Some people need help with administrative obligations, such as organizing a funeral or dealing with solicitors. Others might just need a hot meal cooked for them. Reaching out for help even with the most mundane tasks also goes a long way to preventing the bereaved from falling into isolation and depression. Support groups made up of people who have had similar experiences can be immensely helpful.

**Maintain physical self-care.** Grieving is grueling on a physical, as well as an emotional level. People who are in mourning often feel that they tire very easily. For this reason, it is important to get as much rest as possible. This needs to be combined with good nutrition and gentle but consistent exercise. A daily half-hour walk would be a good place to start. Taking some kind of action is also enormously helpful in counteracting the feelings of helplessness and vulnerability that are often associated with grief. Even if we don't do much, we can always do a little to value and take care of ourselves.

**Find your own rituals.** There are no standard responses to grief. In a sense, whatever feels like the right thing to do is a good guide. This might mean looking over old photographs, or visiting places that are attached to the person who has

been lost. Memorial services or other rituals of remembrance are often essential. In the case of disasters or accidents, it can be helpful to visit the location. Rituals can help people move on from the intense phases of grieving and resume their everyday lives. Creative activities such as writing, drawing or making music can become powerful healing rituals in their own right, reminding us that death is always accompanied by the creation of something new.

**Get spiritual support.** Bereavement has the capacity to reconnect people with a sense of spiritual meaning, or drive them away from it. While some will turn to prayer or other rituals in their attempt to make sense of what has happened, others will find that their faith or beliefs have been profoundly shaken. All traumatic experiences have the potential to undermine our sense of meaning and order in the universe. Don't hesitate to contact a priest or spiritual teacher from your own tradition or from another if you want to discuss these issues further. Whatever one's response, it is essential that these reactions be given time and space, without being suppressed or bottled up. The concept of Post-Traumatic Growth has now been widely documented. And while no one is implying that every tragic loss is bound to lead to something positive, it is the experience of many people that traumatic events can bring us into a deeper appreciation of life and relationships.

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## Books

### On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss

by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler

### The Courage to Grieve: Creative Living, Recovery and Growth Through Grief

by Judy Tatelbaum

### A Grief Observed

by C.S. Lewis

## Further help and information

CiC – Supporting Organisations

[www.well-online.co.uk](http://www.well-online.co.uk)

24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline, providing emotional and practical support.

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