

Counselling Service

Coping with

Bereavement

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Bereavement and loss

'Grief' and 'mourning' are the words we use for all the feelings, thoughts, reactions which we have when we lose someone important to us or something we value. Grief is painful and stressful, it is also normal, natural and necessary - an inevitable and human response to loss.

We will be talking here mostly about the feelings and reactions we may experience after a loss through death - but we can also suffer feelings of grief following any loss, for example of a hope or plan for the future, or when a relationship ends.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. We all grieve in our own way and in our own time. You may cry, you may not. Your feelings may change from day to day and even from hour to hour. Some days are good while others are bad. Your own feelings and responses may be affected, for example, by who the person was who has died, the nature of your relationship to them, the way they died, your previous experiences of loss, your own personality, and maybe your social and cultural situation.

Each of us takes our own time to work through grief, there are no hard and fast guidelines for this. Over time the emotional swings, the painful feelings will lessen in intensity as you begin to adapt to this change in your life, but to begin with it can be hard. "No-one ever told me that grief felt so like fear." C.S.Lewis's words in 'A Grief Observed' seem to sum up the sense of confusion and bewilderment so many people experience after the loss of someone they love.

After the initial shock most people begin, however slowly, to adjust to living without the person who has died. And the time this takes is different for each of us. The change is usually gradual, but over time you will begin to feel less overwhelmed by your loss. At first you may think about the person who has died almost constantly, but in time you will begin to 'forget' at first for a few minutes, then for hours and even days at a time. This is not a betrayal and it does not mean that you love them less. People, living or dead, do not cease to exist for you when you stop thinking of them.

Feelings we may experience

- **Shock and disbelief, numbness.**

You don't want to believe it – and who would?

You are not feeling anything. It can take some time for the news of the death to sink in.

- **Anger.**

You may well feel angry with the world or with people for:

- causing the death
- not being able to cure the illness
- making insensitive remarks
- carrying on with life and having fun
- and you might feel angry with the dead person for dying and abandoning you and for the pain you are now feeling.
- and you might feel angry with yourself.

- **Self-reproach and guilt.**

You may blame yourself for the last argument you had or for not visiting the previous week as you'd promised or meant to. You may have negative as well as positive feelings about the person who has died. Some people feel 'survivor guilt'-for being alive when the other is dead. If the death was from suicide, feelings of regret and guilt may be heightened. Guilt can be our way of trying to feel more in control of the world. To admit that we do not have the power to change events can be very frightening indeed.

- **Loss.**

You miss the person who has died, their love, their friendship, their support, intimacy, hopes, and accompanying the loss can be a deep sense of sadness.

- **Loneliness.**

You might feel that no-one can really understand you or what you are feeling.

- **Depression.**

Feeling low is a natural part of mourning. Grief can cause you to have some of the symptoms of depression such as inability to concentrate or sleep disturbance, and intense sadness. If you are concerned that you might be suffering from depression you may find it helpful to talk to your GP or to a counsellor.

- **Relief.**

You might feel relief that the suffering is now over – and you may feel this relief for yourself as well as for the person who has died. This too is normal and natural.

- **Earlier losses.**

Your loss can bring back memories and painful feelings from earlier losses – and this can add to your sense of sadness and confusion.

- And you may feel that these reactions will go on for ever, which of course they won't.

How can grief affect us physically?

You may find it affects you in some or all of the following ways:

- **Tiredness.**

Having all these feelings is exhausting. You may also have practical things you have to do and arrange because of the death. Allow yourself to feel tired, to rest as much as possible, to go to bed, to sleep, to not do some of the things which you would normally expect to do.

- **Sleep disruption.**

You may find it hard to get to sleep or to stay asleep or you may wake early

- **Appetite disturbance.**

You may not feel like eating or you may feel like eating very much indeed.

- **Preoccupation.**

You might be so preoccupied with thoughts and memories of the person who has died that you might think you see or hear them (you are not going mad – this is quite common)

- **Anxiety and panic.**

With so many powerful feelings aroused you might become anxious – that you are going crazy (which you're not) or that something terrible might happen.

- **Loss of concentration.**

Again this is quite understandable – you are working through powerful emotions which at the moment are using up your energy and even brain power. You will get them back but right now you cannot force anything.

- **Irritability.**

You can feel as if you are on a very short fuse. You might find yourself 'snapping' at people even if you do not normally do this.

- **Clumsiness/forgetfulness.**

You may find yourself being more clumsy than usual, banging into things, forgetting things.

- **Crying.**

Crying can bring relief as it is an outlet for the emotions and tension which have built up.

- **Other physical symptoms.**

For example: feeling sick, tightness in the chest, back pain, dizziness, digestive problems. These are almost always part of our grieving – a response to the stresses and traumatic nature of our loss and a physical expression of our feelings of maybe anxiety, fear, helplessness. If you are concerned about these or any other physical symptoms you may wish to talk to your GP.

All of these are normal and understandable reactions and given time, support and understanding they will lessen and eventually disappear.

How can we help ourselves through this time

- **Ask for help.** This can take courage and is not always easy. It is OK to need help. Ask someone you feel you can trust- a friend, a GP, a tutor, a college chaplain, a parent. It may help to speak to a counsellor.
- **Talk about your feelings.** Talk about the person who has died. It can bring relief to 'get it off your chest' – it helps you clarify and understand what has been going round and round in your head. It also helps you feel less alone.
- **Express yourself in some other way.** If you don't feel like talking, see whether you can write about your feelings and experience, using any form you feel comfortable with – a poem, letter, diary, song. Or you may find it easier to express your feelings through painting, modelling, dance.
- **Get some exercise.** Exercise is a way to use up our physical energy and also is a way to express frustration and anger.
- **Listen to music.** Many people find that music has the power to get through to us in a way that nothing else can. Choose music to suit your mood. And sometimes you may need to take your mind off your loss. Use music to help you escape for a time.
- **Take good care of yourself.** You may feel that you can't be bothered or that there's no point, but it will help. Eat well, bath and shower regularly and get the sleep and rest you need. Some people try to block out their feelings using alcohol or drugs – but these only give short – term relief and merely serve to postpone the process of grieving.
- **Trust and accept yourself.** Within reason follow your feelings and reaction. If you want to be alone or to go out then do that. Keep reminding yourself that it is normal to feel the way you do following a bereavement.
- Allow yourself to take each day, each hour, each moment as it comes.

Getting professional Help

Talking to a counsellor can help you find your way through the hard and painful process of grieving.

If you are concerned about physical symptoms – consult your GP

If you are worried about your academic studies – speak to your tutor

If you feel overwhelmed by your feelings, particularly if you continue to feel hopeless and despairing and especially if you start to feel suicidal – contact the counselling service. An appointment can be made for you to see a counsellor quickly

How can you help a friend who has experienced a bereavement?

What Does Help

- It does help knowing people care about us.
- It does help having someone just listen to us when we want to talk.
- It does help knowing we don't have to talk if we don't want to.
- It does help knowing our friends will still be there for us when we do feel like being sociable.

What Doesn't Help

It is generally not helpful:

- To be told we will get over it in time.
- To be told to pull ourselves together.
- To be told that things could be worse.
- To be told it is all for the best.
- To be ignored by friends and not asked out.
- For people to pretend that nothing has changed, to avoid speaking about what has happened, for fear of upsetting us, when in fact we are living with our situation all the time.

Some books you may find helpful

The Courage to Grieve, Judy Tatelbaum*

Facing Grief: Bereavement and the Young Adult, Susan Wallbank*

When Parents Die, Rebecca Abrams*

Death & How to Survive It - Coming to Terms with the Loss of a Partner,
Katie Boydell*

Healing After the Suicide of a Loved One, Ann Smolin & John Guinan*

* These books can be borrowed from the counselling service library.
Contact counselling service administrator for details.