

The impact of bereavement

For most of us, bereavement will be one of the most distressing experience we will ever face.



The grief we feel when someone close to us dies can be overwhelming at times.

Everyone experiences grief differently. There is no “normal” or “right” way to grieve. Everyone’s experience is unique and perhaps you can see how even within your family people can react to the same loss in very different ways.

The feelings you have and what happens to you when you are grieving can feel very unnatural or strange – even scary. Clients often ask us “Am I going mad?” or “Am I doing this right?”

Please be reassured – you’re not losing your mind. You’re going through the grieving process and it’s a journey into the unknown. It does however have a purpose, and it will become less overwhelming and easier to cope with as you move through that process.

Feelings are unpredictable in grief but some of the more common ones are:

Numbness: people who experience a great loss often report an initial period of shock, numbness or disbelief that the tragedy has even occurred. This is a very normal defence mechanism of the mind as it tries to protect you from being overwhelmed. This allows you time to take in your loss as and when you are able to.

Sadness and yearning: sadness can feel overwhelming and you can really yearn for the physical closeness of your lost loved one. This can provoke feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. These feelings can lead to **worry, anxiety, fear.**

And a feeling people often experience but don’t always talk about is **anger.** It’s normal and understandable for you to feel angry for example at the situation you are in, with the medical world, with the rest of your family, with the person you have lost, with the whole world, with God, with yourself.

You may have felt some degree of **relief,** especially if the death follows a long illness or it was a very conflicted relationship. It is possible to feel relief that someone is no longer in pain, whilst also feeling angry and sad that they are no longer alive. Feelings of relief or anger might then lead to feelings of **guilt.**

Guilt is a very common reaction to loss as people often feel that somehow they should have predicted or prevented the death of the person they are grieving for. Many people feel guilty that they did not get the chance to say goodbye or that they were not with the person when they died.

Some of the other feelings people may have are loneliness, helplessness, jealousy, worthlessness and resentment.

All the feelings mentioned are not wrong or unnatural. They are normal reactions to what may be the most difficult experience of your life.

Bereavement can affect your thoughts:

- You may find that you cannot believe what has happened, it can't have happened to your loved one and you are filled with disbelief.
- Some people say they feel a sense of presence of their loved one and some people even think they see the person who has died.
- You might also find that you are confused and preoccupied as so many thoughts fill your mind.

Bereavement can affect you physically:

- You might have muscle tightness, body pains, feel exhausted, lack energy or motivation. Or you may be restless, can't relax or sit still or become hyperactive.
- You may suffer insomnia, you may be sleeping too much, you might have disturbing dreams.
- You may have a loss of appetite, be overeating, have nausea, have a dry mouth, a "hollow stomach", indigestion, intestinal disorders like diarrhoea. You may have weight loss or gain.
- You may experience headaches, shortness of breath, chest pressure, tightness, be oversensitive to noise or feel a lump in the throat.

There are also the social/behavioural effects of bereavement:

- You might want to withdraw socially, and stay away from others.
- You may feel detached, and prefer not to take part in your usual activities and interests.
- You may feel suspicious, irritable, or even hostile towards others.
- You may lose and/or gain some friends during your grief journey.
- You may try avoid reminders of the person. For instance, not buying food the person liked to eat, not watching a TV programme they enjoyed. On the other hand you may treasure objects that belonged to them and not want to move objects or clear out anything which they owned.
- You may have dreams or nightmares about the person who has died.
- You might search for the person in a crowd.

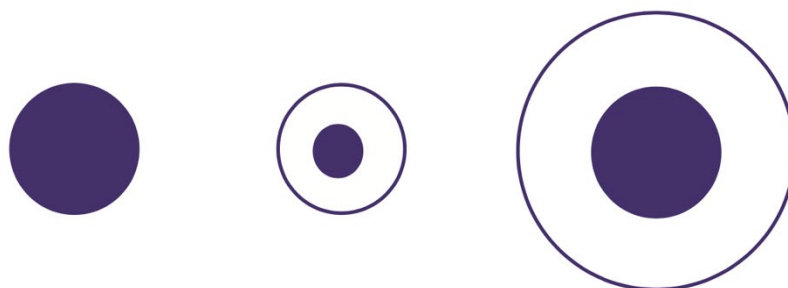
All these effects can be intertwined. So, as you are dealing with so much, it's important that you take care of yourself following a bereavement:



- **DO** talk to others about the person who has died, about your memories and feelings
- **DO** look after yourself. Eat as well as you can (if you find you don't have an appetite, eat little and often) and get enough rest (even if you can't sleep). Try to get into a "new" routine and include some exercise such as going for a walk.
- **Do** take up offers of support from family and friends, such as getting dinner made for you, getting shopping or providing a listening ear.
- **DO** give yourself time and permission to grieve.

Looking ahead

People often expect that grief reduces over time. However, the grief can remain, particularly if you miss that person. When someone close dies, grief can be totally overwhelming (the first circle below, the red circle represents your grief). However, gradually life starts to grow around that grief as you start to find a "new" normal. You can have a bad day, when the grief washes over you again. Then the next day you have a good day as your life continues to expand around the grief. In this way you continue the process of integrating the loss of your loved one into your life, moving forward and taking that loved one with you, in your heart.



We can't tell you how long it will take or how this will happen for you but we can reassure you that you will not always feel like you do now.

Coping tips for days with special meaning

When you're bereaved many events will evoke memories, like wedding anniversaries, birthdays, and anniversaries of a death. Unpredictable reminders can include a piece of music, a smell, a TV show or even food in a supermarket aisle, which was liked by the person who has died. You also may see someone who looks like them or someone wearing the same item of clothing.

Every relationship and bereavement is unique and special to you. Reminders can stimulate comforting memories or produce sadness, even anger e.g. "how dare they still be alive when he/she has died?" These are all normal reactions to grief.

So what can help?

Some of those special occasions may be very difficult so it's important to work out a way to manage and cope with them. Some people avoid the place or people that will bring sad thoughts or memories. Others may mark the day in a very personal way, for example lighting a candle, reading a special poem, taking a walk or going on holiday.

There are also different ways to remember someone close such as making a photograph album, planting a tree, making a memory cushion made of a piece of their clothing, donating to a charity or funding an award at a club or school.

If you find your friends are not mentioning the name of the person who has died during conversations, they are often trying to "protect you", not wanting to upset you. Give them permission by bringing the person's name into the conversation – "He/she used to love that programme, a piece of music" etc.

When someone dies, people tell us that they have a lot of unhappy thoughts, but it's important that you do remember the happy times like the holidays you had, the nights out, a silly expression or even an annoying habit that they had!

Think about the person and what they were like. Were they quiet, chatty, life and soul of the party, love TV or liked to read? Did they prefer beach holidays or active holidays? Get family members and friends to write down happy memories of your loved one and put them all in a box. Whenever you're having a bad day, take a happy memory out of the box and remember the happier times.

You're not alone