

Grief

Grief is very personal, but from talking to many bereaved people over the years, we would like to offer some pointers which you may find helpful.

Grief is normal - it is part of what it is to be human and to have feelings.

Grief is the price we pay for love - we feel this pain because the person who died meant so much to us.

Grief is a process through which we travel - but we will emerge from it.

There is no right way to grieve - other people's advice may be helpful, but how each person grieves is personal.

There are no shortcuts - grief takes time, often much longer than we think, and certainly longer than many people around us expect.

It is normal to both grieve and live - when we find ourselves not thinking about the person who has died, that is alright.

Grief is hard for other people - they often don't know what to say, and may say the wrong things, but it is usually because they care.

Grief can be lonely - and can lead to depressing thoughts and even thoughts of suicide. It is alright to experience, and to express, these thoughts.

The turmoil of our emotions may make us feel as though we are going mad - this is normal.

One way to help yourself might be to find someone who will listen - and then to talk.

Some useful phone numbers:

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland
Caring for the bereaved people of Scotland
www.crusescotland.org.uk
0845 600 22 27

Breathing Space (Scotland)
A service for people with low mood or depression
0800 83 85 87

Samaritans
Need to talk to someone? 24 hour service
www.samaritans.org.uk
116 123

Citizen's Advice Scotland
Help with legal, money and other matters
www.cas.org.uk
see Local Phone Book

The Compassionate Friends
Support for bereaved parents and their families
www.tcf.org.uk
0345 123 2304

Cruse Bereavement Care
England, Wales and Northern Ireland
offering a wide range of services for bereaved people
www.cruse.org.uk
0844 477 94000

Living through grief

If you require a copy of this publication in an alternative format, please call 01738 444 178.

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The early days

The death of someone close can be a shattering experience and, whether the death has been sudden or expected, we can find ourselves confused by a mixture of emotions. It can be very hard to make sense of it all. The early days following the death is often a very chaotic time. As we try to take in the bad news, we may also have to cope with the grief of other family members along with all the practical issues which need to be attended to.

It is important to give yourself time for your emotions. People sometimes describe the early days of grieving as being like a nightmare - we think we will wake up and find it has all been a bad dream. It takes time to accept the reality of what has happened, and it is important to allow yourself that time. Talking about the person who has died, looking at photographs and sharing stories will often help.

Among all the feelings of sadness and loss there can often be a feeling of panic about the things that need to be done. People may want to help but there may be things which require your attention and which you wish to take control of yourself - try not to let others rush you into making decisions. It might help to make a list of the various tasks then decide what you want to do yourself and what others could do for you. You may have family and friends visiting, and while it is helpful to talk with them, there may be times when you just want peace. Those who care about you will offer advice - sometimes conflicting advice. In the midst of all that, it can be quite hard to find time to be quiet and alone!

Understanding the feelings

There is no one right way to grieve - you need to do things your way. There is no easy way to get through these early days of grieving. Faced with the loss of someone who was special to us we find that all the markers of what was normal seem to have changed. Some people feel as though they are on a roller-coaster and wonder if they are going mad.

People often report a range of different feelings including:

- shock
- numbness
- disbelief
- helplessness
- a feeling of being overwhelmed

As we swing between the sadness of our grief and remembering the good times, we can feel our emotions are in turmoil and wonder if they will ever settle again. This is normal.

As time goes on

Following the funeral, as other people return to their own lives, the feeling of emptiness can become all too real. This is the time when the reality that death robs us of someone we love strikes home. Physical loneliness is hard. The empty chair that faces us across a room can be a constant reminder of our loss; but the emotional loneliness is very much harder - the fact that when we are with a group of other people, even with our own family, we can feel totally and utterly alone.

It is normal to feel this very deep and painful emotion which it often seems nobody else can understand. People have described this as like a weight dragging them down, like a knot in the pit of their stomach, or like being in a very dark hole.

Waves of grief

Often we long for the person who has died and it is not uncommon to be reminded of them, or feel their presence, when we hear a particular piece of music, see certain things or smell certain smells. We may feel surprise that these things can awaken such emotions in us, even after several weeks or even months. Sometimes the initial emotional responses, perhaps feeling angry or crying, come back just at the point when we thought we were beginning to move on. It can be quite unnerving to feel that we are not coping as well as we thought we were, but this is part of our own safety system. We can only deal with so much grief at a time.

There will be times when we feel we are making progress, and others when we find ourselves right back in the deep pain of our grief. Occasions such as anniversaries, birthdays and festivals, may make the pain feel as sharp as ever. It will help to plan for such events and be ready for the deep feelings of sadness which can swamp us once more.

One of the best ways we can help ourselves on the journey of grief is to talk — to share with others the story of the person who has died and to speak about our relationship with them. We may do this with friends or family, with a doctor or someone from a faith group, or any special person in whom we can confide.

Do what is right for you

We may feel guilty when we stop grieving, but we need to live as well as to grieve. It is an important part of the journey of recovery from grief to start to reconnect with other people and with our life before the death. Initially other people may try to involve us before we are ready, and it is easy to get into a habit of saying “no” to invitations. If you do not want to go somewhere, or do something, explain that the time is not right, but ask people to invite you again. When you are ready, take people up on their offers and accept the help they can give.

Take your time

If you are involved in supporting other members of your family, friends or colleagues in their grief, then it is important to remember that you also need to look after yourself. Try to protect some time for you - time when you can be in touch with your own emotions and visit your own memories.

Look after yourself

Sometimes illness and physical symptoms can follow the death of someone close. There may be some difficulty in sleeping, a change in appetite, a lack of energy or difficulty in concentrating. Again all of this is normal, but if you are worried about your own health you should speak with your doctor.

Remember that grief takes time. Other people may suggest you should be “getting over it” but only you know what pace is right for you. On the other hand, if, after a few months, you become concerned that you are not making the progress in your grief that you want to make, if you feel you are stuck, then it would be helpful to check this out with your doctor or an organisation such as Cruse, which has volunteers trained to offer this kind of support.