

# Coping with Loss and Grief



## **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful for the assistance of Dove House Hospice Family Support Team in producing this booklet and indebted to so many bereaved people of all ages and over many years, whose contributions have made it possible.

It can truthfully be said that this booklet has been written by the bereaved for the bereaved. We have simply included the most common of their shared experiences.



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Nothing and no one can prepare us for a close bereavement. The resulting grief is both natural and normal and nothing can make it just go away. This leaflet is not intended to try to prepare you for what bereavement will be like and cannot make the experience any easier. It is hoped that it will at least help towards understanding your experience.

Our lives are full of losses and changes, some great, some small, some welcome (like getting married), but some are forced upon us against our wishes. These losses and changes can create within each of us a very wide range of powerful feelings, some pleasant, but some equally painful and unpleasant.

The death of someone close to us is one of the most difficult losses that we all face at some point in our lives and we will each react to it in our own way. It is an event that is usually beyond our control and it can have a devastating impact upon our :

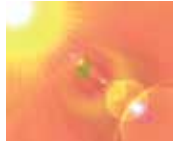
- Physical well-being
- Our emotions
- Our relationships with family, friends and work colleagues
- Performance at work or school
- Our social life
- Our finances
- Our daily routine
- Ability to tackle new responsibilities at a time when we often lose some of our self-confidence

Some people may experience doubts about previously held beliefs upon which they have based their lives which can be equally devastating.

It is impossible within this leaflet to list all the feelings experienced after a bereavement, but then there are no 'rights and wrongs' about how we feel or how we grieve. Some feelings can be so powerful and confusing that they make us truly believe we are going mad. Others may be unexpected, unfamiliar and uncomfortable, such as strong feelings of:

- Anger
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Bitterness
- Jealousy

Close bereavements can re-awaken memories and feelings associated with other difficult or distressing times in our lives. Examples of these could be problems associated with childhood, previous bereavements, times of war or other traumatic incidents. This can make it more difficult to cope with the present bereavement. A major bereavement can take many people to greater depths of anguish and distress than ever previously experienced. Where death has come suddenly and unexpectedly, the pain and distress it creates can be much more intense for many reasons.



**It may be helpful to share with you a selection of contrasting comments made by bereaved people .....**

"My world has been shattered. I can find nothing to go on living for as life has become so empty and I can feel so lost, abandoned and alone. The pain I feel is beyond imagination."

"I can't eat or sleep and I have awful, crazy dreams if I do sleep. I have endless aches and pains and I seem to walk around in another world. I just can't believe how disorganised and forgetful I've become and I keep losing things. Then I get really cross with myself because I feel so stupid. Sometimes I think I've seen her or heard her, only to have the dreadful reality that she isn't coming back crash down on me again and again."

"I feel jealous when I see other couples happy together as I feel so cheated and robbed. I almost take pleasure in the fact that one day, one of them will have to experience this and then I'm shocked to find that I'm capable of thinking such nasty thoughts."

"I think that I'm going mad. No-one seems to understand. Some people tell me they know how I feel, but they haven't got a clue."

"I've been angry with the doctors and angry with God for letting it happen. I get angry with my husband, too, for dying and leaving me in this mess, even though I know he couldn't help it. I ended up taking it out on those around me, yelling and screaming at the kids."

"Everyone keeps telling me that, 'I should be getting over it now' and that it's 'time to let go and move on!' I've begun to think that there must be something radically wrong with me and that after 2 years I should be much further on. In reality life doesn't seem to be getting any easier."

"How do you ever accept that the one you gave birth to, has died before you?"

"I suddenly realised my mum would never see me get married or see my children. I was terrified I'd lose my dad, too, as then I'd have no-one."

"My family can't understand why I've taken Mark's death so badly and I daren't tell them we had been in a (gay) relationship for 3 years - they'd never speak to me again."

"For the first time in over 50 years, I've found myself unable to shut out the screams of drowning men after our ship sank in the Arctic. It's as if my wife's dying has dug up memories I've tried so hard to keep buried."

"I've been through the birthdays, our anniversary and now Christmas and I've survived. I still hurt terribly, but I believe I can make it now."

The above statements describe something of the chaos and diversity of experiences faced by bereaved people.



For many people, grief does not automatically get easier with time after a death. Too many testify to the pain and anguish deepening initially, sometimes for several months. It takes time to fully recognise and understand all that a person has been to us. Regrettably, when many bereaved people are reaching their lowest ebb, others around them think that you should be 'getting back to normal now'. This lack of understanding frequently results in a decline of interest, sympathy and support when you need it most.

Sometimes, it can be helpful to talk about difficult issues with someone from outside your circle of family and friends who will be able to listen without being hurt, offended or overreacting. This is because they understand the effects of bereavement, but are not personally affected by your loss.

Professionals can provide this support when our family and friends are too close to help. The acknowledgement of your feelings and ability to discuss sensitive issues can be very important in maintaining your mental and physical well being.

At first grieving may fill every hour of day and night. As the days, weeks and months pass by, you may slowly experience times of increasing length when you do not think about the person who died. This is very normal and is not a sign that you are forgetting or betraying them.

In the early days of grief it is not unusual to be unable to remember the dead person's face, the sound of their voice and only able to remember unpleasant memories surrounding the last days of their lives. Remembering and reminiscing consumes a lot of our time and energy and it can be very tiring and painful. However, with the passing of time, you will hopefully be able to remember the good memories and gain much comfort from them. Don't avoid times to remember and grieve. However upsetting and tiring they can be, it is important for you not to run away from your memories and feelings, although it is equally important to do things to help you relax.

We don't 'get over' people who have died, nor do we 'let go' of them. We have to learn to live without their physical presence, but our memories of them, their influence upon our lives and the love we shared with them remain with us until the end of our own lives.



## Children and Grief

When children grieve they have different thoughts, worries and coping mechanisms to adults. They need the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings and can often ask difficult questions. It is helpful to answer these with honesty in a way that they can understand. Sometimes children may ask questions which seem insensitive, but this is not their intention and is often their way of finding out information. Children often grieve in short, intense 'bursts' then may go out and play as if nothing had happened. As children get older they may need more explanation about death and dying as their understanding about life and death develops.

It is very important to maintain discipline after a bereavement. Letting children get away with bad behaviour because you are feeling sorry for them will make them feel unsafe and often lead to even worse behaviour.

Although children share many of the same experiences and feelings of bereaved adults, it is important to remember that they make sense of things differently to adults. It is important to recognise their confusion and hurting and not ignore it. For single parents this can be particularly stressful, as it is difficult enough to cope with your own grief.

## Teenagers and Grief

Teenagers may look like adults, but their coping skills are often less well developed. When they lose someone close to them, they may experience similar feelings to adults. However, due to the combined effects of bereavement and adolescence they may require more support and understanding than you might expect.

Further advice, information and support is available to help adults dealing with bereaved children and adolescents (see pages 14 and 15).



Great care should be taken before making big decisions after a bereavement e.g. moving home. Our feelings and needs can change quickly and it is all too easy to end up with regrets. There is no right or wrong time to sort out a loved one's belonging either. Do it only when you feel ready. Keep hold of precious 'keep sakes' for yourself and others close to the deceased person. Creating a special book or box of photographs and other memorabilia can especially help children to remember the dead person and also preserve precious parts of their own history.

A difficulty of bereavement is that sometimes those who have been closest to us before a death can drift away from us afterwards. There are many reasons why this may happen, for example their own busy lifestyles and pressures, but the effect is the same in that it leaves us feeling abandoned. However, what can be equally true is that people we least expect may draw close to us at this time and become an enormous support, but it may require an adjustment in our thinking to accept their offers of help and support.



Many of the physical and mental effects of loss on this and the following page are a normal experience for people who are experiencing high levels of stress. Some physical effects can also be caused by the fatigue of having cared for someone who was very ill, or needed a lot of attention as well as by being bereaved. The stress of bereavement can reduce the effectiveness of our immune system and can also affect our bodies in many ways so that we can become worried about our health. This information is intended to provide some degree of reassurance about your health, but is not intended to be a substitute for the reassurance that a GP can provide. If you experience health difficulties, a few minutes of your GP's time may prevent days or weeks of fretting unnecessarily about a complaint. He may also be able to prescribe some medication to help you manage particularly difficult times. This does not mean you are weak or a failure, as anyone may need help at some point.

## Common Physical Effects of Loss

- Fatigue
- Sleeplessness or sleep with bad dreams
- Muscular aches e.g. In neck and shoulders from being tense
- Headaches
- Sinus related pains
- Grinding teeth (during the night). Clenching jaw may produce aches in jaw, teeth, ear and face
- Chest pains
- Breathlessness
- Repeated deep sighing, excessive yawning
- Heart pounding
- Panic feelings/ hyperventilation/ dizziness – need for open space
- Dry mouth
- Feeling cold, especially in feet and hands
- Shaking e.g. Hands
- Stomach pains and/or bowel problems: indigestion, stomach pains, extra acidity, feeling sick, diarrhoea, constipation, flatulence are all common effects, but can be made worse by changes in diet and/or eating patterns as a result of grief, e.g. Not eating enough or eating too much of the wrong things for comfort
- Poor bladder control, especially in younger children
- Loss/gain in weight
- Hair loss – thinning is more common than total loss
- Frequent minor illnesses/ infections – due to weakened immune system
- Skin disorders, spots, rashes, allergies, dry skin, eczema
- Other allergic reactions e.g. Hay fever
- Mouth ulcers

This is not a complete list. These are just the most common symptoms bereaved people have recorded. Please contact your GP if you experience any of the above symptoms.

# Common Mental Effects of Loss

- Disorganised and forgetful
- Misplacing things
- Confusion
- Poor concentration
- Staring into space/ glazed look
- Loss of interest in things which normally bring pleasure
- Sense of detachment / unreality
  
- Inefficient
- Withdrawn / isolated
- Irritable
- Aggressive – overreacting to situations
- Inability to listen / interrupts
- Inability to keep still
- Careless / accident prone
- Passive / cannot be assertive or defend self
  
- Attention seeking behaviour
- Need for approval
- “Chatterbox”
- Poor punctuality
- Significant absences from work or school
- Mood swings
- Marked changes in behaviour

The first group of mental effects above are the most common. The second group are fairly common and the third group are more common in children, but can be experienced by adults.

If these symptoms persist please contact your GP.

Bereavement can create more serious problems for the health of children and adults if the stress and distress makes them less able to cope. Problems may have existed before the bereavement, which can then become too difficult to manage and lead to the serious problems.

## Serious Effects of Loss

- Drug Abuse
- Alcohol Abuse
- Depression
- Gambling
- Promiscuity
- Criminal activity
- Self harm / injury
- Anorexia or other eating related disorders
- Suicide

Professional help may be needed for any of the above serious effects.



In conclusion, the difficulties created by bereavement frequently take years to work through, though some people can and will adjust more quickly. If you are reading this because you know someone who is bereaved, your compassion, patience, understanding and acceptance of that person and their situation can be very important in helping them grieve healthily and cope. You cannot make a bereaved person 'better' as they are not ill. You can, however, make managing the months and years of anguish and adjustment more tolerable for them.

Many bereaved people, both young and old become anti-social and withdrawn. This is usually to do with:

- others preventing them from talking about their loss
- being judged or misunderstood
- the fear of being a bore in conversation
- the fear of becoming a nuisance or an inconvenience
- the fear that they won't be acceptable to people when they are deeply unhappy most of the time.

We live in a society that can be uncomfortable with us expressing our unhappy feelings and we often feel under pressure to 'wear a mask' that hides our unhappiness. Opportunities are available for the bereaved to 'take off their masks' and share their experiences and feelings individually or in a group. Information about these can be found at the back of this leaflet.

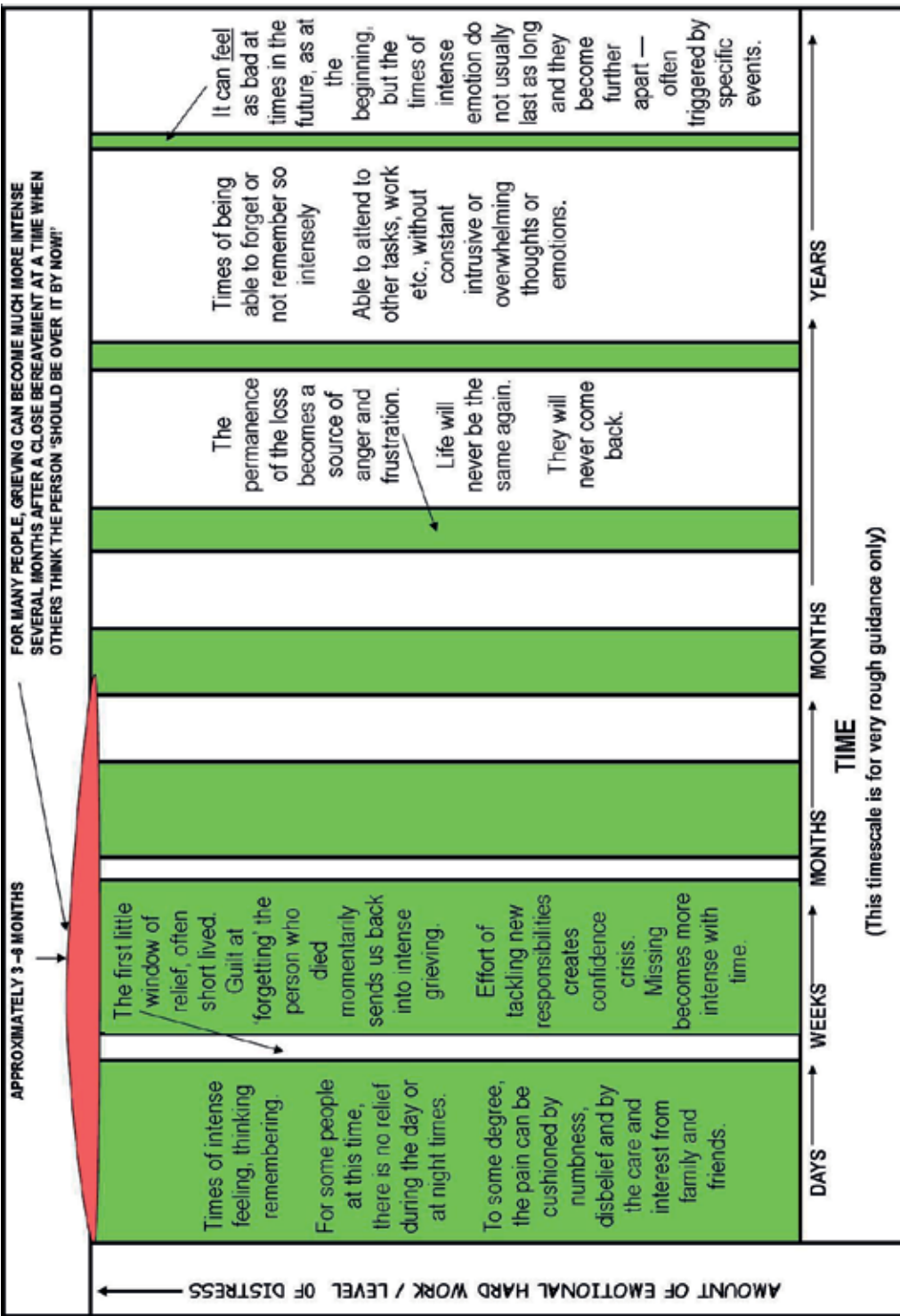


On the next page is a diagram that tries to look at how people cope with bereavement. The vertical line is the amount of pain and distress we feel and the horizontal line is the length of time from the bereavement. The blocks of green hint at the length of time we feel our most intense feelings with time.

It is important not to use the timescale literally. Everyone is unique, so timings can vary a great deal from person to person, depending on a lot of factors.

What the diagram shows is that progressively with time we are usually able to spend more time, more frequently, getting on with the business of our lives without the person who died. However, even after some time, when difficult days come they can still last for a while and feel as bad as at the beginning.

For many people, grief seems to get worse for the first few months and not easier, after which there is normally some slow improvement. This is shown by the red curve above the diagram, peaking at about 3 months. Again this timing varies. It can be very frightening to feel worse with time at first, but it is a common experience which passes and is often about how many areas of our lives are affected by loss. Other difficulties in our lives can impact upon this process.



# Other Contacts for Advice and Support

## **Age UK - Tel: 01482 324644**

Support for the elderly.

## **Bereavement Advice Centre - Tel: 0800 634 9494**

A national organisation that offers advice on all different aspects of bereavement.

[www.bereavementadvice.org.uk](http://www.bereavementadvice.org.uk)

## **Beverley Widows - Mrs Diana Fairhurst - Tel: 01482 888443**

Social group for widows, accepting of members of both East Riding and Hull.

## **Child Death Helpline - Tel: 0800 282 986 or (0800 800 6019 free for main network mobiles)**

A helpline for anyone of age affected by the death of a child. Calls are answered by other bereaved parents. Lines open every evening of the year 7pm-10pm.

## **Childhood Bereavement Network - Tel: 020 7843 6309**

Information and support for parents and children.

[www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

## **Cruse Bereavement - Tel: 0808 808 1677**

Offering counselling and support by trained volunteers and can provide information on practical issues surrounding bereavement.

[www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

## **Natural Death - Tel: 01962 712690**

Offers help, advice and support on planning a funeral.

[www.naturaldeath.org.uk](http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk)

## **Samaritans - 'Free from any phone' Call: 116 123**

**Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)**

24 hours a day confidential emotional support for people who have feelings of distress or despair.

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**'Stepping Stones' - Dove House Hospice - Tel: 01962 712690**

Bereavement support group for those widowed by a life limiting illness. Meets first Wednesday of the month at the Hospice and meets afterwards in the café for lunch. Contact the Family Support Team.

**Support After Murder and Manslaughter - Tel: 0845 872 3440**

Offers help through befriending, for people who have suffered the loss of someone as a result of murder or manslaughter.

[www.samm.org.uk](http://www.samm.org.uk)

**Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide -**

**Call (National Number) - 0300 111 5065 - 9am - 9pm**

**Hull Area - Lynn - 01964 536 546**

**Email - [Sobs.support@hotmail.com](mailto:Sobs.support@hotmail.com)**

Support and advice for people affected by the sudden loss of someone.

[www.uk-sobs.org.uk](http://www.uk-sobs.org.uk)

**Child Bereavement UK - Tel: 0800 02 888 40**

A website for parents and children helping to understand bereavement.

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)

**WAY Foundation (Widowed and Young)**

Safe help support for men and women under 50 whose spouse or partner has died. They also offer support for their children.

[www.widowedandyoung.org.uk](http://www.widowedandyoung.org.uk)

**Winston's Wish - Tel: 08088 020 021**

Support for children and young people who have been bereaved and their families.

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)



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**For further information please contact any of the above organisations for further information.**

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