

Following a Bereavement

Emotional support



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Emotional aspects of grief

- The death of a loved one is an experience that we are all forced to face at some time in our lives. Death is a part of life's cycle and to mourn deeply for someone we have loved is an entirely normal experience.
- However, people find it uncomfortable to talk about death and in many ways we are even discouraged from thinking about it. This can make it difficult for us to turn to others for support, even though what we most need is someone with whom to talk and express our feelings.
- Each of us experiences grief in our own particular way and no two people are entirely alike. People from different cultural backgrounds will have different ways of mourning and different ways of supporting each other. On the other hand, there are several experiences in grief which appear to be common to everyone, and this leaflet will describe some of these experiences in order to help you through the whole process.

There is a need to mourn

- The reason that every culture has some form of funeral ritual is that the ritual itself provides a focus for our grief. At the funeral, if we have not begun already, we have the opportunity to mourn openly for our loved one, and say goodbye.
- Mourning is essential. We must experience whatever feelings emerge within us and try to express them out loud, preferably to someone else. It is necessarily a painful process that we have to go through, and there are no short cuts. It is rather like having a piece of work to do. It may take many months, or even years, to feel like your old self again, so give yourself lots of time to complete the work of grief.

What can I expect to feel?

- While no two people experience grief in the same way, the feelings described on the following pages are a sample of the many that can occur. It is rare to move smoothly from one stage to the next, or even experience all the feelings listed. Rather, you may have setbacks and sometimes feel as if you are having to start your grief all over again. Don't be disheartened by this. As long as you are

allowing yourself to feel whatever you feel, and are gradually rebuilding your life, you are doing the work of grief.

Shock

- To feel shocked at the news of the death of someone close to you is a natural reaction. You may be feeling numb and unable to believe that it's true. Some people are unable to feel very much for some time; some become quiet and withdrawn, while others quickly become agitated and anxious.
- Whatever you are feeling try to bring it to the surface and express it. Don't try to put on a brave face in order to protect yourself or others from embarrassment.

Expressing your grief

- Grief raises many emotions and it is important to allow yourself to feel whatever you feel. In the early months of grief you will probably feel moments of sharp intense grief interspersed with a more constant sense of dull loss.
- You may be feeling very lost in the world, and simple daily chores may involve painful recollections of tasks previously done together.

- Going to bed at night or waking in the morning may feel particularly lonely and upsetting. People sometimes have difficulty falling asleep though, because grief is such an exhausting variety of emotions, many people feel very tired a lot of the time.

Anxiety

- It is quite common for people to feel anxiety (the same as fear) in the early stages of grief when they are having to face an unclear and unknown future.
- If you notice that you have persistent physical sensations of anxiety (such as a pounding heart-beat, muscle tension, increased perspiration and breathing) or if you find that you worry a lot, it may be helpful to learn how to relax.
- Learning to relax is a useful skill which many people can teach you these days. If your anxiety symptoms persist, contact your GP and ask to be referred to someone who will be able to help you with your anxiety.

Anger

- Life can feel very unjust when someone close to us dies. So it is natural to feel some anger in grief. For some people, however, feeling angry is the only way they know how to grieve.
- You may be feeling angry at the unfairness of the fact that your relative is dead. Or you may be feeling that medical services could have done more or should have reacted differently. If you have concerns about the service you have received, ask for a discussion with a senior member of staff involved in the care of your relative.
- Mostly we feel anger about the death itself and our feeling of helplessness. A part of you may be feeling some anger towards the person who has died (for example, “How could they leave me like this?” or “Why didn’t they look after themselves properly when they were alive?”) though you may feel more awkward about sharing these feelings. Again, try to talk about them with someone you trust and who is a good listener.
- Avoid bottling up your feelings as they will only catch up with you later.

Guilt

- Another universal feeling in grief is guilt, which is simply anger turned in on oneself. You may be feeling that there was more that you could have done, that you could have reacted more quickly to signs that the person was in distress. You may have been, or felt yourself to have been, responsible for your relative who has died and now that they are gone you blame yourself for not having taken better care of them. It is worth remembering that for every action we take in life there are always many other actions we could have taken - we usually end up simply taking the action which seems to be the right one at the time.
- If you have been caring for your relative for a long time before they died, your feelings of loss may be complicated by some milder feelings of relief (that both you and the deceased are released from a long painful illness, for example). This is quite understandable and does not make you a bad person for feeling it. It is helpful if you can talk through these feelings with someone else so that you can let go of your guilt.

- If the death was more sudden, it may have left you feeling guilty about things left unsaid. There is often a great deal of unfinished emotional 'business'. Perhaps you did not say how much you cared or you did not say you were sorry about things you may have said or done in the past or perhaps you did not say "thank you" for the happiness that he or she brought you; and maybe you did not say goodbye. Perhaps it is worth remembering the good things that you were able to give them when they were alive; if you think of what they would be feeling about you right now, if you had died and they had lived, you may have a clearer idea of what you actually meant to them.
- Again, it is important to express these painful thoughts and feelings in both tears and words since it is only through expressing our grief that we are able to get through it effectively.

Depression

- Acute anxiety and anger often gradually give way to more constant feelings of depression and apathy (a feeling that you don't want to do anything). This happens as you finally come to realise at a deeper level that your loved one

will never return. The fight and anger against this realisation and the feeling that somehow “none of this is real” dissolves into a well of despair.

- Unfortunately, these feelings of hopelessness often coincide with a time when all the immediate friends and family who were available for support at the funeral seem to be scarce. Our friends are often embarrassed at not knowing what to say to us and, sometimes without realising it themselves, they stay away.
- Similarly, people often worry that they may become a burden on others and consequently avoid contacting the very people who they would find it easy to talk to. Try to remember that if a friend had turned to you for support in their grief, there is a good chance you would feel honoured that you had been asked to help them.
- If you are feeling particularly low, you may wish to contact one of the bereavement counselling organisations at the back of this booklet, or to contact your GP.

Taking care of yourself

- The work of grief is very exhausting and places great physical demands on the body, as well as the more obvious emotional ones. You may feel physically exhausted and tired a lot of the time and consequently, you may have more colds and flu than normal. If any symptom persists, be sure to tell your doctor.
- Try to look after yourself. Eat well and regularly, even if you are not particularly hungry. Get plenty of rest, and sleep if you can. If you do have sleep problems, speak to someone who can help; your doctor may be able to refer you to someone who can train you to relax naturally and therefore sleep more easily.
- Give yourself lots of time. Don't rush back to work if you are not feeling up to it, but keep your workplace informed. If necessary, obtain a letter from your doctor to give to your boss in order to protect your job. Try to plan things in the future to work towards and look forward to, but try to avoid making any sudden major life decisions, such as moving house. So often decisions made in grief are regretted later on. Try to involve friends and family members in your planning and listen to their views as well

as your own. Many people find that a gentle routine is helpful.

Recovery

- Grief is such a universal human experience that to talk of 'recovery' is perhaps the wrong word. However, time really is a great healer when it comes to grief. When you are newly bereaved, it is hard to imagine that eventually you will find a way to live without your loved one. It may be hard to imagine that you will ever be able to laugh or enjoy yourself again.
- Somehow, with time, you will be able to take up the threads of your life and begin to weave a new future. It may be a different future from what you expected but it will not necessarily be any less positive than the past; there will almost certainly be good things waiting for you in the future.
- There may be many new hurdles to face, things to learn and challenges to meet. In facing these challenges, friends and relatives are an important means of support. Therefore, do your best to maintain your contact with people who have been important to you in

the past. Try to avoid becoming isolated or withdrawn.

- Overcoming grief is not a smooth process. There are many ups and downs. Pangs of grief can sometimes occur years after a death, when you thought you had recovered from it. This is to be expected since you will never forget the person you have lost; their life, however long or brief it was, will have changed the course of your own forever. You may find it comforting to realise that, even though someone dear to you has died, their influence on you and others lives on. The person you are today is probably very different from what you would have been like had you never known the deceased person. In some ways therefore their spirit lives on through you.
- In time you may find you have not thought about your grief for a few minutes, and later this may stretch to hours at a time. At first you may feel guilty that you are not actively grieving, particularly if you have managed to enjoy yourself for a change. Gradually you will feel more comfortable about enjoying the company of other people and new relationships. But, whatever happens, you need not fear that you will ever forget what

your loved one meant to you. The aim is to find a place and time in your life where you can continue to focus your feelings for the person you have lost, without letting your grief become an obstacle to your own life.

The do's and don'ts of grief

- **Do** express your feelings as much as possible.
- **Do** talk through what has happened and what you are feeling with someone you trust (your family, a close friend or an appropriate support group).
- **Do** contact one of the voluntary or hospital organisations listed in this booklet if you would like someone to talk to. They are there to help you.
- **Do** take good care of yourself; get lots of rest, eat well and give yourself lots of time to grieve.
- **Do** begin to make longer term plans for the future so that you always have something to look forward to but remember: don't rush into any big life changes.
- **Do** choose a Funeral Director you like and trust.

- **Do** contact your doctor if you feel unwell or would like the doctor to refer you to someone to talk to.
- **Do** keep in touch with friends and family. Remember that most people feel honoured to be asked to help. However, many people feel awkward and embarrassed about offering their help, so it may be left up to you to ask for it, even though this may be difficult for you.
- **Don't** hide your feelings: try to bring out into the open whatever you are feeling. This is central to the work of grief.
- **Don't** rush into having the funeral right away unless it is the practice of your culture and don't be persuaded to have an expensive funeral unless you really want it.
- **Don't** make any major life changes while you are still grieving. Give yourself lots of time to think about changes you may wish to make and discuss these plans with others.
- **Don't** enter into any financial or legal arrangement unless you fully understand it.
- **Don't** hurry yourself to overcome your grief. There is no fixed time that it takes to get over bereavement.

- **Don't** let others rush you into anything before you are ready. But remember that sometimes you may not know whether you are ready for something unless you give it a try.
- **Don't** turn to drugs, smoking or alcohol to stop yourself feeling the pain of grief.

Sources of further help and support

- For further information on the practical aspects of death, refer to the Social Security booklet (D49), entitled 'What to do after a death'. It is a useful source of more detailed information.
- The opportunity is available for you to return to the ward setting to meet with the ward manager or those involved in caring for your relative to discuss any issues you may have should you feel the need either currently or in the future.
- Many people manage to get through their grief with the help of their friends and family, and without any professional help. However, sometimes it can be helpful to talk through your feelings with someone who is caring and interested but not directly involved with your life.

- Sometimes it is only clear that one needs professional help some weeks or months after a bereavement. If you are worried that you are having problems with your grief, you might find it reassuring to talk to one of the following:

Your GP

- Your doctor is responsible for co-ordinating your overall physical and emotional health. Although GPs are usually very busy and unable to offer you a lot of time, he or she may be able to decide what sort of help, if any, you require. The GP, for example, may be able to refer you to a specialist bereavement counsellor, or they may encourage you to contact one of the excellent voluntary groups in or near Bristol.

Inner City Mental Health team – 0117 955 6098

Bereavement Services Association - 07766137210

www.bsauk.org

Cruse – Bristol 0117 926 4045 Bath 01761 417 250

www.cruse.org.uk

Age U.K. – Bristol 0117 922 5353 Bath 01225 466 135

www.ageuk.org.uk

League of Compassionate Friends – 0345 1232304

www.tcf.org.uk

The Lullaby Trust –Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)

– 0808 802 6868

www.lullabytrust.org.uk

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS) – 0115 9441117

www.uk-sobs.org.uk

Sands (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society) – 0207 4367940

www.sands.org.uk

Miscarriage Association – 01924 200799

www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk

Samaritans – 116 123

www.samaritans.org

Bereavement Advice Centre – 0800 634 9494

www.bereavementadvice.org

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