

# Bereavement and Loss



**Student Counselling**

[www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling)

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## **Bereavement**

This leaflet provides some information about how we react to loss and the feelings we go through as we struggle to cope with the situation. It is important to remember that in these circumstances intense feelings are completely normal.

Loss and bereavement may be one of the most difficult things we ever have to face. When a person close to us is dying or dies, there is a grieving process and it is normal for recovery to be slow and emotionally painful.

For many of us cultural changes have resulted in death becoming a taboo subject, no longer talked about, so when the inevitable happens we are often not equipped to deal with either our own or other people's reactions.

Whatever people may say, there are no rules about grieving and no timetable. Different people go through this experience in their own way depending on the circumstances of the death and their relationship with the person. Recovery is not linear and although we can talk about some common factors or stages in the process every individual reacts differently. There is no 'right' way to mourn and although it is essentially a process of letting go, we nevertheless learn to carry forward the relationship which we have had with the person who has died in our own lives. We may even find new ways of connecting to them internally.

## **Common Reactions**

**Feelings** – Shock, numbness and helplessness are very common at first. These can later give way to overwhelming feelings of sadness. We will feel much more vulnerable than usual and may experience unexpected emotions such as relief, anger, guilt, or we may worry about breaking down in public. Such feelings are not uncommon but may take us by surprise and may be difficult to deal with.

**Thoughts** – The numbness we feel may initially help us to get through the practical arrangements surrounding the funeral or to inform others of the death but it can also lead us to cut off from the people and things around us. We may find ourselves confused, absent-minded and unable to concentrate for very long. Disbelief at what has happened, obsessional thoughts or images of the deceased, even visual or auditory hallucinations can be experienced. All these symptoms are quite common in the early stages of grief and usually disappear after a while. If they do persist it can be helpful to talk to someone who understands the process of grieving and can offer support for the anxiety aroused by such experiences.

**Physical Reactions** – Some people experience emotional pain in a much more physical way, tightness in the chest, a hollow empty feeling in the pit of the stomach, aches and pains, loss of appetite, inability to sleep, or a heavy and overwhelming fatigue. We may find ourselves wandering about aimlessly, or searching for the lost loved one.

## **The Grieving Process**

**Denial and Shock** – At first, it may be difficult to accept the death of the person, and as a result, deny the reality. When we lose something we tend to search for it and searching is a common reaction to bereavement. We may think we see the person who has died walking down the street, or may hear them call our name. Such vivid experiences can be very alarming, but are not unusual. However, as the shock and denial gradually diminish other feelings will start to emerge. Along with the pain and sadness and yearning for the dead person there may also be:

**Anger** – a common question is “Why me?” We may feel angry at what we perceive to be the injustice of the death and this may cause us to displace the anger onto others such as close friends, relatives, the medical profession, God or even the person who has died. It may be easier to be angry with someone or something rather than acknowledge how abandoned we feel.

**Bargaining and Guilt** – If someone we love is terminally ill we may try to bargain with some sort of deity, offering something in exchange for the dying person. We may torment ourselves with the idea that we failed to do something; “If only I’ d been there /done more/not said/ visited more often...” When death comes we may feel relieved for ourselves as well as for the loved one. Such feelings can lead to confusion and guilt.

**Depression** – Inevitably at first there is a great sense of loss; this may be followed by mood fluctuations, feeling depressed, isolation and withdrawal. This is perfectly natural: it takes time to recover. Encouragement and reassurance from well-meaning friends may not always be experienced as helpful: often time is needed to just be with ourselves.

**Loneliness** – after a while we may think we should be ‘getting over’ some of the feelings associated with bereavement and this can make it difficult for us to speak to friends or relatives about the loss. This may lead to feelings of loneliness or isolation.

### **Factors that may hinder the resolution of grief**

Sometimes there are particularly traumatic circumstances surrounding the death of someone close to us. This may be in the manner of their death or maybe a difficulty we had in our relationship with the person who has died. Some of us experience a number of losses without the time or support to mourn and each new loss just adds to the burden of unresolved grief.

### **Factors that may help the resolution of grief**

- Looking after ourselves – both physically (getting plenty of rest as well as exercise, eating good food) and emotionally and spiritually (allowing ourselves the freedom to experience our emotions)

- Talking to someone we trust and feel safe enough with to express feelings
- If we do not want to talk, maybe then writing or expressing our feeling in other creative ways (music, dance, painting, clay modelling)
- Trying not to shut out the emotions with overwork, alcohol, drugs or other avoiding behaviours
- Being patient with ourselves and trusting ourselves and our own way of doing things. Allowing time to make the necessary adjustments to the new situation
- Talking to a counsellor, especially if feelings are confusing and overwhelming

This booklet has been produced by The University of  
Plymouth Counselling Service.

For details of our service visit the website:

[www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling)

### **Further help:**

**CRUSE Bereavement Care**

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

**Daytime Helpline: 0844 477 9400**

**E-mail: [helpline@cruse.org.uk](mailto:helpline@cruse.org.uk)**

## Further Reading

- Ironside, V. (1997) *You'll get over it: the rage of bereavement*. London: Penguin Books
- Kohner, N.& Henley, A. S. (2001) *When a baby Dies: The experience of Late Miscarriage, Still birth and Neonatal death*. London & New York: Routledge
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1970) *On Death and Dying*. London and New York: Routledge
- Lewis, C.S. (1966) *A Grief Observed*. London: Faber and Faber
- Levine, S. (2000) *Who dies?* New York: Anchor Books
- Mc Elhone, N. (2010) *After you: Letters of Love, and Loss, to a Husband and Father*. New York: Viking
- Morris, S. (2008) *Overcoming Grief: A Self Help Guide to Cognitive Behavioural Techniques*. London: Robinson
- Moulder, C. (2001) *Miscarriage: Women's Experiences and Needs*. London & New York: Routledge
- McNeill Taylor, L. (2000) *Living with loss*. London: Constable and Robinson
- Murray-Parkes, C. (1996) *Bereavement* . London: Penguin
- Murray-Parkes, C. et al. (1998) *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures*. London & New York: Routledge
- Weithmer, A. (2001) *A Special Scar*. Hove, East Sussex: Brunner-Routledge

## **Websites**

Further sources of self-help leaflets on a variety of topics including bereavement can be found on the web at:

<http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation.aspx>

<http://www.student.counselling.co.uk/guide.html>

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