COPING WITH BEAREAVEMENT

CREATING A FRIENDLY, POSITIVE, INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Student Wellbeing Team
www.brighton.ac.uk/wellbeing
Bereavement is a common but extremely distressing experience. Eventually, most of us will suffer the death of someone we love. Yet in our everyday lives, we think and talk about death rarely. So when faced with someone’s death we may not feel equipped to cope with this traumatic event and its aftermath.

This leaflet provides information about how to deal with this acute experience, both for the person who has lost someone and for those helping a bereaved person.

As grief is a very individual experience, it can often be a lonely time. For some grief is very intense, while for others it is rather mild. Some of us grieve instantly from the moment of loss while others experience a delay before grief is felt. Some people appear to experience grief for only a short period, whereas for others, grieving seems to go on forever.

Many factors determine how grief is experienced. Each of us is affected by our own personality and personal history. Our grief is also influenced by the type of relationship we had with the deceased and by how the person died. Sometimes in cases where the relationship was difficult or contained unresolved issues, a more complicated grief pattern sets in. Whatever our experience, bereavement can feel like an inescapable journey we have to endure.

Some prefer to tackle their feelings alone. Other people deal with their loss by talking to friends or family. Often, however, the support of a counsellor or chaplain provides a valid opportunity to talk to a third party who, unlike friends and relatives, is not emotionally involved. In counselling, the bereaved may, if they wish, address the painful feelings of loss, talk of the deceased and of ongoing reactions to losing him or her.

Physical sensations:
- Hollowness in stomach
- Dry mouth
- Oversensitivity to noise
- Sense of unreality
- Shortness of breath
- Muscle weakness
- Tightness in throat/chest
- Lack of energy

Thoughts:
- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Preoccupation
- Hallucinations
- Hearing his/her voice
- Frustration
- Sense of deceased’s presence
- Expecting the return of the person
- No interest in self, aimlessness
- Injustice - why me?
- Feelings of rejection
- Resentment towards the dead/towards others appearing not to understand or who haven’t suffered the same
- Idealisation of the deceased
- Religious doubts/guilt
- Embarrassment of not reacting in the way others may have wished
- Disappointment at unfulfilled future plans and dreams
- Anger at being left behind

Sudden death

In sudden deaths there are specific and notable characteristics:
- Shock, sense of unreality, dazedness, experience of nightmares and intrusive images
- Feelings of guilt and ‘if only’ thoughts.
- A need to blame someone or something for what happened
- Medical and legal involvement, especially in cases of accident or suicide, can make mourning more difficult, if not impossible, until such aspects of the case are resolved
- Feelings of helplessness on the part of the survivor and a sense that control over one’s life is dramatically challenged
- Unfinished business – did not say or do things which one wishes one had.
- A strong need to understand – to make sense of the loss.

Reactions

Reactions:
- Deep sadness
- Anger/anguish
- Guilt/self-reproach
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Fatigue
- Helplessness
- Denial
- Shock
- Yearning
- Liberation
- Relief
- Pining
- Numbness
- Fear of the future
- Fear of own death

Behaviour:
- Sleep disturbance
- Appetite loss/gain
- Dreaming of the deceased
- Changes in libido
- Searching for the deceased
- Disorientation
- Social withdrawal
- Indecision
- Aggression
- Increase in need for alcohol or drug intake in effort to release tension
- Physical, emotional and mental exhaustion
- Absentmindedness and forgetfulness
- Avoiding or treasuring reminders of the deceased
- Crying, sobbing, deep sighing

When there are difficulties between family members following a bereavement

A death in the family can bring people together but it can also create tensions and strains. It can reawaken rivalries and unresolved problems between siblings, father and mother, parents and children, and between partners. How each member of the family copes affects all the other members and if support does not seem to be apparent, it can add to the pain and suffering already being endured.

Money, property, belongings, wills and last wishes or the lack of, can become very difficult to deal with and it can sometimes be more shocking and painful to see how family members react in these situations than it can be to cope with the actual death. Sometimes, extra help from a third party is needed, even if only to talk about and admit what the problems within the family are.
Healing and coping

Often people fear feeling a bit better as we imagine this means we are forgetting and betraying the deceased. Eventually the pain may lessen or will occur less frequently; this does not mean we didn’t care - when we lose someone we love, we may always feel an emptiness because we miss them. What healing means is that we start to feel ‘normal’ again and we begin to feel more able to cope with life.

Ways to remember

There are many events that will evoke memories of the deceased, and depending on the type of relationship we had, the stronger and more frequent these memories can be. Some are personal and obvious such as birthdays, wedding anniversaries, the anniversary of the death itself, or occasions when the person’s lack of presence is particularly poignant, such as at festive, seasonal or religious celebrations.

Other more unpredictable reminders may be a piece of music, a smell, a colour, a film, a book, a place, another person, and countless other images and things can all be powerful reminders of the person’s absence. Events such as natural disasters or the death of someone famous can trigger painful memories that then have to be unravelled and dealt with along the way. There is no right way to feel and no time limit on experiencing the feelings. Many people feel guilty if they haven’t thought about the person as often as they assumed they should, or for a long time. We all have to cope in different ways and coping cannot be measured with one simple formula.

Bereaved people need to find ways to manage their grief. They develop coping mechanisms. You may need to have time away, or quiet time to reflect and take stock of what’s happened and how you will find ways of adjusting to the loss, both on a practical and emotional level.

Practical ways to remember someone

- Create a memory box or book of mementoes. Use photos, letters, cards, poems or any other records of the person’s life. You can do this on your own or ask other family members/friends to contribute – sharing can be therapeutic and a useful way of talking about the person in a supported and supportive way.
- Plant a tree or shrub.
- Have a meal or organise a special service or visit a place the person really loved, on the anniversary date or birthday, with other members of your/their family or friends.
- If you have a faith you can also have prayers said for them at an appropriate time.
- Make a donation to charity or some cause that played a part in the person’s life, or becoming a volunteer or helper for that charity.
- Fund a prize or award at a club, school or university.

Dealing with and coping with a bereaved peer

Many people are frightened and feel inadequate when faced with death and bereavement. They often do not know how to speak to someone who has just lost a partner, friend or relation. In worrying about saying the wrong things, it sometimes seems easier to say nothing at all. However, this can make the bereaved person feel even more isolated and unhappy. One of the most difficult balances to achieve is knowing how to show you care and empathise with the bereaved, without the person feeling swamped or neglected. Often the bereaved person’s grief may result in anger, frustration or silence towards people at work, or sometimes withdrawal from them.

Work is stressful enough without having to cope with bereavement as well, and expressing your emotions at unpredictable times can also be difficult and scary. We fear we may not be understood. We like to be in control of ourselves particularly in public - the fear of breaking down in tears at random moments, such as in meetings, can be very frightening. If you are working with someone who is bereaved, you may say things that you think are sympathetic and acceptable, but result in an unpredictable reaction. S/he is struggling to find ways of coping so it is not necessarily a reflection of your inability to understand. What is important is that if you try to help and it is rejected, you don’t take it personally; nor must you think you are alone in your trying to cope with someone who is in such pain.

The counselling and chaplaincy departments are used to dealing with both bereaved people and those working with the bereaved. It can be as helpful for you to come and check things out with us, as it can be for the person who has just lost someone. Do ask us.

Bereaved people’s needs

Bereaved people require patience: they need time to adjust and come to terms with what’s happened. They need to be reassured that they can talk to someone if and when they want to – they must not feel isolated or dismissed.

Their pain cannot be overestimated. If you have not yet experienced bereavement, do not assume that it isn’t that bad really. It is! Bereavement can change a person dramatically.
Do not assume that it takes a matter of weeks or months to ‘get over it’: it’s going to be a whole year before the first anniversary occurs and that alone can be a terrible ordeal.

If someone appears to be coping very well, it does not mean that s/he actually is. Greater sensitivity is still needed as random occurrences can trigger a lot of pain and emotion, which needs to be expressed.

Bereaved people need to feel that they can express themselves honestly and not have to pretend that they’re coping. They need gentleness and reassurance that they are not alone. Be supportive: listening, accompanying and just being there for someone is enormously helpful.

**Practical advice**

Following a death, many people need to be involved for the purpose of funerals, memorials, financial and legal matters. This can be complicated and exhausting. We can put you in touch with the appropriate advisors if you want this resource.

**Counselling**

Many people who are bereaved need to talk about it a lot and in great detail. Try to find someone to talk to about it all such as a counsellor or a faith advisor.

**Useful organisations**

- **Compassionate Friends**
  0845 123 2304
  helpline@tcf.org.uk
  www.tcf.org.uk

- **Cruse Bereavement Care**
  Brighton branch
  01273 234007
  Eastbourne branch
  01323 642942
  www.cruse.org.uk/

- **The Lullaby Trust**
  Helpline: 0808 802 6868
  www.lullabytrust.org.uk

- **National Association of Widows**
  0247 663 4848
  www.nawidows.org.uk

- **Samaritans**
  116 123 (local rate call)
  www.samaritans.org

- **Stillbirth and neonatal death charity**
  0808 164 3332
  www.uk-sands.org

- **Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide**
  Helpline: 0300 111 5065
  www.uk-sobs.org.uk

**Useful resources**

- **Mind - Understanding bereavement**
  www.mind.org.uk/help/diagnoses_and_conditions/bereavement