Grief support for adults

What is grief?

Grief is the feeling that you have when you have lost something dear to you, usually a person. It can however be the loss of a pet, a job, a home, or the end of a relationship. The type of grief covered in this leaflet is about the intense feelings and range of emotions you may have when a person you care about dies.

If we know that a person is going to die because of an illness, we can start to have feelings of anticipatory grief before they die. People naturally will feel intense sadness and find it very upsetting to see a loved one in discomfort or pain. This doesn't mean that grief won't occur when they die, but it can mean that there has been some preparation for what life will be like when the person has gone.

Disenfranchised grief occurs when someone loses a person who may have committed a crime, or they may be grieving a person who others feel was not a genuine loss to them. This can be really difficult, because the person feeling grief may feel they need to hide their feelings.

When someone close to us dies, we may feel a secondary sense of loss. Losing a partner for instance could affect retirement plans, or losing a parent could affect your support system. Losing someone in the household could mean a reduced income which could be very worrying. Losing a child would mean losing the experience of seeing them grow up, and maybe you having grandchildren.

Collective grief can occur when a whole community loses someone important, or a tragedy affects a whole community. There can be strength found in mutual support during this time, but the sadness can live on in the community for a long time.

What does grief feel like (including stages of grief)?

Grieving can feel different depending on how close we are to the person who has died, and how they died. There is no time limit on grief, and it is not a linear process. Some days we may feel ok, and the next we may feel overwhelmed with sadness. Grief can feel isolating, and it may be difficult to consider the future, even causing suicidal thoughts. Grief can be a smooth process, or a chaotic one – particularly if we are busy and ‘put it to one side’. Sometimes we think we have finished grieving, and then something happens which brings up new feelings of sadness and loss.

It is common to feel numb, confused or anxious, particularly to begin with. The death may cause worries around your own mortality, or the mortality of someone else you love. Feeling angry at the world for having taken away your loved one is normal. The main feeling of grief may be complete overwhelm, with the thought that you can never stop experiencing that level of loss.

If someone has died after a long illness, there is a certain sense of relief around the death. There is still the sense of loss, but seeing someone in the last stages of life, particularly if they are in pain, or distress, is extremely upsetting. We can then feel glad that their suffering is over, but also guilty that we are relieved at their death in some ways.

There are physical effects linked to grief too. Often the appetite is reduced, you may have physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. We can hold our bodies tense when we are struggling with strong emotions, which cause all sorts of aches and pains. We can be frightened of being on our own, or alternatively not want to see anyone. All these responses are normal.

Some people like to think of grief in stages, although not everyone experiences them all, or indeed in the order written. MIND report these stages:

- Denial - feeling shock, disbelief, panic or confusion - "How could this happen?", "It can't be true,"
- Anger - blaming yourself, blaming others and hostility - "Why me?", "This isn't fair", "I don't deserve this,"
- Bargaining - feeling guilty and having thoughts like "If only I had done more", "If I had only been..."
- Depression - feeling tired, hopeless, helpless, like you have lost perspective, isolated or needing to be around others - "Everything is a struggle", "What's the point?"
- Acceptance - acknowledging the loss and new circumstances. And being prepared to move forwards. Acceptance doesn't mean that you like the situation, or feel that it is right or fair.

Taken from MIND (What does grief feel like?)

Crying and grief

Crying is a completely natural response to grief. Many people become fixated on whether they have cried too little or too much – it doesn't matter! Everyone is different. Often when someone dies, we feel numb, and we find it difficult to cry. The tears come later as we process the grief. There is scientific evidence that tears contain a lot of stress hormones and toxins, and therefore we can feel physically better after a good cry. It would be offensive though to think that someone grieving would feel emotionally better though – grief is a long process.

Sometimes people find it difficult to cry, especially if they have been busy making practical arrangements for the funeral etc. It can be useful for them to put aside some 'grieving time' - maybe listening to some favourite music, looking at photos of their loved one, or having chance to talk about them. If someone remains at the

'numb stage' for a long time and they can't cry, it may be good for them to see a bereavement counsellor.

Some people can cry a lot, and feel like it is never going to stop. This is also normal. If you are supporting someone who feels like their crying is not reducing, it can be useful to encourage them to keep a diary to record how often they cry. This can then show that crying is reducing, or if not, a bereavement counsellor might be a good way forward.

There may be occasions during the day when people don't want to cry. Taking deep breaths, splashing the face with cool water, or counting backwards can be a distraction for a short time until they can find a private space or person where they feel safe to cry. Sometimes others don't seem to show compassion when they find someone in tears – it is usually not because they don't care, but because they don't know how to help.

Grief and suicide

Grieving for someone who has taken their own life can bring feelings of guilt and regret. It is important to know that suicide is complex, and that no one individual is to blame for their death. This can cause relationship problems for the people left behind, where blame and guilt can play a part. As well as numbness and disbelief, there may be a lot of anger around the death – either towards the person who took their own life, yourself, or towards the world in general. Grief by suicide may lead to anxiety, depression, self-harm or suicidal thoughts in those left behind.

As time passes, it can be good to remember the person when they were alive, but this can be too hard. Looking at photos of good times, making their favourite food or celebrating their birthday can help to balance out the trauma of the suicide. It is normal though if this is difficult for quite some time.

Helping someone with grief

Often people don't know how to make contact with someone who is grieving, and don't know what to do to help. Sometimes the person who is suffering from grief has to be the one to reach out and be specific about the help they need. This might be practical help like picking up the kids from school, or walking the dog, or they might want to meet up for coffee and have chance to offload. People grieving often say that they struggle when people avoid them in the workplace or in the street, because people don't know what to say. It is important as a friend or family member to be open and willing to support – sending a message is useful as it allows the person grieving to make contact when they are ready.

Sometimes the person grieving might want to do something 'normal' - to go out for a meal, or do something fun to give themselves a brain break. It can be a relief to them to be with someone who is not grieving, and they may not want to talk about the person who has died. Be aware also that the grieving person is likely to be

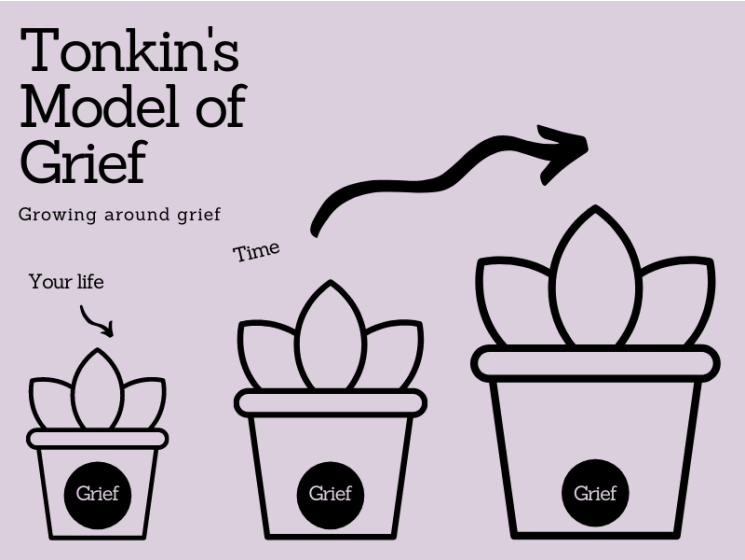
emotionally and physically exhausted, so may want to make an outing relatively short.

Some people who are grieving feel that they don't want to 'burden' loved ones with their grief, and they hold it in. You may be able to help with this, or they may be more comfortable talking to someone they don't know via a grief helpline for instance:

- Samaritans – **116 123** is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Cruse Bereavement Support – **0808 808 1677**.
- Cruse Scotland – **0808 802 6161**.
- Supportline – **01708 765 200**.
- Lifeline (Northern Ireland) – **0808 808 8000**
- Bereavement by suicide **https://uksobs.org/**

Growing around grief

This is a concept which can help people reconcile that their grief doesn't go away, or get smaller, they just learn to grow their lives around the grief. The ability we have to experience other feelings apart from the grief increases with time.



Taken from Growing around grief | Cruse Bereavement Support

This model is useful because it shows that you never 'get over it', and the grief doesn't go away, but life continues and grows around it. People can feel guilty sometimes if they have a good time, or laugh, or go on holiday, because they feel they are not dedicating their whole being to their grief. This model takes away that feeling of disloyalty, and builds instead a level of acceptance that life continues.

Helplines and advice

- At a loss – find bereavement services and counselling across the UK, including resources on bereavement during the pandemic.
- Child Bereavement UK – offers support if you are bereaved after losing a child. Or if you're a child or young person who is grieving after losing someone.
- Child Death Helpline – helpline for all those affected by the death of a child.
- The Compassionate Friends – find support for bereaved parents and their families, including a helpline.
- Cruse Bereavement Support – offers face-to-face, telephone, email and online support for anyone who has experienced a loss.
- Dying Matters – resources to help people talk more openly about dying, death and bereavement, and to make plans for the end of life.
- The Good Grief Trust – a charity run by bereaved people, helping all those experiencing grief in the UK. Provides information and stories about grief and bereavement, including a map of UK bereavement services.
- Hub of Hope – database of mental health services in the UK, including community, charity, private and NHS mental health support.
- The Loss Foundation – offers support to people who have lost someone to cancer. Includes free support groups, walking events, workshops and a peer connection service.
- Samaritans – if you're struggling you can call Samaritans any time on 116 123 to talk about anything. Samaritans also have a Welsh Language Line on 0808 164 0123 (7pm–11pm every day).
- Sands – information and support for anybody affected by pregnancy loss or the death of a baby. Support includes a helpline and live support chat.
- Sue Ryder – offers bereavement support, including ways of finding bereavement support online.
- WAY (Widowed and Young) – advice for people who have lost a partner before their 51st birthday.

If you've lost someone to suicide, see our page on bereavement by suicide to find support options.

Bibliography

Growing around grief | Cruse Bereavement Support

Helpline, or online chat https://www.cruse.org.uk/

Mind – information and where to go for support
https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/bereavement/about-bereavement/

Macmillan – support and advice, helpline https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/supporting-someone/coping-with-bereavement/support-with-grief

Marie Curie – support, advice, helpline https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/bereaved-family-friends/dealing-grief/grief-support

This information has been written using the above websites, and is believed to be correct on the day of writing. This leaflet is not designed to take the place of advice from your GP.

Nikki Fouracre, June 2026