

Understanding grief

What to expect following a bereavement



Health
South Western Sydney
Local Health District



HammondCare
An independent Christian charity

Grief. What is it?

Grief is a word used to describe the range of responses experienced when facing a loss. Bereavement refers to the experience of loss following a death. Everybody's experience of grief is different. It can be important to give yourself permission to grieve how you want to grieve rather than how you think you 'should' be grieving.

At the time of the death of a family member, you may feel shock, numbness and even disbelief. Some weeks later, when you think you should be getting over the death, you may feel things are getting worse. Over the coming months it may seem as if you are on a roller-coaster experiencing a range of emotions when least expected.

What can I expect?

Grief includes a wide range of responses which vary with each person, depending on the available support, your personality, culture, life experiences and the nature of the loss.

The grief experienced in response to death is unique and personal. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Some people seem to manage their grief more "easily" than others, it doesn't mean they are not grieving. We are all different.

While everyone's grief is unique there are some things you are likely to experience. Many bereaved people say that they know their family member has died but they find it hard to feel like that person is really gone. There can be a desire to talk about the person who has died and the events that led up to a death. It can feel distressing to have your thoughts occupied by memories of ill health or the death itself when you would prefer to remember happier times.

Your mind might feel 'foggy' and you may experience difficulty concentrating and forget things easily. It can feel like there's a huge void in life, making it hard to find meaning and purpose in everyday things.

This is a time when you may find family and friends helpful. It can be useful to accept offers of assistance. For example, you may prefer not to be at home alone or may not feel safe driving. Where possible tell your friends and family what feels right for you. For some people work can be a helpful distraction. For others, it may be helpful to negotiate leave or adjust duties where possible.

It is important that you look after yourself at this time, take care to eat as well as you can and get rest. Caring for a person during their illness and grief itself can leave you very tired and adjusting to a life without your caring role is often challenging and may feel empty at first.

Responses to grief

The grief we experience in response to death can impact on every dimension of our being: our body, our thoughts, our behaviour, our emotions, our relationships, our hopes and dreams, and our spirituality.

While every person's experience of grief will be unique, there are similarities in patterns of grief. Some points to remember are:

- It is normal and healthy to experience intense and painful emotions but not everyone expresses their grief in that way
- Grieving is important for healing the wound of separation and change
- Grief often feels chaotic
- The painful feelings will feel less raw with time
- There is no correct time frame or way of grieving
- Grief is not about 'letting go' or 'moving on'. It is about becoming accustomed to a world which will be forever different, and remembering the person who died in whatever way is right for you. People die – relationships don't.

Impact of grief

Physical responses you may experience

- Decreased appetite
- Sleeplessness or sleeping a lot
- Shortness of breath
- Gastro-intestinal upsets
- Tiredness and lethargy
- Decreased/increased sexual drive
- Palpitations
- Dry mouth

Emotional responses you may experience

- Sadness
- Anger/feeling short-tempered
- Despair
- Numbness
- Helplessness
- Fear
- Relief
- Frequent bouts of unexpected tears
- Irritability
- Feeling like you do not want to live
- Guilt
- Yearning, longing, pining
- Anxiety

Cognitive impacts

- Forgetfulness
- Confusion
- Distraction
- Obsessive thinking
- Hallucinations
- Inability to concentrate or think clearly
- Difficulty making decisions
- Vagueness
- Denial
- Vivid dreams

Behavioural responses you may experience

- Hyperactivity
- Social withdrawal
- Lack of motivation
- Restlessness
- Lethargy and tiredness
- Low self-esteem

Spiritual responses you may experience

- Questioning of previously held religious beliefs
- Questioning the meaning of life
- Loss of faith
- Sense of meaningless/pointlessness
- Strengthening of spiritual connections
- A sense of the presence of the person who has died

Remember to see your GP if you have any concerns about your health or mental wellbeing.

Not everyone will experience all of these reactions. You may only experience a few. Our grief tends to get triggered by internal and external events and most people will find that these episodes decrease and become less intense over the coming months. However we experience our grief, it can be helpful to be aware that the impact of a death is far reaching.



How long does it take?

Over the coming months you will most likely find that the pain will decrease and the feelings will be less intense.

It is common for grief to take longer to resolve than most people think it should, and it can take more energy than you imagine.

The time it takes will be different for everyone. If your grief does not diminish in intensity over time you may want to speak with a doctor or bereavement counsellor (for details please see 'Contact' section at the end of this pamphlet).

Days of special meaning such as birthdays, anniversaries and religious celebrations may be especially difficult (see pamphlet, Grief: coping with anniversaries, religious celebrations and special occasions).

What can help?

When you are grieving it is important that you look after yourself. Try to eat at least a couple of small nutritious meals a day, even if you have little appetite, and drink water.

Go out into the fresh air and, if possible, take a walk each day and get as much rest as you can. Slow down and give yourself permission to let go of some of your responsibilities for a time.

Sometimes it can be helpful to treat yourself or do something that you enjoy or that keeps your mind engaged or busy, in order to get some respite from your grief. Not thinking of the person who has died for a few moments or enjoying yourself does not mean that you do not miss them. It is not a betrayal. Give yourself permission to have joy when you can, just as you give yourself permission to mourn when you need to.

It's ok to talk out loud or in your head to the person who has died. Take time to look at photographs, hug clothing or visit places that help you to feel close to the deceased if that feels helpful.

Avoid overuse of drugs or alcohol as they can delay or stop the adjustment process.

Wherever possible, put off making major irreversible decisions such as moving house during the first 12 months following your loss.

Ongoing support

Family and friends can be a great support but may be uncertain about how best to help you. Remember they may be grieving too. Encourage them to let you grieve in your own way and in your own time.

Tell people what you might find helpful. A relative or friend who can listen, without offering advice or judgement, may be your most valuable source of comfort at this time.

There are others who can help as well. You may gain support from your doctor, clergy, a bereavement counsellor or through community organisations (see suggestions on back page).



Resources for support

Suggested websites and support groups

National Association for Loss & Grief (NALAG)

P 02 6882 9222

www.nalag.org.au

NALAG Grief Support Telephone Service

P 02 9489 6644 or 0439 922 201

Australian Centre for Grief & Bereavement

P 03 9265 2100 or Toll Free 1800 642 066

www.grief.org.au

Bereavement Care Centre

P 1300 654 556

www.bereavementcare.com.au

National Centre for Childhood Grief – ‘A Friend’s Place’

P 1300 654 556

www.childhoodgrief.org.au

Solace (for widows & widowers)

P 02 9519 2820

www.solace.org.au

Compassionate Friends

(for bereaved parents)

P 02 9290 2355 or Toll Free 1800 671 621

www.thecompassionatefriendsnsw.org.au

GriefLine

P 03 9935 7400 or 1300 845 745 (admin)

www.griefline.org.au

There is a range of online grief forums that provide support for the bereaved. You can access these by typing ‘grief forum’ or a similar phrase into your search engine.

Other grief related pamphlets

Grief: coping with anniversaries, religious celebrations and special occasions

Children & grief: information for parents

Bereavement counsellor/coordinator

South West Sydney

Braeside Hospital (Parriewood)

SWSLHD Palliative Care Service

P 02 9756 8878 or 02 9756 8849

Services can also be provided at a location closer to where you live within the South West Sydney Local Health District
www.swslhd.health.nsw.gov.au/cancer/palliative.html#ber

Southern Highlands

Bereavement Care Service (Bowral)

(A sliding scale of fees applies)

P 02 4862 1701

www.shbcs.org.au

NSW Bereavement Counselling Services Directory

www.palliativecarebridge.com.au/resources/25-nsw-bereavement-counselling-services-directory-2018

Local social worker or hospital chaplain

To find a social worker or hospital chaplain contact your local hospital or Community Palliative Care Service.

Lifeline

13 11 14

These services are free of charge.



HammondCare

An independent Christian charity