

Coping with Bereavement

Dealing with death is often the most distressing and difficult experience of our lives. This information sheet is designed to help you understand and cope with some of the challenges you might face.

What to Expect

Initially, accepting that the death has actually happened can be very difficult – it's very common to expect to see the person pop their head round the door, or keep putting aside their post for them to open later, or think 'oh I must remember to tell them such-and-such'. The crashing realisation after each of these responses is very hard to take – but the magnitude of your loss is simply too huge to take in all at once. It's also common to think that you have seen them or heard their voice – this doesn't mean you are going mad. Some circumstances make accepting reality even harder

– if the body is never found, if you weren't there at the death or don't see the body afterwards, if you don't go to the funeral, or if the loss isn't really recognised by society – a miscarriage for example.

Although accepting reality is usually the first task of grief, it can go on intermittently for a long time – it's not uncommon to be devastated at the first significant anniversary because you were secretly harbouring a belief that 'surely he'd come back for *this*'.

At the same time as coming to terms with the bewildering reality of the death, but probably going on for much longer, is the task of going through the pain of grief. Many different emotions can suddenly sweep over you – overwhelming unbearable sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, despair. Because these feelings are so strong and so painful, it's understandable that we often try to avoid them – by keeping very busy or numbing ourselves with drugs or alcohol, or just trying not to think about it. But ultimately these feelings need to be allowed, or they will never go away – cropping up years later, or giving you an out-of-proportion reaction to a much less significant loss, or other event for example.

There are usually all sorts of secondary losses to be faced too – the things that you have lost *because* you have lost your loved one. These can range from very practical losses – he or she was the person who always did the laundry or cut the grass – to less immediately obvious losses: your status as part of a couple, or as a parent, your sex life, your faith, your financial security, your role.

Eventually, though it's hard to believe at the beginning, people normally get to a point of acceptance. This does *not* mean that the dead person is no longer important to you, or that you have 'got over it' but that you have been able to relocate

them in your mind so that they can now be remembered with love and affection and without fresh pain. To get to this point, some people find the metaphor of a garden helpful: if you spend all your time tending the front garden (your grief) then the back garden (your life) is going to grow into an impenetrable jungle – and vice versa. You need to spend time actively in *both* gardens, allowing your grief rather than pushing it away, whilst at the same time allowing yourself to live. This can sometimes bring about huge guilt, or it might just seem impossible. It's common to feel that you no longer want to go on living without the person you have lost, but that feeling does pass over time.

“I should be over this by now”

It's very common for people to think this just two or three months after the death, and most are surprised to find that two years is a more realistic appraisal of the time it takes to live through the strongest of their grief. It's important to remember though that there are no hard and fast rules, and it may take much longer. The first year is usually the worst, as you have to cope with birthdays, Christmas, anniversaries, and thinking 'this time last year we were doing this'. If you can, it's best not to make any big decisions that you might regret later, like changing your job or moving house, during at least the first year.

Taking care of yourself

Grieving is hard work and absorbs a huge amount of energy, leaving you exhausted, run down, and more open to illness. Exercise can help, especially if you have developed a fear of not trusting your body anymore, and dread it falling apart. It will also make you physically tired so that you sleep better. Be wary of drinking or drug taking, no matter how tempting it is to numb the pain. If you can, set aside time for things you used to enjoy. This is not disloyal and will help you cope with your grief. Put some structure into a daily routine so that you feel a little bit more in control. Try to keep to a good diet, and get plenty of rest, even if you can't sleep.

Finding good listeners

Many people are afraid to talk to someone who has been bereaved, because they feel inadequate and don't know what to say. This can mean that just at the time of greatest need, even normal day-to-day support is withdrawn, and you might find yourself alone. Most people want and need to talk about their loss however, so it's very important to find good listeners – and not just at the beginning.

If you feel there is no-one you can talk to, or if you mistakenly believe you must be strong for everyone else, then it might be helpful to have some counselling. There are some factors that make normal grieving much more difficult – if the death was in violent circumstances for example, or if you have suffered a lot of loss in the past, or, surprisingly perhaps, if you had a very difficult relationship with the person who has died. In any of these circumstances counselling may be necessary.