

Factsheet: Bereavement

Bereavement means “to be deprived by death”, and the bereaved can be deprived in many ways, depending on the circumstances of the death and the relationship with the deceased. They may feel deprived of hope, the future, peace of mind, financial security or the chance to say goodbye or to put things right.

Death represents a particular loss and the grieving process comes from this.

The Five Stages Of Grief

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the author of *On Death and Dying*, sets out the Five Stages of Grief as follows:



It is important to emphasise that these stages are only part of the framework of learning to live with bereavement. They are tools that may be helpful in framing and identifying some of the emotions but they are not defined, definite stages. Not everyone goes through all five stages, nor is the progression through them always linear – people can move from Stage One to Four and back through Stage Two, for example. Each individual grieves in their way.

It can be helpful to set out some of the emotions, physical symptoms and behaviours associated with grief. We need to also bear in mind that there can also be anticipatory grief where a death is expected, for example a person with a terminal illness or advanced old age.

Emotions Associated with Grief

- SHOCK** Disbelief is one of the first emotions particularly if the death is unexpected
- DENIAL** Inability to accept the reality of the death
- NUMBNESS** Feeling like running on auto-pilot
- ANGER** Why me? Why did they have to die?
- DEPRESSION** Feeling lost, helpless, despairing
- GUILT** The ‘what ifs’ and ‘if onlys’
- ACCEPTANCE** Beginning to accept the reality of the death (this does not cancel out the sorrow or sense of loss.)

Physical Symptoms Associated with Grief

The mind and body are inextricably linked, and bereavement can have physical effects too:

- ▶ Loss of appetite or an urge to over-eat
- ▶ Hypersensitivity to noise, light, smells
- ▶ Breathlessness or a sense of having a stone in the chest
- ▶ Weakness or light-headedness
- ▶ Problems sleeping
- ▶ Visual or auditory hallucinations

The last symptom is very common, where the bereaved person feels that the deceased is present, may hear their voice, laughter or smell their scent or imagine that they see them in a crowd. Our senses do play tricks on us, particularly in traumatic situations such as bereavement.

Behaviours Associated with Grief

Bereavement can have an impact on our day-to-day behaviour. You may experience:

- ▶ Restlessness and over-activity
- ▶ Visiting places the deceased may have liked
- ▶ Sitting in their bedroom for long periods of time
- ▶ Absent-mindedness or a feeling of not being in complete control

Many of these will pass with time. If any become chronic or start affecting the health of the bereaved person, medical help is advised.

How to Help Yourself

- ▶ Try to regulate your sleep if it becomes an issue
- ▶ Take care of your health as best you can
- ▶ Be gentle with yourself, acknowledge that you need to be patient
- ▶ Leave major decisions until you begin to feel more like yourself
- ▶ Accept help from friends particularly practical help such as meal preparation, a lift to work etc
- ▶ Use whatever resources help, but be wary of mediums or spiritualists
- ▶ If rituals help, such as visiting the grave, going on a favourite walk or lighting a candle, do embrace them.

Life Post Bereavement

Life does go on. Grief is not something you “get over”, rather it becomes part of you that will become integrated into who you are. To grieve indicates that you cared about the deceased, and it is an entirely natural reaction.

There will always be memories and anniversaries, but eventually you will adapt to a changed life with different relationships and perspectives. If you feel you cannot move on, please seek help as acute, unaddressed grief can be detrimental to both mental and physical health.

Other Sources of Help

There are many organisations that help with bereavement, both emotional and the practical aspects. One of the best known bereavement charities is CRUSE www.cruse.org.uk

Or, you may prefer to source in-depth specialist counselling, and you can find a qualified counsellor via a reputable website such as the BACP www.bacp.co.uk. You may also find our factsheet **Counselling** a useful resource.