



# Bereavement

This resource provides information on bereavement, where to go for support, and suggestions for helping yourself and others through grief.

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## What is bereavement?

Bereavement is the experience of losing someone important to us. It is characterised by grief, which is the process and the range of emotions we go through as we gradually adjust to the loss.

Losing someone important to us can be emotionally devastating - whether that be a partner, family member, friend or pet. It is natural to go through a range of physical and emotional processes as we gradually come to terms with the loss. See our section on experiences of grief for information about the types of feelings that are common during the grieving process.

Bereavement affects everyone in different ways, and it's possible to experience any range of emotions. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Feelings of grief can also happen because of other types of loss or changes in circumstances, for example:

- the end of a relationship
- the loss of a job
- moving away to a new location
- a decline in the physical or mental health of someone we care about.

[Read Bethan's story](#) on our website about coping with loss, grief and anxiety.

## Are there different types of grief?

In addition to the feelings of grief that you will experience following a loss, there are also other types of grief that you may experience at different times during bereavement.

### Anticipatory grief

Anticipatory grief is a sense of loss that we feel when we are expecting a death. It features many of the same symptoms as those experienced after a death has occurred, including depression, extreme sadness or concern for the dying person. It does not necessarily replace, reduce or make grief after the loss any easier or shorter, but for some people it can provide the opportunity to prepare for the loss and for what the future might look like.

### Secondary loss

After any loss you may also feel what is known as 'secondary loss'. After the initial shock of losing a loved one you may struggle when thinking of future experiences that those people will not be there to share or see, such as watching your children grow up, meeting partners or attending key life events like weddings.

[Cruse Bereavement Care's website](#) has information on coping with anniversaries and reminders of your loved one when you are bereaved.

*“Bereavement is tough. All the 'happy times' that have followed Ruth's death are tinged with a deep sadness for me.”*

### How long does grief tend to last?

There is no time limit on grief and this varies hugely person to person. The time spent in a period of bereavement will be different for everybody and depends on factors such as the type of relationship, the strength of attachment or intimacy to the person who died, the situation surrounding their death, and the amount of time spent anticipating the death.

## What does grief feel like?

Grief can be difficult and stressful and nearly everybody goes through it at some point in their lives. Despite this, it can be very difficult to predict how we might react to a loss, as it is a very individual process. After a loss you may experience any of the following:

*“The pain doesn't vanish and we shouldn't have to hide it, especially from those closest to us.”*

- **Sadness or depression.** This can be brought on at the realisation of the loss and may cause you to isolate yourself whilst reflecting on things you did with your loved one or focusing on memories from the past.
- **Shock, denial or disbelief.** It is natural for our minds to try to protect us from pain, so following a loss some people may find that they feel quite numb about what has happened. Shock provides emotional protection from becoming overwhelmed, especially during the early stages of grief, and it can last a long time.
- **Numbness and denial.** You may find that you feel numb after a loss. This is natural and helps us to process what has happened at a pace that we can manage, and not before we are ready. It is natural and can be a helpful stage - the only problem being if numbness is the only thing we feel, and none of the other feelings associated with grief, as this can cause us to feel 'stuck' or 'frozen'.

*“Grief is a fickle thing, and it hits you in ways that you aren't prepared for. I've always been a fairly confident person so the shift in my mental health that came with grief took me by surprise.”*

- **Panic and confusion.** Following the loss of someone close to us we can be left wondering how we will fill the gap left in our lives, and can experience a sense of changed identity.
- **Anger or hostility.** Losing somebody is painful and can seem an unfair thing to happen. You may find that you feel angry or frustrated and want to find something or someone to blame for the loss, so that you can try to make sense of it.
- **Feeling overwhelmed.** Grief can hit people immediately and with full force, potentially causing them to cry a lot or feel like they are not coping. People can worry that their feelings are so overwhelming that they don't know how they can

live with them. But over time feelings of grief tend to become less intense and people find a way to live with them.

- **Relief.** You may feel relieved when somebody dies, especially if there had been a long illness, if the person who died had been suffering, if you were acting as the main carer for the person, or if your relationship with the person was difficult. Relief is a normal response and does not mean you did not love or care for the person.
- **Mixed feelings.** All relationships have their difficulties and you may think that, because you had a difficult relationship with the person, that you will grieve less or cope better. Instead you may find that you feel a mix of emotions like sadness, anger, guilt and anything in between.

We can feel all, none or some of these things. **There is no right or wrong way to feel following a loss.** Some people seek help immediately by showing their emotions and talking to people, others prefer to deal with things slowly, quietly or by themselves.

See our pages on [depression](#), [anxiety and panic attacks](#) and [anger](#) for more on these topics.

*"I have lost friends and family - each bereavement has been different but it has all been a learning process. It is crucial that people know where to turn to."*

[Read Lynn's story](#) on our website about coping with the loss of her daughter Ruth.

There are many different factors that affect grief, including the relationship we had with the person who died, our previous experience of grief, and the support we have around us. Some other experiences you may have while you are grieving include:

- sleep problems
- changes in appetite
- physical health problems
- withdrawing from other people, or wanting to be with others all the time.

For more information on these see our pages on [sleep problems](#) and [food and mood](#).

## The 'grief cycle'

Research has suggested that, in some people, grief comes in stages or as a cycle. The grief cycle as a whole is sometimes referred to as 'mourning' and describes how people adapt following a loss.

It is a completely individual process but can be influenced by things such as culture, customs, rituals and social expectations.

*"I managed to get good grades... but inside I was always suffering, feeling lonely and isolated, detached and numb a lot of the time. I couldn't fully express how I was feeling to anyone."*

Different studies describe the stages of the grief cycle in slightly different ways, but the most common stages are:

- **Denial** - feelings of shock, disbelief, panic or confusion are common here. "How could this happen?", "It can't be true".
- **Anger** - blaming yourself, blaming others and hostility are all common feelings and behaviours - "Why me?", "This isn't fair", "I don't deserve this".
- **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?".
- **Bargaining** - feelings of guilt often accompany questions like "If only I had done more", "If I had only been...".
- **Acceptance** - acceptance does not mean that somebody likes the situation or that it is right or fair, but rather it involves acknowledging the implications of the loss and the new circumstances, and being prepared to move forward in a new direction.

**These stages do not always appear in the same order for everybody**, and some people experience some stages and not others. It is common to move forwards and backwards through the stages in your own way and at your own pace. Some people may experience grief outside of the cycle altogether.

If you ever feel like you are not coping with bereavement there are organisations and people who can support you. Some ideas for who to contact can be found in the support and self-care section and the useful contacts section.

*"Things that helped me through the bereavement were opening up about the way I was feeling, making real friendships, exercise, healthy eating, and helping others."*

## Is grief a mental health problem?

In most cases, grief is not a diagnosable [mental health problem](#). It is absolutely normal that grief places strain on our everyday lives and it can take a long time to adapt to life after a loss. Even after a long period it is still normal to experience days like the difficult early days after a bereavement, but over a period of time we gradually learn to manage these. This is sometimes called **simple grief**.

However, sometimes people experience such strong feelings of grief long after a bereavement happens that a diagnosis of **complicated grief** is made. These experiences of bereavement can be very similar to 'simple grief' except that, rather than becoming manageable in the long-term, they can worsen and affect your day-to-day-living for a long time.

### How do I know if I'm experiencing complicated grief?

- Symptoms of grief feel continuous for a long time, and they get harder to cope with over time, rather than gradually easier.
- Intense and overwhelming feelings of grief are having an impact on your day-to-day living.

See Cruse Bereavement Care's website for more information on [complicated grief](#).

## Losing someone to suicide

Every type of grief has the potential to cause intense and complex feelings, but research shows that people bereaved by suicide can have a particularly complex set of feelings and can experience additional struggles and dilemmas in trying to resolve their grief.

*“It took me a good few years to work through my feelings about the death... (but) in coming out of the depression I finally began to truly be myself and stop feeling so isolated and detached.”*

Feelings you might experience when you lose someone to suicide include intense sadness, shock, anger, frustration, confusion and isolation. Some people also talk about experiencing a sense of shame or guilt, and while this is a very common reaction it is important to remember that people who take their own lives are often trying to stop feelings of distress that can feel as intense and real as physical pain - the reasons for suicide are complex and you are not to blame.

For more information see our pages on [suicidal feelings](#).

## Who is affected by a suicide?

Suicide can have a ripple effect, extending well beyond the person's immediate family and friends. How you are affected will depend on your relationship to the person who has died, the strength of the attachment and the circumstances around the death.

While losing someone close to you to suicide can be an extremely painful and emotionally complex experience, you may find that you are also affected if someone you know less well has taken their life.

If you feel affected by a suicide there are organisations that can help. Talking through difficult emotions and talking about the person who died can be helpful in processing the loss.

*“People seem to expect you to move on. I think that patience and support without a deadline is the best thing you can give to someone suffering from bereavement.”*

[Read Callum's story](#) on our website about losing his dad to suicide and what the experience has taught him.

## What help is available?

Many people bereaved by suicide find that they need more specific support than that provided for bereavement in general and can find it particularly valuable to make use of support groups that are especially designed for people bereaved by suicide.

In addition to the support options mentioned on our support and self-care page, you might like to consider the following:

- **Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)** are a great source of support for people who have been bereaved by suicide. See the [SOBS website](#) for details of their helpline, local support groups and many more practical resources.
- **Cruse Bereavement Care** also has some suggestions for further reading and support for people who have lost a loved one to suicide. See [Cruse's website](#) for more information on traumatic bereavement and suicide, including support if you live in Wales.

*“To the outside world (including family and friends) he was thoughtful, caring and inspirational. Someone with a loving and supportive family, secure job and content life. But inside, he was fighting an invisible battle that not even those closest knew about.”*

Grief doesn't necessarily stop, but it can change.

Grief is completely individual and there is no time limit or tried and tested process for it. People who are bereaved can sometimes feel pressure from those around them to 'move on' but it is important to recognise that grieving takes time and is not a linear process.

Time doesn't necessarily 'take away' the grief, but it can give us space to adapt around it, accept the loss and build new meaning.

## Support and self-care

### Where can I get support?

There are a number of different organisations offering support for different types of bereavement. For example:

- [Cruse Bereavement Care](#) - offers face-to-face, telephone, email and online support for anyone who has experienced a loss.
- [BEAD \(Bereaved through Alcohol and Drugs\)](#) - provides information and support for anyone bereaved through drug or alcohol use.
- [Child Bereavement UK](#) - provides support for anyone who has lost a child, and for children themselves who are bereaved.
- [Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Charity \(SANDS\)](#) - provides information and support for anybody affected by the death of a baby.
- [The Compassionate Friends](#) - offers a range of services supporting bereaved parents and their families.
- [Sudden](#) - helps people who have experienced a sudden bereavement to access specialist information and advice.
- [Widowed and Young](#) - offers support to people under 50 who have lost a partner.

If you have lost someone to suicide, see our section on bereavement by suicide for more information and specific support options.

*“Losing my dad unexpectedly aged 20 completely turned my life upside down. I thought I wasn't going to get through the grief but with the right support and time, I got through it.”*

## Losing a pet

For some people, losing a pet can feel like losing a close family member and can trigger grief and sorrow in the same way. Pets provide companionship, emotional support and unconditional love during the time they share with you and losing this can cause great sadness, especially if you are someone who has a strong bond with animals or for whom your pet is a key companion.

Some people don't have pets or see this type of loss as very different to losing a person. However, the significance of a loss is very personal and varies according to context and the meaning that the particular relationship had for us, and so it is important not to make assumptions about what is 'normal' when supporting someone who has lost a pet.

No matter what the type of loss, there are organisations and people offering support and advice. Please check the [Blue Cross](#) website for information on their pet bereavement support service.

For other ideas on organisations that can help, have a look at our useful contacts section, and the comprehensive [list of bereavement support options](#) available on Cruse's website.

## How can I help myself?

Coping with the loss of a loved one is always difficult, especially when it is not expected. It can take time to understand your feelings and adjust after the loss has happened, but there are things you can do help yourself cope. For example, it can help to:

- [understand the grief process](#)
- [connect with others](#)
- [talk to a therapist](#)
- [look after your wellbeing.](#)

*“If I knew then what I know now, I would have prioritised looking after my own needs.”*

## Understand the grief process

Grief can be painful and exhausting but most people find that in time things become easier. Understanding the grief process and the common stages of the [grief cycle](#) can be really helpful - so it can be a good idea to familiarise yourself with these and keep them in mind during the periods when difficult feelings come up.



It can be particularly helpful to:

- **Take each day at a time.** There might be good days and bad days. Try to focus on each day at a time and set yourself small, achievable goals.
- **Develop coping strategies that work for you.** Self-help resources, such as [Moodjuice](#), can help you to work through difficult feelings and learn coping skills.
- **Make a memory box.** You might find it helpful to fill a box with items which prompt happy memories of the person who died, as these can help lift your mood, when you feel down. The box can contain anything that is meaningful and helpful to you, for example: a favourite book, quotes, photos, letters, poems, notes to yourself, a cuddly toy, a perfume, or a smell that's important to you.
- **Learn your triggers.** It is normal for certain things to trigger difficult feelings or painful memories about the loss. By taking note of what causes your mood to change, you can gradually learn how best to cope with triggers when they happen. You can try tracking your feelings using an online mood diary (there are many freely available, such as [MoodPanda](#)).

*"I assumed that when I was feeling sad, it was not to do with my dad's death. But now that it has been several years, I can understand that what I was experiencing was a reaction to [his death]."*

## Connect with others

- **Let others know how you're feeling.** Tell people what you find helpful and let them know when you are finding things difficult. It's okay to ask others to be with you if you need them.
- **Seek support.** If you're not already receiving support or don't feel the support you have is helpful, take a look at our useful contacts section for a list of organisations who might be able to help.
- **Try peer support.** It can be helpful to talk with others who are also currently coping with a loss or have experienced grief in the past. Contact your [local Mind](#) to find out what [peer support](#) is available locally. You can also access peer support via online communities, such as [Elefriends](#).

*"In the early days, talking to whoever would listen helped me cope."*

## Talk to a therapist

Talking with a trained professional can help you become more aware of and address your thoughts and feelings following a loss. It can be useful to have a continuous focused source of support that goes beyond the level of support that friends or family may be able to provide.

Talking to a specialist grief counsellor may be appropriate and could help you with:

- understanding the grieving process
- identifying and expressing your feelings relating to the loss

- exploring ways of coping
- moving towards acceptance
- coping with birthdays and anniversaries of the loss.

For information on talking therapies see our pages on [talking therapy and counselling](#). Cruse Bereavement Care also have a [local bereavement services directory](#), with some regions providing grief counselling.

*“I thought that because I appeared to be coping better than my siblings, I was doing fine - but I needed to look closer at my own feelings.”*

## Look after your wellbeing

Following a loss it is natural to feel like your whole life has been disrupted. This may mean that you experience disrupted sleep (sleeping too much or too little), eating unhealthily or for some people using substances like alcohol or drugs in an attempt to numb difficult feelings - all of which are likely to make your mental health poorer.

With this in mind, it can be helpful to try to:

- **Get enough sleep.** Learn how to relax before bed, making sure your bedroom is a calm place and as clear of distractions as possible. If you are having trouble sleeping, see our pages on [coping with sleep problems](#).
- **Eat well.** Eating regular healthy meals can make a big difference to your overall sense of wellbeing. See our information on [food and mood](#) for tips.
- **Avoid drugs and alcohol.** Alcohol and drugs tend to make it difficult in the longer term for you to manage your feelings and find ways to help you to cope. See our pages on the mental health effects of [recreational drugs and alcohol](#) for more information.

*“When I am absorbed in playing and creating it can distract me from the distress I still experience at times.”*

## How can other people help?

*This section is for friends and family of someone who has experienced a bereavement.*

Death and loss can be difficult to talk about and many people struggle to know what to say when trying to support someone who has been bereaved, even if they are a close family member or a good friend. You may want to help but worry about saying 'the wrong thing'. Here are some ideas of how you might be able to support somebody after a loss.

*“I was shocked when friends didn't ask how I was doing. I felt invisible, as if I were standing there but they couldn't see me.”*

- **Acknowledge the loss and don't avoid contact.** It's understandable to feel uncomfortable speaking about death or other losses, or to worry that you might say the wrong thing, but staying silent or not contacting somebody after their bereavement can often make feelings of isolation and sadness worse. Reaching out to the bereaved person so that they know you are available to talk and listen if they would like to can be incredibly helpful.
- **Consider how best to be in contact.** There are different ways to grieve and there are different ways to communicate after a loss too. Receiving text messages may be easier for somebody to manage than returning calls. Dropping in to see them in person may be welcome for some but may be an inconvenience for others. It is worth asking the person what they'd prefer rather than making assumptions.
- **Give them space.** Not wanting to spend lots of time with other people or feeling guilty at not acknowledging messages could be an additional burden for a grieving person, so it can be worth letting them know they can respond whenever they feel able, or simply send them a message to let them know you are thinking of them and that no response is needed. Adapting to life after a loss can take a long time and people should be allowed the space to process their emotions for as long as they need. It is useful if you can strike a balance between contacting them so that they do not feel isolated but also giving them space. Again, asking them what they need is a good idea.

For more information and resources that can help you talk more openly about dying, death and bereavement have a look at the [Dying Matters](#) website.

*"When someone shows up with a cast, we immediately inquire, "What happened?" If your life is shattered, we don't."*

- **Talk about the person who died.** When a person dies it can feel like they are erased from people's memories. While you may fear that talking about the deceased person will just bring up painful feelings, many people actually appreciate the opportunity to talk a bit about the memory of the person, finding this a comfort and a way of integrating the memory of the person who has died into their life, rather than pushing memories away. "What's your favourite memory of [the person who has died]?" or "Tell me about a time [the person who has died] made you laugh" can be useful.
- **Focus on listening.** Try to respect what the bereaved person is choosing to share with you and focus on listening rather than finding out more. Give the bereaved person space to open up if they want to, while also being sensitive if they would rather not take it further.
- **Focus on the bereaved person.** Try to keep the focus on the bereaved person rather than coming back to your own feelings about the loss. Unless you have your own experience of bereavement it may not be helpful to make comparisons with your own experiences.
- **Help them seek additional support.** Supporting someone who is bereaved can be hard work and it is worth exploring what other options for support are out there. If they are ready and interested, help them explore additional support options, such as those listed on our useful contacts section.

*“With the help of amazing family and friends I have been able to talk about the way I feel myself and have been able to share my experiences with them.”*

### Support following a suicide

Similarly, it can be difficult to find the right words when trying to support someone who is bereaved by suicide, but by asking the bereaved person what they feel will help we can offer vital support.

In addition to the above, you may also want to:

- **Be sensitive when discussing the death with others.** Other people around the family or friendship group may not know about the death so it can be useful to think about and agree how best to talk about what has happened, what details are appropriate to disclose, and with whom.
- **Use non-stigmatising language.** When referring to suicide try to use words like "died by suicide" or "took their life", rather than the outdated expression "committed suicide", which dates back to when suicide used to be a crime.
- **Avoid speculating about the suicide.** Suggesting or speculating about explanations for a suicide could make somebody feel blamed and also risks over-simplifying what causes suicide.

For more information have a look at our section on bereavement by suicide.

## Useful contacts

### Mind's services

- **Helplines** – all our helplines provide information and support by phone and email. Our Blue Light Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families.
  - Mind's Infoline – 0300 123 3393, [info@mind](mailto:info@mind)
  - Mind's Legal Line – 0300 466 6463, [legal@mind](mailto:legal@mind)
  - Blue Light Infoline – 0300 303 5999, [bluelightinfo@mind](mailto:bluelightinfo@mind)
- **Local Minds** – there are over 140 local Minds across England and Wales which provide services such as [talking treatments](#), [peer support](#), and [advocacy](#). [Find your local Mind here](#), and contact them directly to see how they can help.
- **Elefriends** is a supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem. See our [Elefriends page](#) for details.

## BEAD (Bereaved through Alcohol and Drugs)

[beadproject.org.uk](http://beadproject.org.uk)

Provides information and support for anyone bereaved through drug or alcohol use.

## The Blue Cross

[bluecross.org.uk](http://bluecross.org.uk)

Provides support around the time of a pet's death.

## Child Bereavement UK

0800 028 8840

[childbereavementuk.org](http://childbereavementuk.org)

Runs a national helpline and local support groups for parents and families following the loss of a child.

## The Compassionate Friends

0345 123 2304

[tcf.org.uk](http://tcf.org.uk)

Provides support to bereaved families after the death of a child.

## Cruse Bereavement Care

0808 808 1677

[cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)

Provides information and face-to-face support for anyone who has experienced a bereavement. Support available across England and [Wales](#).

## Dying Matters

[dyingmatters.org](http://dyingmatters.org)

Coalition of individual and organisational members across England and Wales, aiming to help people talk more openly about dying, death and bereavement, and to make plans for the end of life.

## Moodjuice

[moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk](http://moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk)

Online self-help guides on topics such as bereavement, depression, anxiety and stress.

## MoodPanda

[moodpanda.com](http://moodpanda.com)

Online app to help you track your mood.

## Samaritans

116 123 (freephone)

[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

[samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK

PO Box 90 90

Stirling FK8 2SA

24-hour emotional support for anyone who needs to talk.

## Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Charity

0800 164 3332

[helpline@sands.org.uk](mailto:helpline@sands.org.uk)

[sands.org.uk](http://sands.org.uk)

Supports anyone who has been affected by the death of a baby.

## Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

0300 111 5055

[uksobs.org](http://uksobs.org)

Provides support to people over 18 who are bereaved by suicide.

## Widowed and Young (WAY)

[widowedandyoung.org.uk](http://widowedandyoung.org.uk)

Offers a peer-to-peer support network to anyone whose partner died young (aged 50 or under).

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References are available on request.