



BEREAVEMENT, GRIEF AND MENTAL HEALTH

**National Grief Awareness Week 2023
December 2 - December 8**



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.

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.

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 page on experiences of grief for information about the types of feelings that are common during the grieving process.



Symptoms of bereavement, grief and loss

Bereavement, grief and loss can cause many different symptoms and they affect people in different ways. There's no right or wrong way to feel.

As well as bereavement, there are other types of loss such as the end of a relationship or losing a job or home.

Some of the most common symptoms include:

- shock and numbness – this is usually the first reaction to loss, and people often talk about "being in a daze"
- overwhelming sadness, with lots of crying
- tiredness or exhaustion
- anger – towards the person you've lost or the reason for your loss
- guilt – for example, guilt about feeling angry, about something you said or did not say, or not being able to stop your loved one dying

These feelings may not be there all the time and powerful feelings may appear unexpectedly. It's not always easy to recognise when bereavement, grief or loss are the reason you're acting or feeling differently.



Do

- try talking about your feelings to a friend, family member, health professional or counsellor – you could also contact a support organisation such as Cruse Bereavement Care or call: 0808 808 1677
- find out about how to get to sleep if you're struggling to sleep on the nhs website
- consider peer support, where people use their experiences to help each other. Find out more about peer support on the Mind website

Don't

- do not try to do everything at once – set small targets that you can easily achieve
- do not focus on the things you cannot change – focus your time and energy into helping yourself feel better
- try not to tell yourself that you're alone – most people feel grief after a loss and support is available
- try not to use alcohol, cigarettes, gambling or drugs to relieve grief – these can all contribute to poor mental health

Where to get NHS help for stress, anxiety or depression

Referring yourself for therapy

If you need more support, you can get free psychological therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) on the NHS.

You can refer yourself directly to a psychological therapies service without a referral from a GP.



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.

Collective grief

Collective grief can happen when a community experiences a significant loss together. This might be following the death of a significant public figure, or a tragedy that affects a local community. It could occur at a wider national level too. These kinds of major events can impact us even if we didn't personally know those who've died. They can bring up many difficult emotions, and remind us of other losses in our lives. And seeing others sad could make us feel sad ourselves. But we might also find comfort in sharing and processing these events as a community.

How does grief affect the body?

Physical pain

It's common to feel physical pain after someone dies. Grief can affect your whole body. It can also reduce your ability to fight off minor infections.

Appetite and digestion

You may not feel like eating in the early days after someone dies. It may feel difficult to swallow and food can taste strange. Or you might find you're eating a lot more than usual. Or only eating foods that you find comforting. This is very normal. Try not to be too hard on yourself if your diet looks different right now. And try not to panic if you notice these changes.

Anxiety

Grief can make you feel very anxious. Sometimes this can result in feeling breathless, having heart palpitations or even a panic attack. This can be very scary. If you start to have these regularly, it's a good idea to contact your doctor.



Sleep

It's normal to have trouble sleeping after someone dies. You might be frightened to go to sleep because of bad nightmares. Or you might find it difficult to get to sleep because your mind is racing. Sometimes, you may dream that the person who died is still alive and find waking up to be very painful.

Complicated grief

Over time most people start to adapt and feel better after someone dies. When someone becomes stuck or is still unable to cope after many months it is sometimes known as complicated grief or prolonged grief disorder.

What is complicated grief?

Feelings of sadness and hopelessness are really common after someone dies. Over time though, most people will start to adapt and feel better again. When this doesn't happen for many months or even years it is sometimes known as complicated grief or prolonged grief disorder. It is more likely to happen if someone's death was very tragic, traumatic or unexpected.

Our understanding of complicated grief or prolonged grief disorder is still growing. The terms are often used interchangeably and in the UK people are not usually given them as a diagnosis by a doctor. Not everyone agrees that grief can be a mental health issue. But we hope the following information will help you get extra help if you need it.

What's the difference between complicated grief and depression?

In medical terms clinical depression is a condition where the feelings of being sad, low and hopeless last over weeks or months. These feelings often go together with anxiety. It's also common to feel like this after someone dies, and depression and bereavement can happen at the same time. You can read more about the signs of depression and options for treatment on the NHS website.



What people have found helps them

Grief is very individual and what helps is different for different people too. The following suggestions are what some bereaved people who have struggled with complicated or prolonged grief have found helps.



Self-compassion

Try to treat yourself kindly. It's OK to grieve because someone close has died, but know it's also OK to experience a bit of happiness. This might be tiny to start with: an old activity or a new one, a nice walk or anything which fills your mind with something that's not the grief.

Talking to friends, family or your community

Talking about how you're feeling can really help. Try to identify those people who you feel safe with and can trust to be able to be share or witness your grief. You might be able to find a support group of others who really understand what you are going through. Or get in touch with Cruse.



Keeping a steady routine

Keeping to a routine helps us stay as healthy and balanced as we can be in a difficult period. Try to rest and eat at regular times.

Helplines

If you need any help please feel free to reach out to any of the companies listed below

At a Loss

ataloss.org

The UK's signposting website for the bereaved. They can help you find bereavement services and counselling.

Bereaved through Alcohol and Drugs (BEAD)

beadproject.org.uk

Information and support for anyone bereaved through drug or alcohol use.

Child Bereavement UK

0800 028 8840

childbereavementuk.org

Support when a baby or child of any age is dying, or a child is facing bereavement.

The Compassionate Friends

0345 123 2304

tcf.org.uk

Provides support to bereaved families after the death of a child

Cruse Bereavement Care

0808 808 1677

cruse.org.uk

Information and support after a bereavement.

The Good Grief Trust

thegoodgrieftrust.org

Charity run by the bereaved, helping all those suffering grief in the UK. Can help you find reassurance, advice and support.