

Guidance on understanding and coping with grief



Grief is the most painful of all human experiences and is a natural reaction to loss. It is the process, which allows people to come to terms with the loss and resulting change in their lives. Loss can take many forms, from the obvious death of a partner, relative or friend, to divorce or the loss of a job. The grieving process takes many forms and is an intensely personal emotion. It can take varying lengths of time depending on the significance of the loss, even lasting for several years.

Understanding grief

Grief is a very personal and individual experience and is comprised not of just one feeling, but of many. However, though we may experience different feelings at different times, grief usually follows a general, recognisable pattern.

Disbelief

After a loss such as bereavement the initial response is one of numbness and disbelief. The body releases chemicals when facing severe stress, such as adrenaline to boost thinking, alertness and coping with pain. The early days play a valuable part in helping to bring the bereaved person to terms with the death. Seeing the body and organising the funeral all help to bring home the reality of the situation and the very aspect of being busy with the planning and formalities surrounding a death can help some people. Some people may continue to carry out their normal routine and daily activities but feel completely numb and not part of the real world.

Anger and guilt

Once the numbness disappears it may be replaced by anger. Anger is strongly associated with grief and can come in many forms. It may be directed at figures of authority such as doctors or surgeons or may be self-directed as self-guilt. It is common to question the circumstances of the death and ask questions about how it could have been prevented, or what someone should have done or should not have done. Anger can even be directed at the deceased person, particularly in the case of suicide. There may also be a period of agitation with intense yearning for the dead person and a sense of almost 'searching' for them. Guilt is another common feeling, often linked to thoughts of things that have or haven't been said or done.

Depression

After the intense emotions outlined above, a feeling of depression usually sets in and the bereaved person may seem withdrawn and silent. Three to four months after the death can be a particularly hard time, as this is when the reality of the death really sinks in and yet it can be a time when family and friends begin to pick up their own lives and start to expect the bereaved person to get on with their own life. The real sense of loss and the long term gap in the life of the bereaved.

It may also be a very lonely time, when the bereaved person feels that no one else understands him or her and what they are going through and that their grief will never go away. Conflicts can arise with for example the different ways people grieve. One parent of a child who has died may seem to be coping and consequently not caring by the other parent who is still in deep trauma. Depression can last longer after a sudden death than a natural death, particularly when the body has not been recovered or is unrecognisable. Visiting the site of the death can sometimes ease grief but again this is a very personal decision.

Adjustment and recovery

The basic human instinct of survival is very strong and the grieving process is not only a natural reaction to the death of loved ones but is critical in allowing us to carry on with life. Gradually most people begin to cope on a day to day basis and try to fill some of the gaps and adjust to the change in their lives. It is still very important to provide as much support as possible as well as being there to listen.

It is good advice not to take any major decisions affecting the bereaved person's life until at least a year after the bereavement. Often people jump into decisions such as moving house or area at a time when they are particularly vulnerable and emotional. A home, which holds many memories, may seem painful initially but such associations could be seen as comforting later on.

Help Lines

CRUSE: 0208 939 9530
SAMARITANS: 08457 909090
SANDS: 0207 436 5881
CHILD DEATH: 0800 282986

The Guiding Principles

Caring for the community

All cremation and burial facilities shall be managed with competence and efficiency, to ensure that the entire bereavement experience occurs without error or insensitivity, and meets the religious, secular, ethnic and cultural needs of the bereaved. The service shall comply with all statutory and Health and Safety requirements.

Service sensitivity

The burial or cremation of a human body is a highly emotional occasion for those taking part. Each cemetery and crematorium must be managed to create and maintain an atmosphere of solace and respect throughout the entire proceedings. This sensitivity must extend to all staff and contractors working at facilities, through the application of bereavement sensitive specifications. Members will respond sympathetically to individual funeral needs and shall give a justifiable reason for refusing any specific request.

Staff

All staff should possess qualifications and undergo recognised training specific to their duties. At the senior management level, the appointment of staff in possession of the Diploma of the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management should be seen as a minimum requirement. The appointment of all staff must emphasise the need for proper conduct and demeanour, as well as technical expertise. Staff must act and speak in a manner that recognises the sensitivity of bereavement, both during and outside working hours, and should not accept gratuities. All staff should be identified by name badges.

Environmental issues

Every Charter member shall minimise the impact of bereavement upon the environment. This should encourage the greater use of earth friendly materials, particularly in coffins and containers used for burial or cremation, a reduction in fossil fuel usage and emissions to air, and the use of suitable ground for burial so that water borne pollution shall not occur.

Metal residues found in cremated remains shall not be salvaged for any purpose. They shall not be removed from the crematorium and shall be interred in the grounds.

Individual disposal

The importance of human beings as individuals and the manner in which they interrelate with relatives and friends does not diminish in significance following death. It is important for the bereaved to know that the burial or cremation is individually carried out, and the following requirements must, therefore, be met:

General conditions

No coffin/container/shroud shall be accepted at a cemetery unless the name of the deceased therein is clearly shown.

The identity shown on the coffin/container/shroud shall be verified at every funeral. If burial is to occur, the body and its coffin/container/shroud shall be placed in the identified grave. If cremation is to occur, the body shall be cremated individually and the correct identity shall be maintained throughout the process.

Requirements relating to burial

After the coffin/container/shroud and body have been committed into the grave, they shall not be removed or otherwise disturbed except for lawful exhumation, by licence and/or faculty or by the order of a Coroner.

Immediately after the mourners have departed the graveside, the grave shall be entirely backfilled and made tidy. This work will be completed on the day of the burial and must not extend overnight.

Requirements relating to cremation

A body shall not be removed from the crematorium after the service of committal, except by order of a Coroner or for some other valid reason. The container and the body shall be placed in a cremator and cremation commenced no later than 24 hours after the service of committal. Where cremation may not be carried out on the same day, the Applicant for Cremation shall be notified. The coffin or container with the body inside shall not be opened or otherwise disturbed, other than in exceptional circumstances, and then only with the express permission and in the presence of the Applicant for Cremation. Once a coffin or container has been placed in a cremator, it shall not be disturbed until the process of cremation is complete. On completion, the whole of the cremated remains shall be removed from the cremator and reduced to granular form, except where this is specifically not requested, and shall be disposed of or released according to the instructions of the Applicant for Cremation. Cremated remains placed in the Garden of Remembrance shall be treated with reverence and respect. If strewn, they should be obscured by soil or brushing. Where a local practice of strewing in the form of a cross or other pattern has developed, it is acceptable providing it does not result in the unsightly build-up or prolonged visibility of the cremated remains. Cremated remains must be labelled and released in suitable, unused containers, and where sent by post or carrier, capable of withstanding transit without damage.

Inspection

Everyone has the right to inspect the crematorium or cemetery during normal working hours, upon application to the manager of the facility.

The dying person's Bill of Rights

I have the right to be treated as a living human being until I die.

I have the right to maintain a sense of hopefulness, however, changing its focus may be.

I have the right to be cared for by those who can maintain a sense of hopefulness, however changing this might be.

I have the right to express my feelings and emotions about my approaching death in my own way.

I have the right to participate in decisions concerning my care.

I have the right to expect continuing medical and nursing attention even though 'cure' goals must be changed to 'comfort' goals.

I have the right not to die alone.

I have the right to be free from pain.

I have the right to have my questions answered honestly.

I have the right not to be deceived.

I have the right to have help from and for my family in accepting my death.

I have the right to die in peace and dignity.

I have the right to retain my individuality and not to be judged for my decisions which may be contrary to beliefs of others.

I have the right to discuss and enlarge my religious and/or spiritual experiences, whatever these may mean to others.

I have the right to expect that the sanctity of the human body will be respected after death.

I have the right to be cared for by caring, sensitive, knowledgeable people who will attempt to understand my needs and will be able to gain some satisfaction in helping me face my death.

YOU MUST EXPRESS YOUR GRIEF AT THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE, THEN YOU MUST GO ON.
THE EYES OF THE DEAD MUST BE GENTLY CLOSED,
AND THE EYES OF THE LIVING MUST BE GENTLY OPENED.

JAN BRUGLER, 1973