

Bereavement & loss

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About loss

When someone we care about dies, it is normal and healthy for us to grieve over our loss. Our feelings, at this time, may be among the most profound and painful we ever experience. They are a natural reaction and, if we are able to bear with them, they can help us to come to terms with what has happened.

This period of mourning varies according to the individual circumstances: it may be relatively short, or it may last many months, even years. It will take as long as it needs.

Grieving

There are different stages of grief and a wide variety of possible feelings. Your own experience and combination of these will be unique - there is no right or wrong sequence. Here are some of the most common feelings and reactions:

Numbness

You may not feel much at first, due to the shock, and you may feel bad about this.

Disbelief

- You may not be able to believe that the person really has died;
- You may find yourself looking for them in familiar places or you may think you have seen them.

Yearning

You may ache with longing to be able to put the clock back and to be with your friend and loved one again.

Sadness

You may feel "down" and tearful.

Anger

- At whoever or whatever seems responsible for the death and want to blame them;
- at "Life" or "God" for the injustice and unfairness of it;
- At the dead person (which is more difficult to accept) for leaving or abandoning you;
- At other people for continuing to have fun, for appearing trivial or for not understanding your feelings.

Guilt

- Regretting things you said or did not say, things you did or did not do;
- For surviving and being alive, when they are not;
- For feeling relief, e.g. at the death of someone who was ill and suffering.

Fear

- At death's shadow having passed so close to you;
- At your sense of your own mortality, causing you anxiety and panic;
- Of harm to yourself or others close to you;
- Of "going mad", of being overwhelmed by your feelings;
- Of not being able to cope;
- Of losing hold of the image or memory of the person who died.

Shame

- For being seen as helpless and emotional (e.g. crying) or for not being emotional;
- For feeling you are burdening friends and others with your unhappiness;
- For envying others who have not suffered your loss.

Loneliness

- Feeling isolated by your grief: either wanting to avoid other people, or feeling avoided by them;
- Feeling no-one can understand what you are going through;
- Feeling that the loss has left a hole in your life and in you that will never be filled.

Apathy

No motivation to do anything and no concentration, so unable to do your work.

Depression

- You may begin to feel utterly hopeless and in despair;
- That life is meaningless and pointless;
- That there is no future for you to look forward to;
- That you will never feel "all right" again;
- Also, you may start thinking about suicide.

(N.B. If you feel you are becoming depressed, arranging to see your GP or a counsellor can help)

We experience emotions in our bodies as well as in our minds. Below is a list of some of the physical symptoms of grief that may affect you:

Exhaustion

Due to being emotionally drained and worn out, or to lack of sleep.

Sleeplessness

- You feel restless and your mind races and keeps you awake;
- Bad dreams disturb you in the night;
- You wake up early and can't get back to sleep again.

Loss of appetite

You may lose interest not only in eating, but also in sex, your appearance and previous pleasures.

Irritability

You may feel easily annoyed.

Pre-occupation

With incessant thoughts about the person and his/her death.

Fuzziness of mind

You cannot think clearly or remember things.

Dizziness, shakes, palpitations & muscular tensions

Headaches, neck ache, backache.

Breathing difficulties

Anxiety or panic attacks.

Choking

Nausea

Diarrhoea

Menstrual Irregularity

How to survive

- Trust yourself: pay attention to your feelings and needs and treat these with respect;
- You have been emotionally wounded, and the wound needs care and time for healing.

The following are ways of coping that others have found helpful:

Talking About It

- With someone you trust (e.g. friend, relative, tutor, chaplain, counsellor);
- Share your feelings and thoughts with them;
- You may need to go through these again and again before you feel ready to move on.

Expressing Your Emotions

- Crying is a natural response to unhappiness and brings relief: often we hold back our tears, afraid of seeming weak, and imprison the grief inside us;
- Through some other outlet that feels right for you, such as: writing (poems, letters, diary), painting, modelling, playing music or sports.

In summary, it may help to:

- Express your feelings.
- Talk to those who care.
- Give yourself time.

Remembering

- Keeping a memento (a photograph, a piece of clothing, a special CD - or anything you treasure) can help your sense of staying close to the person you have lost;
- Making time to be with your memories of them on birthdays and anniversaries;
- Visiting places which remind you of them and times you spent together.

Try not to:

- Bottle up your feelings
- Avoid the subject
- Expect feelings to pass quickly

Taking care of 'You'

Warning: Drive with extra care. Be more careful generally. Accidents are more common after severe stresses.

Influences on grief

The circumstances surrounding the death of the person you care about are likely to affect the intensity of the grief you feel, as in these examples:

- Where the death was expected and acknowledged, the grieving process can begin before the loss: there is time to prepare and say goodbye.
- When the death occurs unexpectedly and shockingly, as in the case of an accident or suicide, or if it involves a child or a young person, the impact may be more disturbing and long-lasting. If you did not have the chance to say goodbye to the person who has died, it may be helpful to attend the funeral or remembrance service and to say it there.
- Also, if feelings and thoughts well up unexpectedly from an earlier death or loss you have experienced, these may complicate and deepen your grief, and it may be beneficial to talk these through with a counsellor.

The end of grief

Gradually, the intensity of your feelings of grief will begin to lessen and your constant thoughts about the person who has died will become interspersed with periods of forgetfulness, where other thoughts break through and gain your attention.

Sometimes, you may feel guilty about this, as if it means the person is becoming less important to you already. Yet, this isn't so, for our thoughts of the people we care about come and go quite naturally through the day and we do not love or value them any less in the intervals.

After a while, your sense of hopefulness about the future will start to come back and you may feel more like your "old self", with your interest in life and other people returning. Even so, the experience you have been through may affect your values and beliefs, deepening your responses to others and to the spiritual questions of our existence.

The tide of your grief is ebbing, but individual waves of sadness and hurt may flood through you again from time to time - perhaps on an anniversary or at a piece of music or a place that reminds you of your loss.

In the end, while picking up the threads of your everyday life once more, you are able to come to terms with the death of the person you cared about, holding them safe inside you, together with the memory of who they were and what they meant - and still mean - to you.

When to seek extra help

The normal process of grieving and healing may become stuck or unbearable. If you feel this happening to you, don't hesitate to ask for help.

For example:

- If you find you are unable to work (no motivation, no concentration), talk to your personal tutor or any member of departmental staff you feel comfortable with. Departments can be supportive in practical ways, once they understand your situation.
- If physical symptoms persist or alarm you, arrange to see your GP or visit the Medical Centre on campus.
- If your sleeplessness, lack of appetite and low mood continue, again speak to your doctor (or to a University nurse) or counsellor. You may have become depressed and they can help.
- If your feelings of despair and hopelessness become overwhelming and you begin to feel suicidal, ring or visit the University Counselling Service. You will be able to arrange to see a counsellor there quickly and confidentially.
- Similarly, if nightmares or horrific images persist or if you experience panic attacks and feelings of extreme anxiety, consult a counsellor. (N.B. Relationship difficulties or sexual problems can increase your level of anxiety, and these may benefit from counselling).
- Finally, if you continue to feel numb, empty and unable to grieve, or if you find you are drinking, smoking, taking drugs or keeping busy to excess, in order to avoid the pain of your feelings, exploring these issues with a counsellor can be helpful.

Remember: Your grief will have an end and you will start to feel happier and more hopeful again. In the meantime, help is here if you need it - do ask.

Tips for helpers

It may be your best friend, partner or relative who is bereaved and whom you want to help. Listed below are some suggestions to support you in this valuable, but sometimes very difficult position.

Helpful

1. Understanding and trusting the process - remembering that grieving is a natural and healing process, which unfurls in stages and in its own time.
2. Being with the person - staying with and acknowledging their feelings, whatever these may be; sometimes, simply sitting with them in silence or holding their hand.
3. Listening - calmly, patiently, empathically, without searching for solutions.
4. Asking the bereaved person if they would like to talk about the one they've lost and showing interest - for example, sharing photos and anecdotes.
5. Knowing and accepting your own limits - allowing time and space for your own needs.
6. Having someone else to talk to - being able to share with another what you are going through.

(NB talking to a counsellor at the Counselling Service can be helpful, in this way).

Unhelpful

1. Wanting to cure the bereaved person.
2. Wanting to speed up the process.
3. Looking on the bright side.
4. Encouraging a 'stiff upper lip'.
5. Trying to 'jolly' them along.
6. Offering advice.
7. Avoiding the subject in case it upsets the bereaved and allowing it to become 'taboo'.
8. Feeling responsible.
9. Wanting to do too much.
10. Bearing the other person's grief alone.

Helping agencies

On campus:

[Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity](#)

studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk

01509 228338

[Chaplaincy](#)

chaplaincy@lboro.ac.uk

01509 - 223741

[Medical Centre](#)

(Enquiries) 01509 - 222062

(Appointments & Emergencies) 0845 – 0450557

[Bereavement café](#)

Off campus:

[CRUSE Bereavement Care Helpline](#)

National Helpline 0844 477 9400

01162 884119 (Leicester) Mon - Fri, 9:00am - 6:00pm

[Samaritans](#)

116 123

jo@samaritans.org

[Facing Bereavement](#)

Useful books

What To Do When Someone Dies

Paul Harriss, Which?

Through Grief: The Bereavement Journey

Elizabeth Collick, CRUSE

Death Of A Parent

McLoughlin, Virago, 1994

"Death of a Mother", Daughter's Stories

ed. Rosa Ainley, Harper Collins, 1994

A Special Scar - the experiences of people bereaved by suicide

Alison Westheimer, Routledge, 1997

A Grief Observed
C.S. Lewis, Faber, 1961

Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy
J.W. Worden, Penguin, 1998

[Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity team](#): 01509 228338
studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk

To book an appointment with any of our services within Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity (including the Counselling Team, Mental Health Support Team and the Wellbeing Advisers), please complete [the referral form](#).