

Bereavement information sheet

The pain of grief is just as much a part of life as the joy of love; it is, perhaps, the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment (Colin Murray Parkes).



What is Bereavement?

- Bereavement is what we experience after the death of someone close or important to us. It is therefore something almost all of us will encounter at some point in our lives.
- Bereavement is characterised by grief – a range of emotions and processes we go through as we adjust to the loss.
- It's hard to put a time frame on grieving. Although strong feelings about loss usually ease over time, they may return and intensify from time to time.
- It is natural to have a wide range of responses to a significant loss, and a bereaved person's feelings may, at times, seem complex and contradictory. Some reactions can be very intense and quite overwhelming at first. Although, of course, this is hard, it is usually very normal.
- Although any loss can have a devastating impact, certain types of loss may, by nature, be especially difficult to grieve. These include bereavement by suicide, traumatic bereavement (when the death occurs in a particularly sudden or shocking way, or is directly witnessed), or losses that are not so widely recognised, such as pregnancy loss, or the death of a pet.

- The way each individual grieves is unique and there are no 'right' or 'wrong' ways to experience bereavement. A person's grieving may be influenced and shaped by a number of factors including:
 - the nature of their relationship with the person who died
 - access to grieving 'rites' and processes such as seeing the body and attending a funeral
 - the level of support the bereaved person has in their day-to-day life
 - how they have processed previous losses and difficult life-events
 - the person's personal and mental health history, plus factors such as their culture, ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality and personality

What is common after Bereavement?

- **Strong and challenging emotions.** Shock, disbelief, panic, anger, guilt, sadness, and despair are a few feelings that are very common after a bereavement – although emotional numbness may also be present for a while. Certain feelings may be easier to acknowledge and talk about than others – for example, it may seem more acceptable to be sad than to feel relief or resentment when a person dies. All kinds of feelings are valid after a loss, though, and it's important to give them space.

- *Tiredness and feeling drained.* Grieving is hard work, and you may feel exhausted after a bereavement. Shock and emotional disturbance can make it difficult to eat and sleep, which might leave you feeling additionally depleted. There may also be practical tasks (such as planning a funeral) to attend to, which will draw heavily on your physical and emotional resources.
- *Connecting with others may feel hard for a while.* After a loss, we may feel reluctant to reach out to others – particularly those who are also grieving at the same time. With the best will in the world, those close us may also not know what to say, so may withdraw, or say things that feel awkward or insensitive. Often, when grieving, we don't have the energy or inclination to socialise as we used to, or we may feel irritable or intolerant towards others.
- *Lack of focus and forgetfulness.* Grief can take up a lot of mental 'bandwidth', so a bereaved person may find it hard to concentrate and appear dazed. It's also not uncommon to momentarily forget that the person has died, and to instinctively try to call them or shout out their name.
- *Lack of closure, or 'unfinished business'.* Particularly with sudden or unexpected losses, there may not have been time for final or desired conversations with the person who died, or there may be unanswered questions about what happened. With accidental deaths, suicides and homicides there are often lengthy inquests, investigations and court hearings, which may drag on, making it especially hard for the bereaved to move forward.

Self-help tips for managing Bereavement

- *Give yourself time and space to grieve.* It can be unrealistic and unhelpful to try to 'snap back' into normal life too soon after a close bereavement. It is a major life-event and you may need to make adjustments in light of it.
 - In the short term, you will likely want to take some time off work (check your employers' policies around compassionate leave) and see if other people can relieve you of additional pressures (for example, help with childcare or cooking).
 - In the longer term, it may help to find time to commemorate the person who died (visiting the grave or looking at old photos, for example), to speak with a counsellor, or simply to attend to your feelings.
- *Look after your physical health.* Physical and mental health are closely linked so any steps you take to look after your body will have a positive impact on your state of mind.
 - It's important to keep your energy levels up whilst grieving, although it's common to experience loss of appetite. If eating substantial meals feels hard, opting for nutritious snacks and warm soothing drinks may be easier.
 - If, on the other hand, you're drawn towards comfort eating, this is unlikely to be problematic in the short-term, and may bring you some consolation. However, if you're reaching for food regularly to meet emotional needs, consider finding someone to talk to, or other ways of channelling how you feel.

- Try to get enough rest, given how tiring grieving can be. Sleep disturbance often occurs after a bereavement, and it can be common to spend time at night thinking about the person who died or dreaming about them. Whilst this can sometimes feel reassuring and connective, it can also feel frightening or overwhelming. Learning about sleep hygiene will help with sleep disturbance and speaking to your GP or seeing a counsellor may be advisable if you're experiencing long-term sleeping problems linked to bereavement.
- Whilst using alcohol or other drugs to numb difficult feelings relating to bereavement may be tempting, this is best avoided. Alcohol, in particular, is ultimately a depressant which can amplify uncomfortable emotions. This may be hard to manage when you're already feeling vulnerable, especially if you're on your own.
- *Find ways of staying connected and seeking support.* Grief can seem like a very private matter and you may not want to discuss your feelings with those around you. Yet, turning away from others completely could leave you isolated, with a sense of being alone with your feelings.
- Speaking to a counsellor can allow you to express how you feel without having to 'hold back' or protect others. Similarly, many organisations run support groups for people who have been bereaved (often in a specific way, for example, through suicide or loss of a child). These may help you to connect with others who have had similar experiences.

Professional resources & further useful information for Bereavement

- CRUSE <https://www.cruse.org.uk/> - the UK's main bereavement charity
- The Compassionate Friends <https://www.tcf.org.uk/> support for those who have lost a child at any age
- Miscarriage Association www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk
- MIND – pages on bereavement and mental health www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/bereavement/about-bereavement/
- Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS) <https://uksobs.org>
- Support After Murder and Manslaughter (SAMB) <https://samm.org.uk>
- Widowed And Young (WAY) – peer to peer support for those who have lost a partner before their 51st birthday, regardless of marital status of sexual orientation <https://www.widowedandyoung.org.uk>

FD Consultants

Individual support

At FD Consultants we can support individuals experiencing bereavement. We are a network of accredited therapists. We specialise in stress, anxiety, depression, burnout and trauma care.

Organisational support

For organisations looking for employee psychological support, FD Consultants are the well-being service who will best deliver a reliable, quick, and bespoke support system in the workplace. FD Consultant's team of accredited specialists will offer ongoing support to help manage stress, prevent burnout and provide specialist trauma care where required, enabling your staff with the tools to cope, and recover more quickly.