

A Space to talk about ...

Bereavement

Introduction

When someone passes away, it is often described as a bereavement. The word 'bereaved' comes from Old English. It means to have something or someone taken away. Although we know that we will all die at some point, death is very hard to focus on or talk about.

If you've been bereaved, you may want to start by describing your experience of loss. It can be useful to go through the questionnaire entitled '*Bereavement & how to talk about it*' which is included at the end of this handout. Or you may prefer to start with a more general exploration of the subject using the commentary and questions below to support you in this reflection. There is no right or wrong way to approach the subject. What is important is to find a way into talking about bereavement even if it might feel difficult at first.

Our reaction to death

Everyone has their own response to experiencing a death. Some are visibly upset and want to talk about it while others are less emotional and need time to get used to it. There is no 'correct' or 'normal' way to react when someone dies.

.... Describe some of the thoughts and feelings any of us can have if we are bereaved. *(If you'd like help with this, you can look at the handout on common feelings and thoughts about bereavement which is included at the end of this worksheet.)*

Our experience of loss

How we experience a loss will be determined by different factors such as:

Our age and our circumstances e.g. If we're young and living alone with a single parent who dies, our response to the death is likely to be different from that of an older person whose very elderly parent passes away.

Our history of loss e.g. If we have experienced other deaths or loss of a family member, our home or country or if we are, or have been, fostered or adopted, we might find death stirs up even stronger feelings.

The way in which the person we've lost has died e.g. If death is a result of a long-standing illness, it may feel different than sudden death or death which is the result of violence.

What the person meant to us e.g. We may have had a difficult relationship with a parent. Perhaps they disappointed us or were neglectful in some way. When this parent dies, we might believe we should only experience sadness and grief. But their death means there will be no opportunity to experience the kind of parental love we might have always yearned for. Understandably, in this instance, we'd feel angry and upset at missing out on a more fulfilling parent/child relationship. This response is valid and a reminder that our reaction to a death will be affected by the quality of our relationship with the family member or friend who has passed away. It is important to be able to talk about all our feelings, even those we feel uncomfortable admitting to, and not bottle them up or deny them.

Our ability to be in touch with our feelings All of us need to learn to identify what we feel and then get used to talking about our emotional responses. It doesn't always come naturally – it is a life skill that can take work.

Our views on showing grief There are different ways to show grief. Many see crying as the main form of expressing it. Yet, we all have a different relationship with tears. For instance, crying could bring relief or the opposite - it may feel exposing, as if we're spiraling out of control. Or perhaps we can't cry even if we want to. We might be blocked up and numb, especially at first. That's fine. There's no so-called 'normal' way to react to death.

... How are deaths marked in our society? Can you describe different ways people might express or communicate their grief?

Different kinds of bereavement

Sometimes we lose someone who hasn't been present in our life or was but has been absent for quite a while. An example of this is someone who hasn't had the chance to really get to know their birth father before he dies. If this happens to us, we may be taken by surprise at how upset we become. This could be because we feel the loss of the kind of father-child relationship we wanted but never had and now never will. Even if we have an everyday relationship with our father, we can still feel something like this because, after death, our father won't be there to support us or to celebrate any of our life achievements. This feels the same regardless of who dies - whether they are a friend or family member, they will never be part of our future and this can hurt.

... What do you think upsets people most when someone dies?

Feeling lonely and alone

When we've experienced a bereavement, the pain of loss may be in the background all the time or come and go. It could be stronger when we're alone at night. Or it might take us by surprise when we're with friends who haven't yet experienced a death. We could suddenly feel very different from them and alone with our grief. If it's a family member who died, everyone else may be preoccupied with their own mourning and might not be available to comfort or reassure us. It's important to find someone we can share our inner thoughts and feelings with and who can support us while we grieve.

... What might it feel like to witness the grief of others? How can death bring families closer?

Self-blame

When someone dies, it's quite common to think that somehow we've caused the death. None of us have behaved perfectly. There will always be times when we've been angry or even hated our loved ones - this can leave us feeling guilty. However, to imagine we've had a role to play in someone's death is irrational. We can't cause a person's death by hurtful thoughts.

... What kinds of thoughts or feelings about a family member or friend might stir up guilt?

Holding onto good memories

We often find that we really miss the person who has died when it's a special occasion and they won't be there to celebrate with us. It can be painful, especially the first year after their death. Remembering the good times we've had with them can help.

... Give some examples of special occasions that could lead to missing the family member or friend who has passed away. Now describe the kinds of everyday experiences that become warm memories.

Making the most of our lives

When people experience a death, there may be times when they wish they could die too so that they could be re-united with their lost loved one. But we know that our loved ones will want the best for us and hope that we will live a good life. When we lose someone, they stay in our memory and are always with us in our thoughts. One way of respecting this memory is to make the most of our lives.

... What does living a meaningful life mean to you?

Grief takes time to settle

We never leave grief behind forever. At first, we might be grieving most of the time, living through a mix of emotions. Usually, the intensity gradually dies down over a period of time. However, feelings linked with loss are likely to keep coming back. Even something very ordinary can stir them up such as eating something we remember was their favourite dish or missing them on a special occasion.

... Have you experienced unexpectedly missing someone who is no longer in your life?

After death

No one knows for certain what happens after death. Some people have religious or spiritual beliefs which can provide comfort. Whatever our beliefs, talking about our feelings helps us to cope better with our losses. We're all part of the same human family - everyone will experience death at different stages in life and, of course, we all live with the knowledge that we, too, will die at some point. Perhaps we can put this knowledge to good use, reminding ourselves to make the most of our life and aim to live it in a meaningful way.

Examples of Uncomfortable Feelings Linked to Bereavement

**Sad and
tearful**

**Shocked /
disbelieving**

**Angry &
upset**

**Panicky/
Scared**

**Confused
and/or
overwhelmed**

**Isolated, as if no
one can
understand what
it feels like**

**Frightened of
the future**

**Loss of
hope**

Abandoned

**Numbed out:
not wanting
to feel
anything**

**Cut off: not
wanting to
think about it**

**As if there is
now a 'before'
& 'after'**



Understanding Bereavement

Our reaction to a death is very personal. Here are some of the feelings and thoughts we might have:

- Feeling very self-conscious if everyone knows about it
- Experiencing relief as death released our loved one from pain
- Feeling a sense of acceptance: death happens to us all
- Although it's irrational, we might feel the death is our fault
- Feeling bad about some of our more hateful thoughts & feelings towards the person who died
- Wishing we'd had a better relationship with the person who died
- At peace - our relationship with our loved one was meaningful & fulfilling
- Wanting to give up
- Wishing we'd had a better relationship with the person who died
- Feeling like life will never go back to what it was before the death
- Respectful of the life cycle- beginnings and endings are part of it

Bereavement stirs up a range of feelings and thoughts. Here are some examples:

- We may wish we could turn back the clock
- We could feel guilty about not having done enough
- We may envy others who haven't experienced a death
- We could want to punish ourselves as if we're somehow to blame for the death
- We may fear that we will never be loved in the same way by anyone else
- We could find it hard to believe that things will seem better in time
- We know that death can bring new possibilities
- Experiencing death can make us take our lives more seriously
- We might re-think what's important in life
- Our values could change
- We may seek out a more meaningful way to live
- We accept death as a fact of life

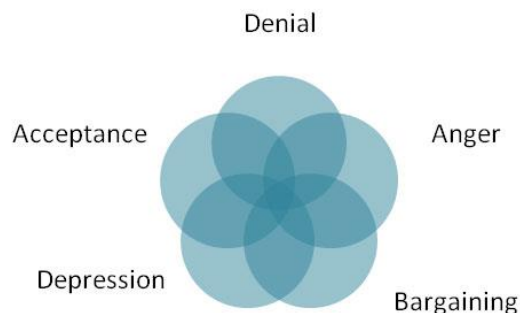
"The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen." *This is a quote from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the first doctor to describe the grief cycle who later wrote a book called 'On Death and Dying'.*



The Grief Cycle

Although grief is a very personal experience, when we suffer a major loss, it is likely that we will repeatedly 'cycle through feelings and thoughts, sometimes in a different order or for varying lengths of time. The intensity of grief fades but the memories of loss never completely go away. Over time, grief feels more 'right sized' and we learn to live with it.

The Grief Cycle is illustrated in a simple diagram below. You can find more detailed images of it online. Do remember that not everyone will feel the same or even be fully aware of what they are going through. The idea of a cycle of grief can be a way into thinking about what can come up when we first hear about the death of a family member, friend or even a pet.



Denial and Shock

Our first reaction to a death is usually one of shock and disbelief. Shock can make everything seem unreal and may leave us feeling numb or cut off. We could feel completely disorientated and confused, not knowing what to do with ourselves. When the shock begins to wear off, we might go through a stage of denial during which we cannot accept the reality of the loss. This might involve what is called 'searching behaviour'. Sometimes people try to 'search' for their loved one and may even find themselves thinking they've seen the dead person or have heard them speak. Many people talk aloud to the family member or friend they've lost - this is a completely normal reaction to death.

Anger and guilt

It is common to experience anger and guilt when someone close to us is dying as well as after they die. We might find ourselves asking: "*Why has this happened and why to me?*" This is particularly so if the death was sudden or involved violence or an accident. Whatever the cause of death,

we may get very angry and seek out someone to blame, either ourselves or others. We could also feel guilty, remembering times when things didn't go so well between ourselves and the person who has died. We might wish we'd behaved differently or showed our love more openly.

Bargaining

As a way of trying to escape from the reality of death, we might find ourselves trying to bargain. This frequently happens before death when someone has a terminal illness and we know they will die soon. We could attempt to hold on to some kind of hope, no matter how irrational. We might, for example, bargain with our version of God asking him (or her) to save the dying person, making promises that we'll be a better person if our wish is granted. The human mind finds it very hard to accept death and will resort to this kind of 'magical thinking' to try to avoid it happening.

Despair and Depression

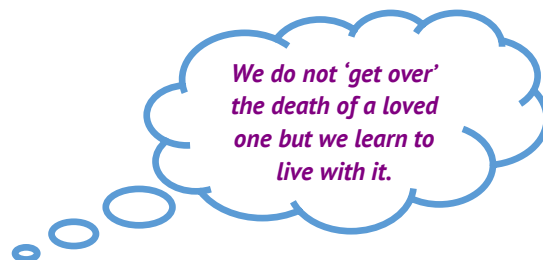
Experiencing a death may seem unbearable especially at first. In the months that follow, it can be hard to hold onto hope. It might seem as if life has lost its purpose and nothing in the outside world holds any interest for us. We could feel very down and depressed. For some people, deep grief can cause them to feel as if they are losing their mind but this is just a phase and it will end.

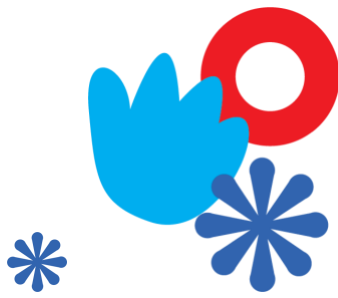
Acceptance

Eventually we pass through the first stages of loss and despair. We begin to accept the death. This can take a year or longer. We know that we're moving forward when we begin to feel more engaged with our everyday life. Some people feel that resuming normal routines is somehow disloyal to the person who has died but this is not so. We don't have to feel guilty about enjoying ourselves or about making plans for the future. This isn't a sign of lack of love but of a healthy response to death. After all, life carries on and our loved one who died would want us to live it to the full. This is a way of respecting their memory.

Conclusion

There is no quick way to get through the worst stages of grief. It's now widely accepted that it helps to express our grief by sharing our feelings about it. However, we may find that friends or family don't know how to talk about what we're going through. Sometimes it's most useful to speak to someone who is trained to listen and understand and can support us in making sense of our loss.





How we grieve

There is no 'correct' way to mourn a loss. Some people prefer time alone while others want the company and support of family and friends. Or perhaps talking to someone who is trained to offer support and understanding might bring the most comfort. Here are some examples of what the grief experience can feel like:

- Things can seem very unreal for a while. It may seem as if nothing is the same and never will be. We could feel very much on our own as if our experience of death separates us from everyone else.
- We might become aware of changes in our everyday life such as poor sleep, decreased appetite and lower mood. Feelings of anxiety or depression could come and go.
- We can feel self-conscious about, and even embarrassed by, people asking if we're alright or wanting to know how we're doing. We might even feel shame, as if it's exposing to be vulnerable or feel broken up inside. Feelings like this are part and parcel of being human - we needn't be ashamed of how we feel or of crying in front of others.
- At times we may unexpectedly find ourselves flooded with sadness or anger sometimes for no reason that we can think of. This is one of the effects of loss - our deepest feelings are on the surface and can suddenly be triggered by everyday experiences.
- We might catch ourselves looking for reminders of the person who has died (e.g. Wanting to keep their things around us and even imagining that they are there with us).
- We might imagine that the world has suddenly become a frightening place and we could feel less safe. Anxieties about our own death could come to the surface.
- We might experience flashes of guilt when we re-engage with everyday life and at times 'forget to feel sad'.

When we experience a death, it can take time to adjust. Talking about it may feel very difficult at first especially if we're not used to sharing our feelings. Expressing our thoughts and feelings is an important step in recovering from our loss.



Untangling our feelings & finding the words to talk about bereavement

Depending on who we're with, sharing thoughts and feelings about a bereavement might come naturally while at other times, words may be hard to find. Being asked how we are might make us feel very uncomfortable and self-conscious, even embarrassed. Or perhaps we avoid opening up as we fear we'll feel too vulnerable and exposed, as if talking about our experience of death could lead to being overwhelmed or falling apart. Even if we're used to being open about our personal feelings and thoughts, it's normal to find talking about a death challenging. Going through the questions below can help with this.

- *Describe your experience of losing someone through death.*
- *When did the death take place? How did you find out about it?*
- *What was its cause? Was it expected or did it come as a surprise?*
- *Did you get the chance for a final goodbye? Is there anything you wished you could've said?*
- *What was your first reaction when you heard the news? How do you feel now?*
- *Did you go to the funeral? If so, what was that like? If not, whose decision was this? Do you feel it was the right one?*
- *How have those around you reacted? Has it been difficult to witness their grief?*
- *What have you found hardest? What has upset you most?*
- *Are you feeling these feelings: anger/ guilt / anxiety/ tearful/ numb? Who can you go to for comfort?*
- *How much time did you used to spend with the family member or friend who died? What did you like to do with them? What do you miss most?*
- *Everyone has arguments or disagreements from time to time. What was the most upsetting disagreement you had with the person who has recently died?*
- *How has this death affected how you see life?*
- *What are your warmest memories of the family member or friend who died?*

"It's only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on earth – and that we have no way of knowing when our time is up – that we will begin to live each day to the fullest, as if it was the only one we had." ~ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross



Help & Support

To help you learn more about feelings in general, you might find it useful to look through the set of emotional learning cards entitled **A to Z of Emotions**. The cards feature images made by artists illustrating different feelings and their opposites. Each card also includes a short description of the emotions highlighted followed by questions to reflect on. This can spark off conversation about the kinds of feelings that come up in the course of our lives. Thinking about the subject of death, you could start with the following cards from the set:

F is for Fragile: We can all feel vulnerable and fragile after a death.

L is for Loss: When someone dies, we may feel the loss very strongly.

M is for Messy or Mixed up feelings: We might be all over the place when we're going through a bereavement and could find it confusing to name how we feel.

O is for overwhelmed: It's common to feel overwhelmed in the face of death.

Z is the last letter of the alphabet and therefore represents endings. Death is a final ending. Experiencing it is a reminder to use our time as best we can with the aim of creating a meaningful life.

You can also get support from the following:

Winston's Wish provides services to bereaved children, young people and their families + offers practical support and guidance. Visit www.winstonswish.org.uk

Childline offers support via telephone counselling and through providing information & advice to children & young people up to age 19. Visit www.childline.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care provides support including face to face meetings, telephone contact and group support. Visit www.cruse.org.uk
Hopeagain (Cruse for young people) Visit www.hopeagain.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK supports families and children going through a bereavement. Visit www.childbereavementuk.org

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) provides support, understanding and comfort to bereaved siblings and parents coping with a death. Visit www.tcf.org.uk