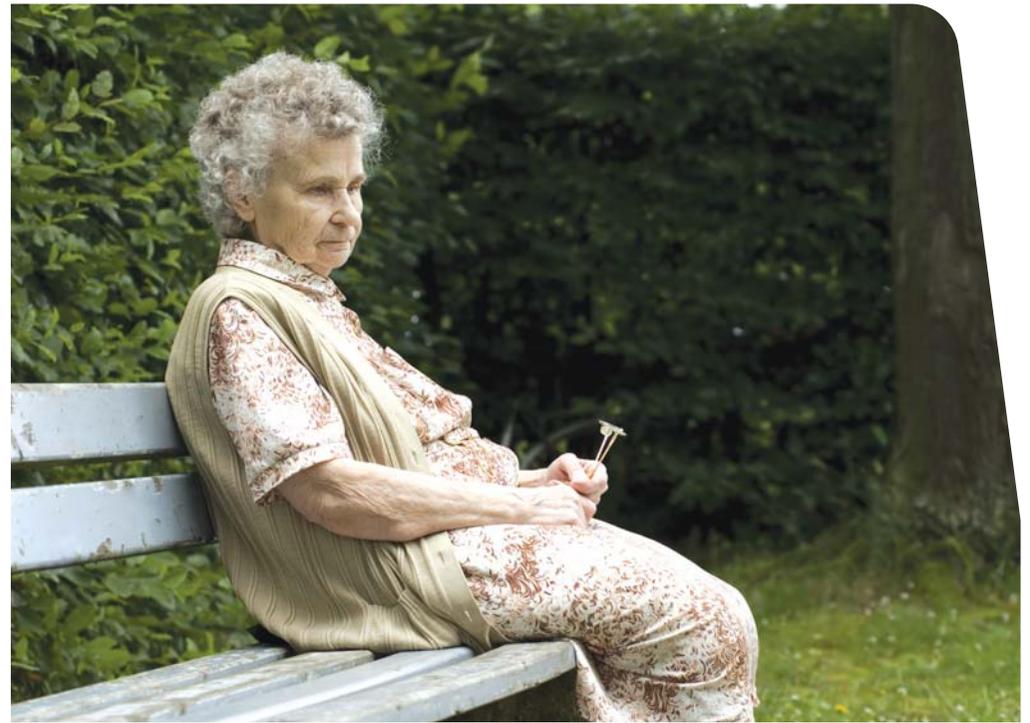




**Acknowledgements:**

This booklet has been produced by the Mental Health Promotion Unit,  
South West London & St. George's Mental Health Trust.

Additional advice has come from Claire Beadon,  
Anna D'Arcy, Theresa Lash, and Kathy Lowe.



## Coping with a Loss

A brief guide for adults who have  
experienced a recent family bereavement



Sutton and Merton   
Primary Care Trust

South West London and St George's   
Mental Health NHS Trust

South West London and St George's   
Mental Health NHS Trust

## INTRODUCTION

“My husband was killed in an accident earlier this year and I am on my own now, bringing up my two sons. I feel so lonely and isolated, I don't sleep and I struggle not to let it show, how lonely I feel... I sometimes find myself feeling angry with him for leaving me to cope on my own – and then I feel bad, I know this is the last thing he would have wanted”

“I don't seem able to feel anything: I know he's gone, but I just don't seem able to grasp the fact. I just drag myself through the day and feel exhausted all the time. I can't even cry, I never cried, even at the funeral...”

“I can't get the picture of him out of my mind – so pale and thin, not able to sit up, ...I wish I could remember him as he was when he was well but I can't...all I seem to see is his poor frail body, I feel so bad...”

People can have quite different experiences when they lose someone close to them, different sorts of feelings, different ways of reacting. The aim of this booklet is to help you make sense of the emotions you may be experiencing during a bereavement or loss, to offer practical suggestions to help you get through this difficult time and to provide information about a range of resources that can offer you further help and support. It is designed to be helpful to those who may be anticipating a bereavement as well as to those who have already experienced the loss of someone close to them.

Bereavement is a very isolating experience. It can create feelings of acute loneliness. You may think that you are the only person who has felt the way you do. While everyone's response to a loss is unique and there can be no rules about grief, there are some common experiences that people will share. It can be reassuring to know that on your journey through grief, you are not alone. You are sharing a route others have followed. This booklet is a guide to that journey.

## UNDERSTANDING GRIEF: THE FIRST WEEKS AFTER A DEATH

People often describe shock soon after the death of someone close. They may feel numb, panicky, very weepy or unable to cry at all. Some people find it hard to sleep, others experience physical symptoms, like palpitations or shortness of breath. Some people find they go through the practical tasks surrounding the death and worry that they seem uncaring. This is just one of the signs of shock and it is most likely that they will feel the impact of the loss at a later stage. Some people may stay in shock and disbelief for weeks, for others it may take months to begin to starting grieving, to really start to feel their loss.

Other people find themselves completely overwhelmed and unable to cope, needing lots of practical and emotional support from family and friends. Some people have no-one to turn to and feel suddenly very alone. Very often people feel preoccupied with their deceased relative. They may find themselves unable to believe that the other person has really died. In some cases people seem to hear their relative's voice or see them in the house or even outside.

Such reactions may continue for some time. After a bereavement some people find themselves continually agitated and unable to stop or relax at all. People can become extremely active, cleaning and tidying all day. These feelings of agitation can lead in turn to anxiety and panic, with palpitations, dry mouth, breathlessness and dizziness. It may feel as if you are 'going mad' ; unable to settle, unable to sleep properly, always restless.

These feelings of restlessness and agitation may alternate with depression, weepiness and tiredness. People may feel guilty. They may wonder what they could have done differently which might have helped the situation. This can be a common reaction after witnessing a loved one's long and prolonged illness. But it is worthwhile remembering that many people do feel relief when suffering ends.

## LASTING GRIEF: THE MONTHS AFTERWARDS

After a time, people find themselves gradually returning to a kind of routine. Their bad or distressing memories of their bereaved become less pervasive and less pre-occupying. As life goes on, good memories begin to take over and people begin to remember their person in better days, and there is a kind of acceptance of the loss. Some people may even feel bad that days have passed and they have 'forgotten' to grieve. Episodes of sadness and crying may become less frequent and sleep may improve.

But a good many people remain upset for many months after the death. The feelings of loneliness, of yearning for the person who has died, of acute sadness and grief may not go away. When this happens, you may find yourself starting to worry that you should be getting back to normal; after a while even supportive friends and relatives may seem to expect you to “get back to normal”.

It may prove difficult to get back to normal. For some people grief and anger and disbelief can continue for many months. You may feel angry, angry at the person who has died (why have you left me?) or angry at people involved in your relative's care (why didn't you do more?) or angry and guilty at yourself (if only I had done or said this or if only I had not done that).

People can find themselves isolated in their grief, and reluctant to meet other people for fear of being asked about the deceased. You may find yourself thinking that there is no point going on, that you don't want to have anything to do with anyone, that you don't want to make any plans or arrangements. You may even find yourself preoccupied with thoughts of joining the deceased person. Appetite for food, even the very appetite for life may seem to go.

However angry or sad, hopeless or despairing you feel, talking over these feelings with someone helps, be it a friend or relative or a counselor. Even if you can't talk face to face, there is always the telephone. A large number of organisations and resources exist that you might find helpful and these often offer advice and support over the phone. Some organisations have local groups that you can join and find companionship with. There are also a few things that you can be doing yourself to help you cope through these bad times.

## **THINGS A PERSON CAN DO TO HELP THEMSELVES**

### **(a) Immediately after a death**

There are a number of things that you can do immediately after a death. You will need to consider things like whether or not you want to see the body of the dead person. Whatever you decide, follow your own feelings, there is no wrong or right thing to do.

Consider the funeral arrangements. There may be lots of people who have opinions about how the funeral should be arranged. Don't feel pressurised into a funeral that is too expensive for your budget. Try to talk through what you really want with someone you trust.

There is a lot of practical business associated with a death, including the medical certificate and the business of registering the death, copying the death certificate, arranging a funeral director, contacting a solicitor if there is a will or the Probate Registry if there is an 'estate' and no will. You may need to contact social security about pensions and other entitlements. Your local Citizen's Advice Bureau can advise you on many of these matters.

In general it is not a good idea to make any major changes in your life such as moving house or jobs until you have had enough time to adjust to the death. Moves made in sorrow may cause yet more sorrow in future. The most important message is “Give yourself time”.

### **(b) In the first few weeks after a death**

#### **Talk about your feelings:**

The first weeks and months after a death are generally the worst, when grief can spill out at any time, triggered by people, places, something heard on the TV or radio, or by your own memories. You may need to find someone with whom you can cry, someone to whom you can talk without being told to pull yourself together.

If you follow a religious faith, try to talk things over with a vicar, pastor or priest or with a fellow member of your faith. You may find much comfort in your faith. For people who prefer a more generic or non-denominational form of support, the organisation In Truth One Spirit offers telephone spiritual counselling and designs non-denominational funeral services conducted by trained interfaith ministers – Tel: 01483 898969.

#### **Sleep:**

Sleepless nights can be a big problem. You can ask your GP for a short course of sleeping tablets or if the problem has become longstanding a course of sedative type antidepressants. Don't take sleeping tablets every night for any longer than a week and don't continue taking them occasionally for more than a month: you could get hooked.

Try and follow a regular routine of going to bed at the same time and getting up at the same time. Don't spend more than 30-40 minutes lying awake in bed. It's better to get up and occupy yourself, returning to bed once you feel sleepy.



Keep a notebook by the side of your bed to jot down any worries that stop you sleeping. You can set time aside during the day to 'pick them up again'. Make worry time, day- not night-time.

Try and do some kind of exercise each day. Long walks might do, or keeping busy with both 'useful' and 'useless' household tasks. You could try a relaxing bath before bedtime. Make sure your last meal of the day is three or four hours before your bedtime.

#### **Appetite:**

Grief can take away people's appetite. You may find you have no desire to eat nor any interest in food. But by neglecting your diet, you risk neglecting yourself and making it even harder to cope with things.

If your appetite has gone, try having smaller and more frequent snacks rather than large meals. Choose snacks that are rich in energy and nutrients such as nuts, dried fruit, milk based fruit smoothies, cereal bars or fruit scones . Choosing some of your usual favourite foods may help make food seem more appealing.

Try and eat in company whenever you can. If it's hard to motivate yourself to cook, get in some ready meals and try to eat one every day at your normal meal time. If you cannot face a cooked meal try a sandwich instead. It's OK to stick to simple things like cereal or toast but eat some fruit or fruit juice as well to make sure you get your vitamins and minerals.

Keep an eye on your weight and if you lose more than 3-5kg over a month or your appetite is not improving after this time, ask your doctor for a referral to your local dietician to get more detailed advice.

#### **Energy**

Not only do people lose their appetite for food, but your very appetite for living can seem lost. You may feel like doing nothing except sitting and crying and thinking. If you can afford to, employ someone to help with domestic tasks. This can be a relief especially during the first few weeks. Sometimes employing a stranger to help at home is better than relying upon family or friends.

Try and plan to do just one thing each day. It may be to talk to someone in the family, ring a counselling service or clean out a kitchen drawer. Bit by bit try returning to routines. The less you do, often the more tired and weak you feel. Grief saps our energy. Building it back takes time – and a bit of determination and planning.

Sometimes, writing down your thoughts feelings and memories can help. Keeping a 'grief diary' can help clear your own mind, and later you can decide whether or not you still want to keep it, once you feel you have started to 'move on'. Writing something down everyday for the first few weeks can help channel your grief.

### **Guilt, grief and anger**

You may find that you are going over all the things you would have liked to have said or done for the deceased person, or what you might have said or done differently, or you may find yourself feeling guilty for the person's death, or feel bad about not feeling enough for the person, or feeling bursts of anger towards them.

These are normal, indeed common reactions to a bereavement. Spasms of guilt and anger can make your emotions seem all over the place. Try and talk about these feelings, write them down in a diary or set time aside just to let these feelings work their way through.

Acknowledging these feelings of intense anger, feelings of guilt is much healthier than denying or hiding them. Feelings are never right or wrong: they are just feelings. By accepting your feelings rather than resisting or suppressing them, you will be more likely to sustain your emotional and your physical health.

Most people feel bad: most people feel sad. But don't feel bad because you don't. Everyone grieves in their own way. Try and accept whatever feelings you have, don't order them around and don't impose a timetable on your emotions.

### **WHEN WILL IT PASS?**

As time passes some of the fierce pain of bereavement begins to fade. Depression lessens and people start to find themselves thinking about other things. Bit by bit, people start to look toward the future, as well as thinking back over the past. Although the sense of having lost a part of oneself following a bereavement may never go away, little by little life begins to return to normal. For many people, this is simply not possible until after they have lived through the first year after the bereavement.

For many people, surviving this first anniversary is an important milestone that has to be passed in order to start out on the road to 'recovery'. Anniversaries can be dreaded and until you have gone through an anniversary you may not feel confident in your own ability to cope. Surviving an anniversary may not always be surviving the first anniversary of the death. It may mean surviving the passage of a birthday, a wedding day or a key holiday like Christmas.

Moving on is never easy even after surviving these initial anniversaries. Being able to acknowledge that the person has gone, that he or she has died, accepting their death and letting it become part of your past rather than a screen over your future, is an important and reassuring indicator that you are coping with bereavement.

Everyone is unique and everyone takes different amounts of time to go through the acute grief of bereavement. Recovery is rarely without relapse. People and places can always trigger fresh episodes of depression, guilt, sleeplessness. But usually a pattern emerges, when the good days start to balance out the bad; eventually they will outweigh the bad. You will find you can cope with the anniversaries and begin to remember the good times.

If, after a year or two, the depression has never really lifted and your sleep has not improved, there may be 'unresolved' grief. Unresolved grief is when the early sense of shock and disbelief just goes on and on, when you cannot think of anything else but your loss. If you think this is what is happening to you, help from your doctor is needed. That help may well involve some talk, some tablets and some therapy.

## OTHER SOURCES OF SUPPORT

While the doctor is often the first person people turn to for help after a bereavement there are many other sources of support. For wide ranging advice about bereavement, **Cruse Bereavement Care** can provide a wealth of helpful information from the practicalities of dealing with a funeral to putting you in touch with members of your nearest local branch.

You can contact **Cruse** via the Internet ([www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)); via their day-by-day helpline (0870 167 1677); or direct (address: – Cruse Bereavement Care, Cruse House, 126, Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR, tel. No. 020 8939 9530).

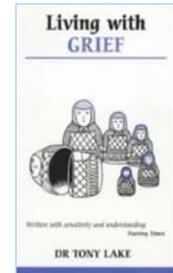
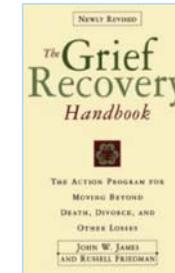
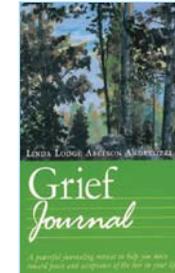
If you have been widowed, you may find the **National Association of Widows (NAW)** a useful organisation to join. The National Association of Widows (NAW) recognises that adjusting to life without a partner is a slow difficult and painful process. NAW aims to provide help, advice and comfort to widows. NAW can be contacted via the Internet ([www.nawidows.org.uk](http://www.nawidows.org.uk)) via their helpline (0845 838 2261) or direct (address National Association of Widows, 48, Queens Road, Coventry, CV1 3EH).

For parents who have recently lost a son or daughter, at whatever age, **The Compassionate Friends (TCF)** can be a lifeline. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a national charity that provides support and friendship to parents and families after the death of their child, from any cause. TCF offers a helpline, one to one and e-mail support, local support groups, a programme of retreats, meetings and annual gatherings. TCF can be contacted via the Internet ([www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)) via their helpline (tel: 08451 232304) or direct (address The Compassionate Friends, 53, North Street, Bristol, BS3 1EN, tel.: 0845 1203785).

For non-denominational, spiritual support and counselling, you can contact **In Truth One Spirit** via e-mail ([intruthonespirit@aol.com](mailto:intruthonespirit@aol.com)) or by 'phone, tel: 01483 898969.

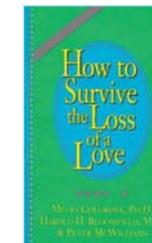
For details of local sources of support, contact your own surgery or Benny Millier, Sutton & Merton Psychological Therapies in Primary Care service, tel: 020 8251 0546.

## BOOKS AND TAPES



Many people find Linda Lodge Andreozzi's **Grief Journal** has some very helpful ideas about using a diary or journal to cope with a loss. It's an American book, widely recommended and one that can be ordered via the Internet from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Other useful self-help books include **Living with Grief** by Dr Tony Lake and **The Grief Recovery Handbook** by John James and Russell Friedman. You might also try Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler's book **On Grief and Grieving**, published by Simon & Schuster or Judy Tatelbaum's **The Courage to Grieve – Creative Living, Recovery & Growth**, published by Vermillion.

For a book that deals with loss of a partner, including the grief when a relationship ends for reasons other than death, this book is also recommended **How to Survive the Loss of Love** by Melba Colgrove, Harold Bloomfield and Peter McWilliams. It is published by Atlantic Books



**For more personal accounts of other people's journey through grief, the following books are recommended:**

CS Lewis, 1976 **A Grief Observed**, published by Faber & Faber, London.

Joan Didion, 2006 **The Year of Magical Thinking**, published by HarperPerennial, London.

**Coping with bereavement** is a set of self help audiotapes for anyone facing the grief of bereavement. It can be ordered via the Internet from [www.talkinglife.co.uk](http://www.talkinglife.co.uk).

