



**THE
AMBULANCE
STAFF
CHARITY**

 **Cruse
Bereavement
Care**



Grief, loss and bereavement

Introduction

Grief is an overwhelming emotion and can seem unbearable. When someone you know dies, you may experience many thoughts, feelings and behaviours, which add to the pain of grieving.

You may have witnessed a traumatic death during the course of your work, or you may have suffered the pain of losing a friend, colleague, or loved one. Everyone's experience and response to loss will be different and many factors may affect your feelings such as who the person was, the nature of your relationship or the circumstances around how the person died.

The five stages of grief

It is important to understand that there is no right or 'normal' response to loss.

There are, however, some common reactions and feelings that **you** may experience in the hours, days, weeks and months following a death or traumatic event. These feelings can sometimes be very strong and frightening, and may ebb and flow.

The five stages of grief do not necessarily occur in any specific order. It is very common for people to move between stages repeatedly before there is some acceptance of the loss and a feeling that they are adapting to the world as it is now.

Everyone's reaction to a major loss is different and you may not go through every stage of grief.

Instead, it's more helpful to look at the stages as guides in the grieving process, which can help you recognise and understand your feelings, emotions and behaviours.



Denial

Losses you are unprepared for, particularly if you were not present to hold or touch the person, can be difficult to accept as real. It's not unusual to pretend the loss hasn't happened at all and you may enter a state of shock, denial and numbness.

This is a common defence mechanism which helps us to cope, making survival possible by only letting in as much as we are able to handle at that time.

As you begin to accept the reality of the loss, you are unknowingly beginning the healing process. However, the emotions you may have been trying to suppress during the denial stage of grief could begin to rise to the surface.

“I can't believe it's true. They've not gone. They'll come round the corner any second...”

Anger

Anger is a very common phase of the grieving process. It can be a natural reaction to loss and a way of hiding the fear and painful emotions that you may be feeling.

- If you lose someone as a result of a violent attack or accident, your anger may be directed against those who you see as the perpetrators.
- A death caused by error or negligence may cause you to direct your anger at those in authority.
- It is not unusual to become angry with the person who has died. You may resent the person for causing you pain or for 'leaving' you.
- Feelings of guilt for being angry with them can also serve to increase your anger.



In some cases, you may get angry with the people you love, or even direct your anger at yourself. You may feel a huge burden of guilt or blame yourself for:

- not having done enough to protect or save the person
- things you may have said or done in the past
- being alive when our loved one, colleague or friend is no longer here

Anger is possibly one of the strongest and most challenging emotions that you may experience in grief. However, it is important to understand that anger doesn't need to be destructive; focused in the right way, it can be a force for good and may help you express feelings and emotions that have been suppressed as you try to come to terms with the loss.

When you don't allow yourself to feel angry, you might find yourself lashing out or reacting in other unhealthy and counterproductive ways. Remember that it is okay to feel angry, but it is important to have healthy ways to diffuse your anger. Being aware of triggers, or what escalates your anger and using coping strategies like meditation or writing down your angry thoughts may help. However, if your anger persists unabated, it may be helpful to seek professional support.

Bargaining

Bargaining is a line of defence against the emotions of grief. It may help you postpone the sadness, confusion, or hurt. Grief can make you feel vulnerable and helpless. As you experience those moments of intense emotions, it's not uncommon to look for ways to regain control or want to feel like you can change the outcome of an event. In these instances, you may find yourself creating a lot of 'what if' and 'if only' statements as we tend to assume that if things had played out differently, we would not be in such an emotionally painful place in our lives.

“If only I’d called them that night, they might still be here.”

“If I could just have them back, I promise I’ll...”

“What if they’d been to the doctor sooner?”

Guilt often accompanies bargaining. You may start to believe there was something you could have done differently to save the person who died. It's also common for religious or spiritual people to try to make a deal/ promise to God or a higher power in return for healing, relief or even for a different outcome.

Depression

“Life has lost its meaning.” “I can’t stop crying.”

Although this is a very natural stage of grief, dealing with depression after a bereavement can be extremely isolating and overwhelming. Depression is not a sign of mental illness, but an appropriate and understandable response to losing someone you care about. As you start to feel the reality of the loss, feelings of depression and low mood may come to the surface in the form of emptiness, fear, sadness and hopelessness.

Losing someone may trigger memories of other deaths that you have experienced in your life. You may feel frightened about being left alone, or of a similar event happening again. A sound, or smell, or visiting a particular place could remind you of that person and may evoke very strong memories.

During this phase of grief, you may find yourself retreating or becoming withdrawn and less sociable. You may feel empty and hopeless about the future, or that life is not worth living. You may also feel like harming yourself or, in extreme cases, have suicidal thoughts. While depression is a normal phase of grieving, some people may get 'stuck' and not feel able to move past this stage. In these cases, it may be beneficial to seek professional help from a therapist or bereavement counsellor.

Acceptance

“I’m lucky to have had so many wonderful years with them. I know they’re not coming back, it’s so hard... but I’m going to be ok.”

This phase is about accepting the reality that someone has died and is physically gone.

Reaching this stage is a gift not necessarily afforded to everyone. Death may be sudden or unexpected and we may never see beyond our anger or denial. However, we try to learn to live with it.

Acceptance is not about 'getting over it' and doesn't necessarily mean that we no longer feel the pain of loss. This phase of grief is about re-adjustment and coming to terms with how your life will be without that person. You may start to reach out to others and tentatively begin to live again, knowing that there will be good days and bad days, and that's okay.



Coping with loss is a deeply personal experience.

No-one can help you go through it more easily, or truly understand all the emotions that you're going through, even if they have had a similar experience themselves. However, others can be there for you and help comfort you through this process.

Resistance or denial will only prolong the natural process of healing and the best thing you can do is to give yourself time and allow yourself to feel the grief as it comes.

The symptoms of grief

Thoughts

Grief, particularly after a traumatic loss, can have a significant impact on your brain.

- **Memories**
You may experience repeated and intrusive thoughts of the person who has died, or the circumstances surrounding their death. You may also find yourself constantly recalling or reliving past losses.
- **Inability to concentrate**
Stress, depression or preoccupation with your grief may affect your ability to focus on everyday tasks or activities. Lack of concentration may also make you feel clumsy or accident-prone.
- **Dreams or flashbacks**
Recurring dreams or nightmares are common for those who are bereaved and you may find yourself re-living the trauma through unwanted images or flashbacks.

Behaviours

Feeling sensitive, emotional, and tearful is a common response when someone dies. You may find yourself crying excessively for no apparent reason, or in situations that would not normally evoke an emotional outburst.

As you try to seek comfort or relief from the pain of loss, you may start doing things you wouldn't normally do, such as excessively drinking alcohol or avoiding situations, places or people who might remind you of the person who has died.

It is also not uncommon for those who are grieving to neglect themselves. Feelings of hopelessness may lead to you not eating properly, having poor personal hygiene or living in unsanitary conditions.



Physical symptoms

When you are experiencing a bereavement, you are often more susceptible to physical illnesses. Other common physical symptoms could include:

- difficulty sleeping
- irritability
- increased heart rate
- loss of appetite
- headache
- stomach upsets
- exhaustion
- feelings of panic or anxiety
- generally feeling unwell

Relationships

When you are grieving, your relationships with your family members, friends or colleagues may be affected. You may find that some people are naturally supportive, but others may struggle to know what to do, and may even avoid you in case they say the wrong thing.

This may leave you feeling unsupported and isolated. A crisis can bring people together, but it can also create strain and tensions, and in that instance, you may find that you just want to be left alone.



Everyone has their own way of grieving and coping with loss. It is important to try and take each day at a time and not to expect too much of yourself.

What you might find helpful

Create a memory box

As you experience grief, you don't forget the person but you gradually find new ways to remember them. Reminiscing about the past can be painful but creating a memory box with meaningful items can be a powerful way to keep precious memories of the person alive.

This may be especially helpful for children as it can provide an opportunity to talk to them about the person they have lost, help them to open up about their feelings, or encourage shared memories.

Try some relaxation exercises

It's important to remember that the physical symptoms of grief, while unpleasant and sometimes frightening, are natural reactions that will fade as time passes. Relaxation exercises, meditation, aromatherapy or breathing techniques can help you to relax and help you re-establish feelings of control.

Attend a memorial or remembrance event

You may choose to visit the place where the person died, place a wreath in a significant place, or attend a memorial service or other ritual of remembrance, such as planting a tree in their memory.

Every two years TASC holds the national ambulance memorial service to honour the members of the ambulance community no longer with us. To learn more visit: www.theasc.org.uk/our-memorial



Express yourself

Bottling up your emotions or withholding from your grief is more likely to cause problems later on than if it is expressed freely. It's normal to express your grief in any way that feels natural, whether that's crying, shouting or just talking endlessly about the person. Try and find someone you can trust who will be a good listener.

Be kind to yourself

Feelings of anger, guilt or sorrow can be exhausting. Try and make time to look after yourself ensuring you get enough sleep and are trying to eat well. Keeping to familiar routines as much as possible as can help you to maintain a sense of order and control. This is especially important for children.

Seek specialist help

Sometimes sharing your loss can make the burden of grief easier to carry and counselling may be beneficial to help you work through the grieving process. Counselling doesn't necessarily 'cure' us of our grief, but rather it provides us with coping strategies to help us deal with our grief in a more effective way.

If you experience particularly disturbing behaviours, thoughts or emotions it's important to seek specialist help. A GP may suggest alternative treatment options such as cognitive therapies, psychotherapies, or anti-depressant medication that could help.

In some cases, particularly following a traumatic incident or death, grief may be so severe that it can become debilitating, bringing about severe depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or thoughts of self-harm or suicide. There are some very effective treatments which have been developed in recent years and professional help should be considered if necessary.

Sources of help and support

The Ambulance Staff Charity (TASC)

TASC can support the UK's ambulance staff in their time of need.

- Call TASC on 02477 987 922
- Email TASC at support@theasc.org.uk
- Message TASC at www.theasc.org.uk/gethelp
- Visit TASC's website at www.theasc.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care (England, Wales or Northern Ireland)

- Call Cruse on 0808 808 1677
- Visit Cruse's website at www.cruse.org.uk
- Visit Cruse's website for children and young people at www.hopeagain.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care (Scotland)

- Call Cruse on 0808 802 6161
- Visit Cruse's website at www.crusescotland.org.uk

Samaritans

- Call the Samaritans on 116 123
- Visit the Samaritans' website at www.samaritans.org

The Ambulance Staff Charity (TASC)

TASC is the national charity dedicated caring for those who care for us by providing mental, physical and financial wellbeing support to the UK's ambulance community. TASC support current and former ambulance staff, their family members, current ambulance service volunteers and paramedic science students from year 2 onwards.

For more information, please visit www.theasc.org.uk

TASC is a registered UK charity: 1163538/SC046384

Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse Bereavement Care is the leading national charity for bereaved people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

For more information, please visit: www.cruse.org.uk

Cruse is a registered UK charity: 208078



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