



**THE  
AMBULANCE  
STAFF  
CHARITY**

# **Bereavement handbook**

**Family members of ambulance staff**

## When a loved one passes away, the grief can seem almost unbearable, especially if it was sudden or traumatic.

People can have very different reactions to death and talking about it isn't easy, however taking a bit of time to have an honest conversation with your loved ones about death, while uncomfortable, will provide some much-needed comfort if the worst was to happen.

This handbook has been created to provide information and guidance to support the family members of the UK's ambulance community. We'll cover:

- How to have a conversation about death with your loved one
- Funeral planning
- The practical things your loved one needs to think about
- Supporting your loved one if they lose a colleague
- How to deal with your grief if your loved one passes away
- Talking to a child who has lost a parent



### A little bit about us...

TASC, The Ambulance Staff Charity, is a leading national charity that supports the mental, physical, and financial wellbeing of the UK's ambulance community. We're here to provide independent and confidential support to ensure the UK's lifesavers are strong, healthy, and resilient. Because they care, we care.

As well as serving NHS staff, we also support private ambulance staff, retired staff, ambulance service volunteers and paramedic science students.

To learn a bit more about us, visit the links below:

- [What TASC does](#)
- [Who TASC supports](#)
- [TASC's services](#)
- [TASC's impact on the ambulance community](#)



# Let's start talking about death

Losing a loved one is an incredibly confusing time as families adjust to their loss alongside dealing with the tedious paperwork and difficult decision-making.

Unfortunately, some of this can't be avoided, but one simple thing you can do now to make this horrible time easier is talking about death and funeral plans with your loved ones.

At TASC we've seen many examples of family members struggling to make decisions about their loved one's funeral and constantly asking themselves 'is this what they would have wanted?' or 'have I done them proud?'



## Tips to starting a conversation

### Don't surprise someone

Talking about death can be difficult, especially with your loved ones, and surprising someone with the topic can be quite jarring. Instead tell them that you want to make some time to talk about death and funeral plans, and the reasons why. Agree a date/time for you both to talk and make sure you give yourself enough time to think about it beforehand.

### Respect their feelings

It's important to take your loved one's feelings into consideration, and avoid pushing them into talking if they don't want to. Instead explain why you want to talk and then tell them you'll pick the conversation up at another time.

### Make dedicated time to talk

Choose a quiet and comfortable place where you can have a face-to-face conversation where you won't be disturbed. For example, avoid talking when getting the kids dinner ready or in a busy café. Don't forget to set your mobile to silent too.

## Things to think about when funeral planning

Here are a few topics you can bring up to start a conversation:

- Do they have an up-to-date Will? (more information on this topic is available later in this handbook)
- Is their next-of-kin at work up-to-date? (more information on this topic is available later in this handbook)
- Do they have a life insurance policy or funeral cover which could help pay for their funeral?
- Do they want to donate their organs?
- What type of funeral do they want for example, faith-based, humanist or a celebration of life?
- Do they want their ambulance trust/employer to be involved in their ceremony? (more information on this topic is available later in this handbook)
- Is there any music they would like to have at their ceremony?
- Do they want to be buried or cremated, or do they have something more specific in mind, such as a natural burial?
- Do they want flowers or do they want donations to a charity instead? [Learn more about in-memory donations here.](#)
- Is there anything they would like to be buried/cremated with, for example clothing or tokens?
- What do they want to happen after their ceremony? Do they want a Wake?

Over the page we've created a table that you can print off and fill in to help you keep track of what you've discussed about funeral plans.



## Funeral planning

### Organisation and finance

e.g. insurance policies, funeral directors

### Service details

e.g. venue, faith/humanist ceremony, burial/cremation

### Employer involvement

### Tributes

e.g. flowers/in-memory donations to charity

### Music and readings

e.g. readings, prayers, songs, and hymns

### Participants and attendees

e.g. readers, pall bearers, family-only event/open event

**After the funeral plans**

e.g. wake, plans for ashes

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## Getting your loved one to check their next-of-kin

When someone joins an NHS ambulance service, they will be asked about their next-of-kin as part of their onboarding. As well as being an emergency contact, if the ambulance worker dies in-service, this person will receive any eligible death-in-service payments, which can be up to 3x their gross salary.

Over time relationships change and the person they originally identified as their next-of-kin may no longer be the person they want to receive the payments.

TASC has seen several times when an ambulance worker has passed away and their death-in-service payment has gone to an ex-partner, and their current partner is left with nothing and must also pay for a funeral.

It's a small check, but one that can make a big difference to the loved ones of ambulance staff. If your family member isn't sure where to start, tell them to contact their HR Team in the first instance.

## Why it's important to write a Will

A Will is a legally-binding document which sets out what you want to happen to your property, possessions, money, and investments, called your 'estate', when you die. It can also cover who you want to take care of your dependent children if your co-parent has also passed away.

Additionally, your Will details the individuals or organisations that you want to receive your estate, called 'gifts'. For example, you could:

- Gift your children your house
- Gift 5% of your total estate's worth to charity

Many people think their estate will pass to their partner when they die, but this may not always be the case, especially if you're not married. If you die without a Will, you will be 'intestate' and your estate will be divided following a set of formal rules which may not follow your wishes. More information is available on the [Citizens Advice website](#).

Making a Will is a simple way to ensure your loved ones are taken care of and that your wishes for your estate are carried out. To learn more about making a Will, visit the [Citizens Advice website](#).

# Supporting your loved one when they've lost a colleague

The people in the UK's ambulance service spend many hours with their colleagues, and they quickly become their second family. When a team member passes away, especially if it's sudden or unexpected, many ambulance staff 'put on a game face' to try and help them cope, but this can delay the grieving process.

You may find your loved one experiences mood swings, or they may act like nothing has happened or even use dark humour to cope. While their grieving process may seem strange to you, don't forget to remind them that you are there to support them. Here are a few things you can do to help them.

## Offer practical help

When struggling with grief, it's easy to forget the little things in everyday life, such as grocery shopping or making dinner. You could help by offering to finish these tasks for them, however be specific about what you can help with and only offer to help with things you're able to do.

## Be a good listener

Offering a listening ear is usually the most helpful thing you can do.

- Focus on them and let them know they have your full attention
- It may take time for them to verbalise their thoughts, if this happens, avoid filling any silences
- Use questions that can't be answered with a simple yes or no.
- Repeating something back reassures them that they have your full attention.

## Help them set up rituals

Grief becomes more manageable over time but you may find they struggle around anniversaries or special days. You can support them by helping set up little rituals to remember their colleague. For example, lighting a candle on their birthday, laying a wreath in a special place, or taking them to the National Ambulance Service Memorial Garden on the anniversary of the death.

**To learn more about supporting your loved one in the ambulance service, download [TASC's Family Handbook](#).**



# Dealing with the death of a loved one

Grief can seem unbearable and everyone's experience of loss will be different and there's no right or 'normal' response to grief. However, there are some common reactions and feelings that you may experience in the hours, days, weeks, and months after the loss of a loved one.

These feelings can sometimes be very strong and frightening, and may ebb and flow.

## The stages of grief

### Denial

Losses can be difficult to believe as real and as you start to accept reality, you're beginning the healing process. However, the emotions you may have been trying to suppress could begin to rise to the surface.

### Anger

Anger is a natural reaction to loss. It's also not unusual to become angry with the person who has died and you may resent them for leaving you.

Anger is possibly one of the strongest and most challenging emotions that you may experience in grief, but if you don't allow yourself to feel angry, you might find yourself lashing out or reacting in other unhealthy ways.

### Bargaining

Grief can make you feel vulnerable and it's not uncommon to look for ways to regain control. You may find yourself creating a lot of 'what if' and 'if only' statements.

### Depression

Depression after a loss can be extremely isolating. You may find yourself becoming withdrawn and feeling hopeless about the future, or that life is not worth living.

While depression is a normal phase of grieving, some people may get 'stuck' and not feel able to move past it. In these cases, you should seek professional help. [Learn more about TASC's bereavement services.](#)

### Acceptance

Acceptance is about acknowledging that someone is gone. It's not about 'getting over it' and doesn't mean that you no longer feel the pain of loss.

It's about 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.

**To learn more about how grief can impact your wellbeing, download [TASC's guide to grief and loss.](#)**

## Traumatic grief

### Suicide

When someone dies by suicide, it's common to be plagued by questions like 'why did they do it?' and 'could it have been prevented?'. You may also feel angry and rejected by your loved one, or maybe even guilty as you feel you could have done more to help.

### Violence

Death through violence can be especially difficult to come to terms with. You may repeatedly ask yourself questions like 'why them?', 'how could this have happened?' and 'why wasn't it me instead?'.  
  
In the following days and weeks, it's very common to feel numb, anger, and disbelief, and you may also experience feelings of intense unfairness and revenge. These feelings can be overwhelming and frightening, but for most people the feelings do lessen over time.

When someone dies tragically from violence, it's common for it to be picked up by the local media or community and this can make you feel very isolated from your support network.

For more information about traumatic grief, visit the [Cruse Bereavement Care website](#).



## Things that may help when you're grieving

### Talking to someone you trust

One of the most helpful things you can do is talk about your memories of your loved one. There are many people you could speak to, such as your family, a friend, a faith/spiritual advisor or even one of your loved one's ambulance colleagues.

### Create a memory box

You don't forget the person you've lost, but gradually you find new ways to remember them. Reminiscing about the past can be painful but creating a box full of meaningful items can be a powerful way to keep precious memories alive.

This may be especially helpful for children as it can provide an opportunity to help them to open-up about their feelings and talk about shared memories.

### Try some relaxation exercises

The physical symptoms of grief, while unpleasant and sometimes frightening, are natural reactions that will fade. Relaxation exercises, meditation, aromatherapy or breathing techniques can help you to relax and help you re-establish feelings of control. The NHS website has free [mental wellbeing audio guides](#) you can download



### Attend a memorial service or remembrance event

You may find it cathartic to visit the place where your loved one died or place a wreath in a special place.

Since our inception, TASC has organised and hosted the National Ambulance Memorial Service to honour our fallen ambulance staff. The service is open to anyone who wishes to pay tribute to ambulance staff who've passed away. Learn more about the service [on our website](#).

To learn more about bereavement, download [TASC's guide to grief and loss](#).

# Supporting your child when they've lost a parent

A parent dying is one of the hardest things that can happen to a child and it will completely change their life. As well as feeling sad or upset, grieving children can also feel confused, scared, or angry.

Talking to a child about someone close to them dying can be difficult, but it's important to be open and answer their questions as honestly as possible - what a child imagines can often be much worse than the reality.

## Tips for starting a conversation with your child

### Build on their understanding

Only use words your child will understand. It may be helpful to start by asking them 'what do you think?' and then building your answers around what they understand about what's happening. Try and give information in small chunks to give them time to process and understand.

### Be clear

Avoid euphemisms as this may confuse your child. It's much clearer to say someone has died rather than 'they have gone away' which could lead to your child to becoming anxious that you may not come back whenever you leave the house without them.

### Listen to your child

Reassure your child that their feelings are okay, including the bad ones. Let them process their emotions, and don't tell them not to worry or be sad, like you, they may find it hard to control their feelings.

You may find that your child is quieter than normal, or they may not seem sad at all. Everyone handles grief differently and you need to give them time to process everything.

### Don't hide your own sadness

It's okay to cry in front of children as it normalises a natural part of the grieving process. It can also help for them to understand why you're crying and that people cry for many reasons. Let them know that it's okay to cry and reassure them that they're loved.

### Expect lots of questions

Children are naturally curious and are likely to ask lots of questions. You may find this quite distressing, but it's part of your child's need for reassurance and it will help them to process what has happened.

## What ambulance services may do when their team members pass away

When a staff member passes away, their employer may get in touch with the family to offer condolences, and in some cases, offer to be involved in the funeral plans, particularly if the staff member served for a long time or died suddenly or in the line of duty.

The service's involvement could be anything from team members attending the funeral, to sending

flowers, or even arranging for the coffin to pass a ceremonial guard of ambulance colleagues.

It's important to remember that the family of the ambulance worker who's passed away can say no to any involvement from the ambulance trust if they wish.

## Places to access bereavement support

### TASC

TASC can provide advice and bereavement counselling to people bereaved by the death of an ambulance worker. Learn more on [TASC's website](#).

### Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse is a national charity for bereaved people. Learn more on [Cruse's website](#).

### Samaritans

Samaritans is a national charity dedicated to reducing feelings of isolation and disconnection. Learn more on [Samaritan's website](#).

### Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

SOBS are the only national charity providing dedicated support to adults who have been bereaved by suicide. Learn more on [SOBS website](#).

### At A Loss

At a Loss provides bereaved people a place to go to find the support they need. Learn more on [At A Loss' website](#).

### WAY Widowed and Young

WAY offers support to anyone who's lost a partner before their 51st birthday. Learn more on [WAY's website](#).



# TASC rely on your support to continue providing our independent and confidential services for the UK's ambulance community.

Here are a few ways you can support our work and ensure we're here for ambulance staff for years to come.

## Leave us a gift in your Will

Leaving TASC a gift in your Will is a caring way to support our cause and leave a lasting legacy for the UK's lifesaving ambulance community.

- You could leave us a set amount. For example, you could leave us £500 which could pay for over 9 hours of support for someone struggling with PTSD
- You could leave us a percentage of your estate. For example, if your total estate is worth £100,000 and you leave TASC 2%, you would be donating £2,000 which could pay for 118 support sessions with TASC's in-house money expert
- You could also donate a specific item, such as artwork or an antique which we could auction off to raise vital funds for our cause

To learn more about leaving TASC a gift in your Will, [visit our website](#).

## Other ways you can support our cause

- Become a TASC regular giver and donate a few pounds a month. [Sign up now](#)
- Text AMBULANCE to 70085 to donate £3 to TASC now
- Plan a fundraising event with your friends and family. [Learn more here](#)
- Join our mailing list to receive our latest new, free resources and opportunity details straight to your inbox every month. [Sign up now](#)



## **TASC, The Ambulance Staff Charity**

12 Ensign Business Centre, Westwood Way  
Coventry, CV4 8JA

T: 02477 987 922

E: [enquiries@theasc.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@theasc.org.uk)

W: [www.theasc.org.uk](http://www.theasc.org.uk)

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