



Bereavement and grief

INFORMATION FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS

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Bereavement and grief

When someone we care about dies, it is normal and healthy for us to grieve over our loss. Our feelings, at this time, may be among the most profound and painful we ever experience. They are a natural reaction and, if we are able to bear with them, they can help us to come to terms with what has happened. This period of mourning varies according to the individual circumstances: it may be relatively short, or it may last many months, even years. It will take as long as it needs.

Grieving

There are different stages of grief and a wide variety of possible feelings.

Your own experience and combination of these will be unique – there is no right or wrong sequence.

Here are some of the most common feelings and reactions:

- Numbness** You may not feel much at first, due to the shock, and you may feel bad about this.
- Disbelief** You may not be able to believe that the person really has died; you may find yourself looking for them in familiar places or you may think you have seen them.
- Yearning** You may ache with longing to be able to put the clock back and to be with your friend and loved one again.
- Sadness** You may feel 'down' and tearful.
- Anger** At whoever or whatever seems responsible for the death and want to blame them;
at 'Life' or 'God' for the injustice and unfairness of it;
at the dead person (which is more difficult to accept) for leaving or abandoning you;
at other people for continuing to have fun, for appearing trivial or for not understanding your feelings.
- Guilt** Regretting things you said or did not say, things you did or did not do;
for surviving and being alive, when they are not;
for feeling relief, eg at the death of someone who was ill and suffering.

Fear

At death's shadow having passed so close to you; at your sense of your own mortality, causing you anxiety and panic; of harm to yourself or others close to you; of 'going mad', of being overwhelmed by your feelings; of not being able to cope; of losing hold of the image or memory of the person who died.

Shame

For being seen as helpless and emotional (eg crying), or for not being emotional; for feeling you are burdening friends and others with your unhappiness; for envying others who have not suffered your loss.

Loneliness

Feeling isolated by your grief: either wanting to avoid other people, or feeling avoided by them; feeling no-one can understand what you are going through; feeling that the loss has left a hole in your life and in you that will never be filled.

Apathy

No motivation to do anything and no concentration, so unable to do your work.

Depression

You may begin to feel utterly hopeless and in despair; that life is meaningless and pointless; that there is no future for you to look forward to; that you will never feel 'all right' again; also, you may start thinking about suicide.

Remember: If you feel you are becoming depressed, arranging to see your GP or a counsellor can help

We experience emotions in our bodies as well as in our minds. Below is a list of some of the physical symptoms of grief that may affect you:

- Exhaustion** Due to being emotionally drained and worn out, or to lack of sleep.
- Sleeplessness** You feel restless and your mind races and keeps you awake; bad dreams disturb you in the night; you wake up early and can't get back to sleep again.
- Loss of appetite** You may lose interest not only in eating, but also in sex, your appearance and previous pleasures.
- Irritability** You may feel easily annoyed.
- Preoccupation** With incessant thoughts about the person and his/her death.
- Fuzziness of mind** You cannot think clearly or remember things.
- Dizziness, shakes and palpitations** You may feel forms of giddiness, fluctuations in blood sugar levels, panic attacks or light-headedness.
- Muscular tensions** Headaches, neck ache, backache.
- Breathing difficulties** Any kind of interference with normal breathing, ie. a feeling of constriction of the windpipe.
- Choking** Breathlessness or hyperventilating.
- Nausea** You may feel the sensation of unease and discomfort in the stomach with an urge to vomit.
- Diarrhoea** You may experience intestinal disorders.
- Menstrual irregularity** Any kind of disturbance to your regular cycle, whether increased or decreased.

How to survive

Trust yourself: pay attention to your feelings and needs and treat these with respect. You have been emotionally wounded, and the wound needs care and time for healing. The following are ways of coping that others have found helpful:

Talking about it with someone you trust – a friend, relative, tutor, chaplain, counsellor:

share your feelings and thoughts with them;
you may need to go through these again and again before you feel ready to move on.

Expressing your emotions Crying is a natural response to unhappiness and brings relief: often we hold back our tears, afraid of seeming weak, and imprison the grief inside us;
through some other outlet that feels right for you, such as: writing (poems, letters, diary), painting, modeling, playing music.

In summary, it may help to:

- Express your feelings*
- Talk to those who care*
- Give yourself time*

Remembering Keeping a memento, a photograph, a piece of clothing, a special CD – or anything you treasure, can help your sense of staying close to the person you have lost;
Making time to be with your memories of them on birthdays and anniversaries;
Visiting places which remind you of them and times you spent together.

Try not to: *Bottle up your feelings*
 Avoid the subject
 Expect feelings to pass quickly

Influences on grief

The circumstances surrounding the death of the person you care about are likely to affect the intensity of the grief you feel, as in these examples:

1. Where the death was expected and acknowledged, the grieving process can begin before the loss: there is time to prepare and say goodbye.
2. When the death occurs unexpectedly and shockingly, as in the case of an accident or suicide, or if it involves a child or a young person, the impact may be more disturbing and long-lasting. If you did not have the chance to say goodbye to the person who has died, it may be helpful to attend the funeral or remembrance service and to say it there.
3. Also, if feelings and thoughts well up unexpectedly from an earlier death or loss you have experienced, these may complicate and deepen your grief, and it may be beneficial to talk these through with a counsellor.

The end of grief

Gradually, the intensity of your feelings of grief will begin to lessen and your constant thoughts about the person who has died will become interspersed with periods of forgetfulness, where other thoughts break through and gain your attention.

Sometimes, you may feel guilty about this, as if it means the person is becoming less important to you already. Yet, this isn't so, for our thoughts of the people we care about come and go quite naturally through the day and we do not love or value them any less in the intervals.

After a while, your sense of hopefulness about the future will start to come back and you may feel more like your 'old self', with your interest in life and other people returning.

Even so, the experience you have been through may affect your values and beliefs, deepening your responses to others and to the spiritual questions of our existence.

The tide of your grief is ebbing, but individual waves of sadness and hurt may flood through you again from time to time – perhaps on an anniversary or at a piece of music or a place that reminds you of your loss.

In the end, while picking up the threads of your everyday life once more, you are able to come to terms with the death of the person you cared about, holding them safe inside you, together with the memory of who they were and what they meant – and still mean – to you.

When to seek extra help

The normal process of grieving and healing may become stuck or unbearable.

If you feel this happening to you, don't hesitate to ask for help.

For example:

1. If you find you are unable to work (no motivation, no concentration), talk to your personal tutor or any member of departmental staff you feel comfortable with. Departments can be supportive in practical ways, once they understand your situation.
2. If physical symptoms persist or alarm you, arrange to see your doctor or visit the Student Health Centre on campus.
3. If your sleeplessness, lack of appetite and low mood continue, again speak to your doctor or counsellor. You may have become depressed and they can help.

4. If your feelings of despair and hopelessness become overwhelming and you begin to feel suicidal, ring or visit the University Counselling Service. You will be able to arrange to see a counsellor there quickly and confidentially.
5. Similarly, if nightmares or horrific images persist or if you experience panic attacks and feelings of extreme anxiety, consult a counsellor. Relationship difficulties or sexual problems can also increase your level of anxiety, and these may benefit from counselling.
6. Finally, if you continue to feel numb, empty and unable to grieve, or if you find you are drinking, smoking, taking drugs or keeping busy to excess, in order to avoid the pain of your feelings, exploring these issues with a counsellor can be helpful.

Remember: Your grief will have an end and you will start to feel happier and more hopeful again. In the meantime, help is available if you need it – do ask.

Tips for helpers

It may be your best friend, partner or relative who is bereaved and whom you want to help. Listed below are some suggestions to support you in this valuable, but sometimes very difficult position.

Helpful

1. Understanding and trusting the process – remembering that grieving is a natural and healing process, which unfurls in stages and in its own time.
2. Being with the person – staying with and acknowledging their feelings, whatever these may be; sometimes, simply sitting with them in silence or holding their hand.
3. Listening – calmly, patiently, empathically, without searching for solutions.
4. Asking the bereaved person if they would like to talk about the one they've lost and showing interest – for example, sharing photos and anecdotes.
5. Knowing and accepting your own limits – allowing time and space for your own needs.
6. Having someone else to talk to – being able to share with another what you are going through.

Remember: Talking to a counsellor at the University Counselling Service can be helpful

Unhelpful

1. Wanting to cure the bereaved person.
2. Wanting to speed up the process.
3. Looking on the bright side.
4. Encouraging a 'stiff upper lip'.
5. Trying to 'jolly' them along.
6. Offering advice.
7. Avoiding the subject in case it upsets the bereaved and allowing it to become 'taboo'.
8. Feeling responsible.
9. Wanting to do too much.
10. Bearing the other person's grief alone.

Useful contacts

Student Counselling Service

01392 724381

www.as.exeter.ac.uk/support/counselling

Student Health Centre Centre

01392 676606

www.exeterstudenthealthcentre.co.uk

Multi-faith Chaplaincy

www.as.exeter.ac.uk/support/chaplaincy

Students' Guild Advice Unit

01392 723520

www.exeterguild.org/support/advice

Samaritans

0845 7909090 / 01392 411711

www.samaritans.org

jo@samaritans.org

CRUSE (Bereavement Helpline)

01392 272406 / 0844 477940

www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk