



Coping with the death of a loved one

Information written with you in mind.

This information guide has been produced with the help of expert peer reviewers as well as older people and carers.

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This guide has been produced with the support of Rothesay Life.



What this guide is about

The death of someone close to us can be one of the hardest things we ever have to deal with. It's not something we can be good or bad at, unfortunately it just happens and we have to deal with it the best we can.

How we deal with death is very personal and there's no formula. However, this guide can explain how you might be feeling, why you might be feeling this way and some of the things that could help you now and in the future.

“It took me a long time to come to terms with my husband’s death but talking about it really helped. I’d encourage anyone in my position to talk to someone. I wish I’d done it sooner.”

Cassie, 73



You may not feel ready to read this guide now and decide to come back to it at a different time. You may also want to look at it with someone close to you, or with a bereavement counsellor.



As far as possible, the information given in this guide is applicable across the UK.

This might help

Following the death of a loved one there are certain practical things that need doing, such as registering the death and arranging a funeral. Some find this a welcome distraction as it gives them something to focus on. Others find getting on with the practicalities the last thing they want to think about.

To try to make things a bit easier, our guide **When someone dies** helps take you through and explain all the practical things you might need to think about.

In Scotland, see the Scottish Government publication **What to do after a death in Scotland** at www.gov.scot/collections/what-to-do-after-a-death-in-scotland.



Coping with a bereavement

As we get older, unfortunately it's more likely we'll experience a bereavement. This might be the loss of our parents, friends, a partner or even our children. While each of these losses can be devastating, how we react and cope with each bereavement is likely to be different depending on the circumstances and your relationship with that person. Coping with a bereavement is a very personal process and it can take some time.

The emotions you may experience can feel overwhelming at times, but, even though it might not feel like it now, things do get easier. Talking to someone – either a loved one or a professional such as your doctor or a bereavement counsellor – is often the best way to start feeling better.

Dealing with grief

Grief is the often conflicting and sometimes overwhelming mixture of emotions you experience when someone close to you dies. Understanding these emotions can be difficult, but it's important to accept them and be reassured by the fact that there's no right or wrong way to feel. Though everyone grieves, everyone will do so in their own way.

Grief is natural and can last a long time. How you feel can be influenced by a number of things such as your personality, your relationship with the person who's died, your religious beliefs and cultural background.

Whatever grief is to you, talking to those close to you can really help. You may be reluctant to talk about your feelings, but you don't need to deal with them alone. The person you talk to doesn't necessarily have to be someone you know. You may be more comfortable talking to a professional – there is a range of support groups and professionals that can help you deal with your loss. You can find many of these organisations listed at the end of this guide, and referenced throughout.

**“After my daughter died
it often felt like I’d go
through all the emotions
in a single day.”**

Anita, 80





How you might be feeling

The emotions you experience as you grieve can be intense and you might feel some more strongly than others. There might be days when you cope better and others when these feelings seem overwhelming.

There's no right or wrong way to feel and the process of grieving is different for everyone. But with time, and the right support, feelings experienced after someone has died tend to become less intense and you can start to adjust and come to terms with your loss.

Feeling numb

Many people talk of feeling a sense of numbness and disbelief soon after the death of a loved one, even if the death was expected. You might seem to be in a daze. As this initial shock passes, you may experience other strong emotions.

Anger

You might be angry at the person who died for leaving you feeling frightened or abandoned. You might also be angry at yourself, questioning whether you could have done more or thinking of regrets you may have. You may be angry at those around you for a lack of understanding, though it's important to remember that everyone deals with bereavement differently.

Those of faith can feel anger, and may even find themselves questioning their faith at such a difficult and emotional time. You might just be angry. You might not know why or with whom, and this is also perfectly natural.

Dealing with this anger can be difficult. Some people write their thoughts down. Others find that talking to someone about these feelings helps – whether it's with someone you're close to or someone not emotionally involved in your loss such as a bereavement counsellor.



Emptiness and sadness

The feeling of emptiness that occurs when someone dies may be overwhelming and feel as if it will never go away. At this time, sadness can often come in waves – some days or weeks might seem easier to cope with than others. But this is a natural response to bereavement. It is also during this period of sadness that some healing can take place – even if you don't necessarily realise this at the time.

But for some, this sadness may not pass and can become depression. If you feel depressed, you're unable to think about anything but the person who has died or you're struggling with self-care such as eating and sleeping, speak to your doctor or a loved one about how you're feeling.

This might help

For some, these emotions can be so overwhelming that you may feel you might hurt yourself in some way. If you do feel like this, you should talk to someone as soon as possible. You can talk to your doctor or call a specialist helpline.

Call Samaritans (page 26) at any time of the day or night on **116 123** if you need someone to talk to. In Northern Ireland you can also contact Lifeline (page 25). In Scotland you can contact Breathing Space (page 24).

“I don’t think I’ll ever really get over losing Pauline, but with time I’ve learned to cope and enjoy life again.”

Michael, 78



Fear

Fear and anxiety are very natural emotions to experience after a bereavement. You may feel that you’re struggling to control your thoughts and emotions. If you’re overwhelmed or anxious, it could help to talk to someone. If you’re worried about how you’re going to cope with practical things day-to-day there’s more information about this on page 14.

Guilt

Some people experience feelings of guilt when someone dies. You may find yourself wondering whether you could have done more to help, or regretting something you said or didn’t say to them when they were alive.

Guilt is a very natural feeling after a loss but it’s important not to dwell on the past. Try not to be too hard on yourself or anyone else. With time, you’re likely to reach some acceptance of the past, be able to move forwards and focus on positive and happy memories.

However, if your sense of guilt doesn’t go away or becomes more powerful, then you should try and talk about it with someone close to you, or someone who specialises in bereavement support.

Isolation

Losing someone close to you can be isolating. This may be because you were incredibly close to the person, such as a partner or spouse, or maybe you had been their main carer for a long time and now you feel alone and lack structure and purpose to life. Or you may be isolating yourself after the death because you can't face talking to others or socialising like you used to.

Whatever the reason, feeling isolated and alone can affect your confidence long term. If you can, talk to others about how you're feeling and try to stay connected to friends and family. This can really help you cope.

“At first, I stopped doing all the things I used to do. Eventually I started going back to bingo and actually felt much better for it.”

Kay, 74



This might help

If you feel isolated, there's information in the 'If you've been left alone' section on pages 20-21 that could help you both practically and emotionally.



Relief

You may experience relief, especially if the person had been ill for some time or was in pain before their death. You may feel as if you shouldn't feel relieved, but it's very natural and understandable to feel this way if you saw someone close to you in pain or discomfort.

If the person lived with dementia, you might have been grieving for them as their condition progressed. This can lead to a sense of relief after their death, which is also very natural.

Next steps

Contact Cruse Bereavement Care (page 24) for help and support with your bereavement.

Looking after yourself

Bereavement can have a physical as well as an emotional impact. The emotions you're experiencing can leave you feeling drained, unmotivated and closed off. But it's important that you continue to do what you can to look after yourself.

Sleep and rest

It's an exhausting time – whether it be arranging the practical stuff, travelling, sleepless nights or just being overwhelmed with everything going on. Be kind to yourself and sleep when you can or want to. It's likely you might struggle to sleep or what sleep you get is disrupted, but even if you can't sleep it's important to rest and recharge when you can.

Eating and drinking

Try to eat and drink regularly. This will help you stay healthy and keep energy levels up. Even if you've lost your appetite it's important to keep eating and drinking.

Food may be the last thing on your mind at this time, but even if you can't eat a balanced diet, eating anything is better than eating nothing.

For some, drink can go from being a comfort to being an escape during this highly emotional time, so be careful not to misuse alcohol. If your drinking is becoming unhealthy or you notice that someone else may be using alcohol to help them through this difficult time you should talk to a specialist organisation such as Drinkaware (page 25).





Self-care

It can be easy to fall into a pattern of self-neglect following a bereavement. This could be something as simple as not washing as frequently as you did or missing doctor's appointments and not taking your medication.

If you feel yourself neglecting your own care needs or you notice loved ones neglecting theirs then talk to someone such as a loved one or a professional.

You may find it more difficult to do some of these things such as washing or getting to the doctor or the shops because you relied on the person who died to help with these things. If that's the case, there's more information about this on page 20.

Staying connected

Naturally, you may find yourself becoming more withdrawn, avoiding social situations and staying at home following a loss. However, try and stay connected with friends and loved ones.

It may be hard to stay in touch with friends and family, and you may want some time to yourself. But, they may be feeling a similar way to you and a simple call or text to ask them over for a cuppa can not only help you, but also be a great comfort to them.

When you're ready, is there a course or class you could go to? It's a good way to add positive things to your life and a chance to meet new people, some of whom may be in a similar position to you. You may have someone you could encourage to come with you if you'd feel more comfortable.

Some people find their faith is a great comfort when someone close to them dies, and others find it a time when they question their faith. If you have a faith or spiritual belief, becoming an active member at your local place of worship can help socially, emotionally and spiritually.

Volunteering can also be a great way to meet new people and stay connected. You can help a cause that means a lot to you and working arrangements are often flexible, so you can start out doing only what you feel able to and possibly build on this over time.

There are many practical things that need to be done following a death and you may want to be there for others experiencing the loss too, but it's important that you look after yourself during this difficult time.

Next steps



Visit **www.do-it.org** to find a local volunteering opportunity.

Read our guide **Healthy living** for tips on keeping yourself in good health. In Scotland, see Age Scotland's guide **Eat well**.

Past bereavements

If you've experienced loss before you may have expected to know how you would cope if someone else you know dies. But different losses can affect people in different ways. Some emotions may be stronger after the death of certain people, or you may experience emotions you haven't felt after losses in different circumstances.

Bereavement can trigger memories of past losses, when emotions may not have been discussed as openly as they are now, or your feelings as a child may have been overlooked.

Other losses, such as a miscarriage or the loss of a child, may have been particularly hard to cope with at the time. You may find memories of these unhappy times rushing back.

You may feel the need to mourn these losses and talk about your experiences before you can start to cope with your more recent bereavement. Talk to friends and family about how you're feeling if you can. See your doctor or talk to a bereavement counsellor if you prefer to speak with someone you don't know.

Next steps



There are specialist organisations you can contact such as Sands (page 26), which offers support to those who have lost a child during pregnancy or after birth. Contact The Compassionate Friends (page 26) for more support – their staff support people who are affected by the death of a child of any age.

The armed forces charity SSAFA (page 26), specialises in helping those who have served or lost someone who served. Also see the section 'Useful organisations' for other sources of help (pages 24-26).



Those around you

You often share the experience of a death with loved ones. Family dynamics can sometimes be tricky during this time but there are often also lovely moments that you can all share together.

Supporting loved ones

While everyone grieves in their own way, having people around you can be a great support, and you can be a great support to them. If possible, encourage your loved ones to share how they're feeling too and reassure them that they're not alone. Talking to each other, sharing stories of the person you've lost and being there to listen can be beneficial to you all and is often the main way people start to accept the loss and begin to feel better.

Knowing the right words

Talking to someone about your feelings is easier said than done. It can often feel difficult to talk to someone who has lost a person close to them – many people don't know what to say or are worried they'll say the wrong thing and so avoid the topic altogether. That's not to say they don't want to offer support. Sometimes it can be helpful if you're the one who brings what's happened up in conversation as this shows the other person that it's OK to talk about it.

Talking to young children

Speaking to grandchildren or young children can be difficult, especially if it's the first time they've experienced a bereavement. But, just like adults, it's important to talk, be open and answer any questions they may have. Try to encourage them to ask questions and answer them as honestly as you can, even if it's difficult for you.

“For me, talking about Carol is actually a great comfort. I make sure I tell my grandson all about his grandma.”

Mark, 64



Next steps



Organisations such as Winston's Wish (page 26) offer support, information and guidance to people caring for a bereaved child or young person. Cruse Bereavement Care (page 24) runs an initiative called Hope Again, aimed at bereaved young people.

If you've been left alone

If you've lost someone and have now been left alone it can be particularly difficult. It may seem that you don't have anyone you can talk to about your emotions, or you may now feel lonely and isolated.

There are helplines you can call if you want to talk to someone. Also ask your doctor about what support services are available locally to help you cope with the loss.

If the person who died was someone you relied on every day then you might be struggling to manage around your home with things such as cooking and shopping or dealing with your finances. If that's the case, contact your local council about having a care needs assessment and explain what you need help with.

This might help

We have some other information guides which may be a good starting point if you've been left alone and are worried about what to do:

- **More money in your pocket**
- **Looking after your money**
- **Getting help at home**
- **Housing options**
- **Staying safe**

“My husband used to deal with all our finances and now he’s gone I don’t know what to do.”

Brenda, 76



If you feel you would like companionship, there might be things going on in your local area. Get in touch with your local community centre to see what’s available near you. Getting involved in activities in your area can be a great way to meet new people.

There are also befriending services available from local Age UKs, where they arrange for someone to visit you to share a conversation and possibly a cup of tea. Age UK also offers a phone befriending service called Call In Time, which matches you with a telephone befriender who you can speak to frequently on the phone.

Next steps



Visit the Age UK website at **www.ageuk.org.uk** or call **0800 434 6105** to sign up for Call in Time.

Contact your local Age UK to find out about their befriending services. In Wales, contact your local Age Cymru. In Scotland, contact Age Scotland and ask about their Community Connecting service.

You can also contact Cruse Bereavement Care (page 24) for help and support with your bereavement.

When Maria's husband died, she found herself struggling to cope.



'I started going to a day centre where I met other people, some of whom were in a similar situation to me.'

'When my husband died two years ago, it was as if my whole world fell apart. We'd been married for over 50 years and I couldn't imagine my life without him. He'd been ill for a while so, while his death wasn't unexpected, it still came as a huge shock to me. My daughters live abroad so when they left, after a couple of weeks, I felt very alone.

'I remembered seeing a sign in my library saying that my local Age UK offered a befriending service, and I thought it couldn't hurt to contact them. I got in touch and they arranged for someone to visit me once a week, just for a chat and a cuppa.

'It made such a difference to know someone was coming round. When I was feeling more confident, I started going to a day centre where I met other people, some of whom were in a similar situation to me. It was good to talk to them and realise that my feelings were normal.

'Now I'm getting back on my feet, it's my turn to help others. I've volunteered as a befriender and soon I'll be going out to see people who need a bit of comfort and support at a difficult time.'



Looking ahead

It may be difficult to look forward, but there's no rush – do everything at your own pace. Looking after yourself and talking about how you're feeling can help to build foundations for the future.

It might be that you feel guilty about enjoying yourself or looking ahead, but finding enjoyment in life is not a betrayal or substitution for the life you had with the person who has died. Life may never be quite the same again, but that doesn't mean life can't be lived.

Spend time with those close to you and do things you enjoy. It might be a time to focus your thoughts on learning something new, take up a new hobby and make new friends.

Give yourself things to look forward to. This might not seem suitable at first, but booking a weekend away or day trip when you're ready can give you time to gather your thoughts and remind you of what life still has to offer.

Birthdays, anniversaries or dates that are significant to you can be particularly difficult, and you might find it helpful to consider how you will deal with them in advance. You may want to use them to celebrate the memory of the person you have lost, for example by sharing stories or raising a toast, or you may prefer to have time on your own to remember the person.

Most importantly, remind yourself there is no magic formula and you may have unexpected feelings, which are natural. Losing someone can be the start of an incredibly emotional time, one that's highly personal. Everyone experiences bereavement in their own way. But if you find yourself struggling to cope or would like to talk to someone – there's help and support available.

Useful organisations

Age UK

We provide advice and information for people in later life through our Age UK Advice line, publications and website.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65

Lines are open seven days a week from 8am to 7pm.

www.ageuk.org.uk

Call Age UK Advice to find out whether there is a local Age UK near you, and to order free copies of our information guides and factsheets.

In Wales, contact Age Cymru: **0800 022 3444**

www.agecymru.org.uk

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI: **0808 808 7575**

www.ageni.org

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland: **0800 124 4222**

www.agescotland.org.uk

Breathing Space

Confidential phone service for anyone in Scotland experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety.

Tel: **0800 83 85 87**

www.breathingspace.scot

Cruse Bereavement Care

Provides emotional support and information across England, Wales and Northern Ireland through local services offering face-to-face support and a national helpline.

Tel: **0808 808 1677**

www.cruse.org.uk

In Scotland, contact Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland
Tel: **0845 600 2227** (calls to this number cost 5p per minute plus your phone company's access charge).
www.crusescotland.org.uk

Department for Work and Pensions Bereavement Service

Carries out eligibility checks on surviving relatives to see what benefits they are entitled to. Also takes claims for bereavement benefits and Funeral Payments.

Tel: **0800 731 0469**

Textphone: **0800 731 0464**

In Wales, call **0800 731 0453**

Textphone: **0800 731 0456**

In Northern Ireland, call **0800 085 2463**

In Scotland contact Social Security Scotland on **0800 182 2222**
www.socialsecurity.gov.scot/

Do-it

National volunteering database of volunteering opportunities across the country.

www.do-it.org

Drinkaware

An organisation funded by alcohol firms that offers tips on responsible drinking.

Tel: **020 7766 9900**

www.drinkaware.co.uk

Lifeline

Provides support for people in distress and despair in Northern Ireland. It can also provide follow-up support, including counselling and complementary therapy.

Tel: **0808 808 8000**

www.lifelinehelpline.info

Samaritans

Provides confidential support for people in distress, 24 hours a day.

Tel: **116 123**

Email: **jo@samaritans.org**

www.samaritans.org

Sands

Offers support to parents, grandparents and their families when a baby dies during pregnancy or after birth. They can be contacted in the weeks, months or years after the loss.

Tel: **0808 164 3332**

Email: **helpline@sands.org.uk**

www.sands.org.uk

SSAFA – the Armed Forces charity

Offers support and advice to anyone who has served in the armed forces or who has lost someone who served.

Tel: **0800 731 4880**

www.ssafa.org.uk

The Compassionate Friends

National self-help organisation. Parents who have been bereaved offer friendship and support to other bereaved parents, grandparents and their families.

Tel: **0345 123 2304**

Tel: **0288 77 88 016** (Northern Ireland helpline)

Email: **helpline@tcf.org.uk**

www.tcf.org.uk

Winston's Wish

Offers support, information and guidance to people caring for a bereaved child or young person.

Tel: **08088 020 021**

www.winstonswish.org

Help us be there for someone else

We hope you found this guide helpful. When times are tough, it's so important to get some support. Did you know you could help us reach someone else who needs a little help? Here's how:

1

Give your views on guides like this

Our Readers' Panel helps make sure the information we produce is right for older people and their families. We'd love you to join. Go to www.ageuk.org.uk/publications/readers-panel.

2

Donate to us

Every donation we receive helps us be there for someone when they need us. To make a donation, call us on **0800 169 8787** or go to www.ageuk.org.uk/donate.

3

Volunteer with us

Our volunteers make an incredible difference to people's lives. Get involved by contacting your local Age UK or at www.ageuk.org.uk/volunteer.

4

Campaign with us

We campaign to make life better for older people, and rely on the help of our strong network of campaigners. Add your voice to our latest campaigns at www.ageuk.org.uk/campaigns.

5

Remember us in your will

A gift to Age UK in your will is a very special way of helping older people get expert support in the years to come. Find out more by calling **020 3033 1421** or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/legacy.

What should I do now?

You may want to read some of our other relevant guides, such as:

- **When someone dies**
- **Your mind matters**
- **How to be an executor**

You can order any of our guides or factsheets by giving our Advice Line a ring for free on **0800 169 65 65** (8am-7pm, 365 days a year).

Our friendly advisers will also be able to help answer any questions you have about anything you've read.

All of our publications are available in large print and audio formats.

There's plenty of really useful information on our website, too. Visit **www.ageuk.org.uk/bereavement** to get started.

If contact details for your local Age UK are not in the below box, call Age UK Advice free on **0800 169 65 65**.



0800 169 65 65
www.ageuk.org.uk

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