



Bereavement

The death of someone close can be devastating. There are no right or wrong reactions to death, the way you grieve will be unique to you. How you grieve will depend on many factors including the relationship you had with the person who has died, your cultural and religious beliefs and your support networks such as family and friends.

Grief is a normal reaction. It is important to remember that we all grieve differently and you may well find yourself grieving differently to other family members. Reactions and feelings can change from hour to hour, and day to day. Some days may be good while others may be bad; some days you'll be up and others down again. You might wish to avoid such difficult feelings, however, for the process of healing is aided best by experiencing and expressing the feelings. In other words best to work through the different feelings that occur.

Over time the emotional swings will lessen in intensity as you learn to adapt to your changed circumstances, but to begin with it can feel overwhelming.

Understanding your emotions

Shock and disbelief

Initially you may feel shock or numbness and confusion. Sometimes you may find yourself carrying on with your life as if nothing has happened. These are all normal reactions and will lessen over time.

Loss

Coping with the loss of the person's love, friendship, companionship or intimacy and the loss of hopes and opportunities for their future or your shared future can often bring a deep sense of sadness. If you had a disappointing relationship with the person who died, you may experience an unfocused loss of what it wasn't or what might have been.

Guilt

Guilt and regret are feelings that many people experience after the death of someone close. You may regret things you have said, or not said, or you may feel guilty for not keeping in touch as regularly as you feel you should have. It is not uncommon for people to feel 'survivor guilt' – to be alive when another is dead. If the death was suicide, your feelings of guilt may be heightened. You may also feel shame or blame yourself for what has happened.

Anger

You might feel anger with people or a cause of death or from a sense of powerlessness at not being able to cure or rescue the situation (people for causing the death or not being able to cure the illness). You may feel angry with others for carrying on with

life and for not understanding your feelings. You may also feel angry with yourself, but perhaps most difficult of all, you may feel angry with the person who has died for abandoning you and for the pain you are suffering as a result of their death.

Loneliness

Grieving can be a lonely process, particularly if family or friends appear to be coping differently to you. You may find other people's reactions difficult to deal with, which can increase your sense of loneliness or isolation.

Depression

Depression is something many people experience following the death of someone close even if they have not experienced depression previously.

Relief

You might feel relieved, especially if the death follows a long illness or if the person's quality of life had diminished. This is quite normal and also understandable if you have experienced them suffering.

Effect on behaviour

Grief also affects our behaviour and functioning. You may find it affects you in some or all of the following ways:

Sleep disruption

Difficulty sleeping, including getting to sleep, staying asleep, or waking early.

Loss of appetite

Loss of appetite or feeling sick when eating or the desire to eat for comfort.

Restlessness

Finding it difficult to relax and 'switch off'. Thinking over what has happened, trying to make sense of it, particularly when you are alone or in bed at night. There may be a desire to 'keep busy' to help alleviate the sense of loss.

Preoccupation

Being preoccupied with thoughts of the dead person or how they died. You may think you have seen them or heard them. Although this may feel distressing, it is a very common experience.

Anxiety and panic

Powerful and unfamiliar feelings become aroused. You may feel anxious about your safety or the safety of others close to you. You may find yourself feeling anxious that something terrible might happen.

Inability to cope

Managing ordinary, everyday things like shopping, academic work or cooking, may become difficult.

Loss of interest

Previous sources of pleasure may feel meaningless. You may lose interest in your usual social life.

Irritability

Losing patience with others, considering everything to be pointless.

Tearfulness

Crying can bring relief as it is an outlet for the emotions, tension and strain that have built up.

Other physical symptoms

Palpitations, nausea, dizziness, tightness in the throat and digestive problems - all can be experienced during grieving. If you are concerned, consult a nurse or your GP.

These are all normal and understandable reactions to bereavement and a natural part of the grieving process. Given time, support and understanding they will lessen and can disappear.

Ways of coping

Ask for help

It's not always easy and it takes courage. Start by accepting that you need help. Ask someone you feel you can trust - a friend, nurse or chaplain, a parent.

You may want to contact the University Counselling Service. Talking to a counsellor can help you find your way through the painful and otherwise lonely process of grieving and help you to make sense of your feelings.

Express yourself in some other way

Many people find writing or drawing their feelings really helps clarify the overwhelming mix of emotions. Choose a form you feel comfortable with - a diary, letter, prose, poetry, song... If you can't find the words to describe what you're feeling try 'speaking' about your experience through dance, song, painting, clay modelling. Let shape, form, texture, colour, rhythm be your words.

Keep some mementos

Find something which helps you to remember the person who has died. This might be photos, jewellery or a piece of clothing. If none of these are available to you, try and think of a place which had special meaning to the person who has died. Remembering can be painful to begin with, but over time painful memories can be replaced by ones that can give you pleasure and comfort.

Get some exercise

This might be the last thing you feel like doing, but it usually helps. Exercise uses up excess energy and it's also a way of releasing some of the frustration and aggression you might be feeling.

Look after yourself

You may feel you can't be bothered or that there's no point, but it will help. Eat well, or at least try to eat something, try to bath or shower regularly and get the sleep and rest that you need. Some people attempt to block out their feelings using alcohol or drugs - but these only bring short-term relief and will ultimately postpone the process of grieving.

Don't expect too much of yourself too soon - grieving takes time, and can be exhausting. Concentrate on living through the present. Give yourself credit for surviving each day.

Looking to the future

After the initial shock most people begin to adjust to living without the person who has died. The change is usually gradual, but over time you are likely to feel less overwhelmed and preoccupied by the loss.

To begin with you may think about what happened and about the person who has died almost constantly, but in time people find that they begin to 'forget' - at first just for a few minutes, then for hours and eventually for days at a time. This is not a betrayal and it does not mean that the loss means any less. It is perfectly natural to not think about someone - we do it all the time with our living friends and family. People, living or dead, do not cease to exist for you when you stop thinking about them.

The goal of the grieving process is to learn to live with loss. As you grieve, life can slowly begin to feel meaningful and enjoyable once more. There will be times, though, when you are taken by surprise - a piece of music or a place may remind you of the person who has died and you will find yourself flooded by grief all over again. This, too, lessens in time.

Special days or anniversaries, especially the closer after the death, can be difficult. Some people find it helpful to plan for these anniversaries and to mark them in some personal way.

You can be changed by the experience of grieving. You might find yourself reassessing your priorities, values, beliefs, hopes, aspirations, friendships.

When to seek additional help

If you are alarmed by your physical symptoms or if they persist - consult a college nurse or your GP. If your work is affected speak to your tutor or your Director of Studies.

For information on counselling and self-help resources visit our website: <https://staff.counselling.cam.ac.uk>

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