



NHS Fife Department of Psychology

Coping with Bereavement

Help Yourself @ moodcafe.co.uk



Bereavement – people's reactions

"My sister died last year, and my brother died the year before. Now it's only me left, and I feel so alone. I just want to talk to them sometimes..." Isobel, 74

"My mum died just before Christmas, after a long illness. She wanted to die, she was ready, but now I feel angry that somehow she gave up on life and I also regret that I didn't manage to get her to keep going. Christmas is such a bad time ... my dad died just before Christmas too." Jane, 43

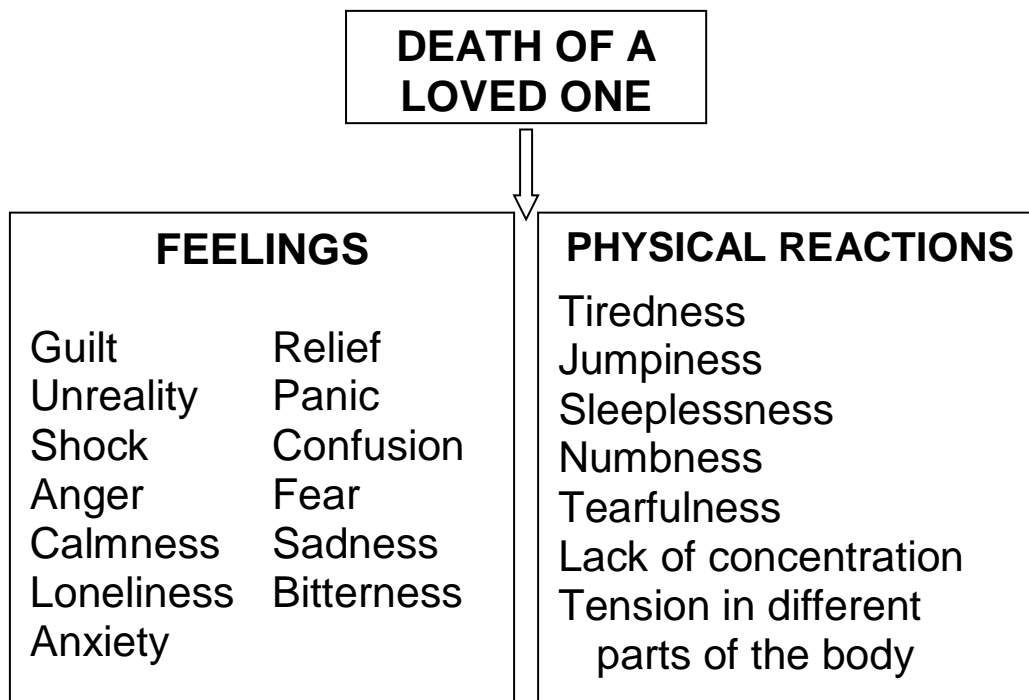
"Our son died. He was only a baby. Now my wife and I are both troubled by how it's affected our other children, and yet we can't talk about it. I think we both feel responsible but know we have to try and look forward and be strong for the children." Gordon, 35

"When my wife died I thought I would never be able to carry on with everything; nobody seemed to understand. They said 'you're young, you'll find someone else' but I didn't want to. I wanted her back so that she – we – could live the life we'd hoped for. It took me three years to come to terms with that loss and to be able to move forward – job, socialising, that sort of thing. I still feel that sense of loss, but it's getting better." Hamish, 28

"My twin died in a car crash, when I was abroad on holiday. I feel guilty that I wasn't there with him. I feel as if part of me has died too. It's hard ..." Sam, 18

Grief

There is no one way to cope with the feelings any of us has after the death of someone close to us. **We all feel differently and we all cope in different ways.** You might feel quite isolated. You could possibly think nobody else has felt the same way as you do. These are some of the feelings or physical reactions you might be experiencing:



These feelings and physical reactions are very common. You may not experience some of them at all. Others may stay with you for a long time. You are likely to go through different emotions at different stages after the death of a loved one.

Sometimes, if a person is very ill for some time before they die, people can experience some of these emotions while the person is still alive. This is a normal reaction and is a sign of anticipating the loss.

At first you might:

- feel everything is unreal
- feel more alert than usual
- worry about how life will be from now on
- feel calm
- need to cry
- not sleep well
- feel jumpy
- think you keep seeing the person who has died
- not be able to believe the person is dead
- not be able to sleep properly
- be forgetful
- need to shout
- lose your appetite
- eat more than usual
- be anxious

Later, you might be:

- continually thinking about your loved one
- not wanting to socialise
- feeling a sense of loss
- resenting other people who are getting on with their lives
- low in mood
- angry
- tired
- relieved
- guilty
- panicky

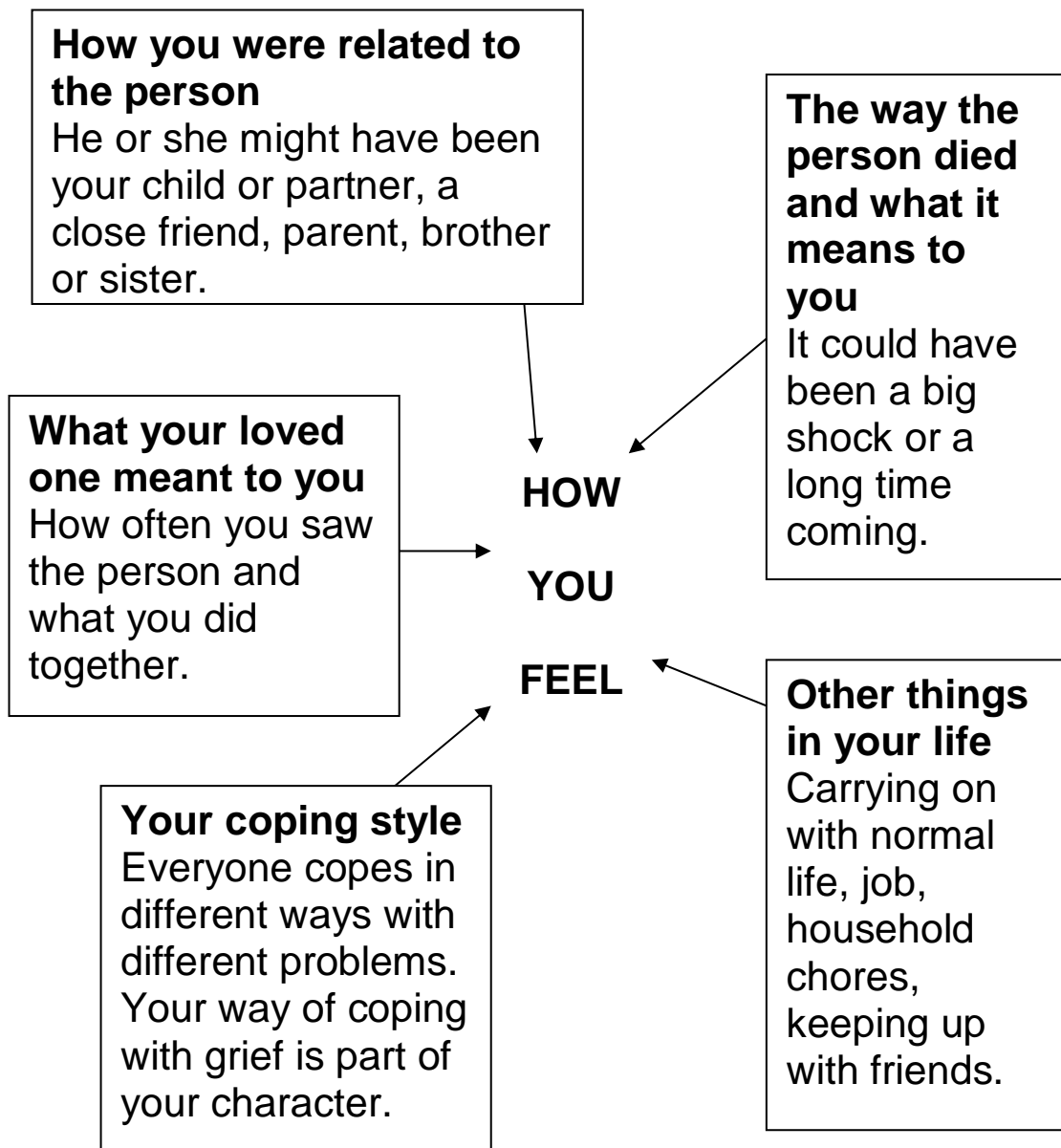
Everyone is different and feels differently about the loss of a loved one.

It is not the type of relationship – such as brother, wife or grandparent – but how you **felt** about the person that is most important.

What the loss **means** to **you** will affect you the most.

The things that affect you

These are a few things that may influence how you feel after the death of a loved one:



How to cope

You might be overwhelmed by your first reactions to the death of a loved one. You might feel very little in the beginning.

Some people find that these feelings are with them for months or years. In some ways there will be a permanent change in how a person feels following a significant loss. However, over time there will usually be a decrease in the way the feelings affect day-to-day life.

Everyone takes his or her own time to learn to cope. The important thing is for you to accept that **whatever** you feel is not unusual, and to **allow** yourself to feel as you do and not worry about this.

Over time you are likely to find yourself thinking less about your loved one and more about your own life. You might feel guilty or disloyal about this, but you can **allow** yourself to return to the normal aspects of your life. You can **allow** yourself to enjoy the things you like to do. Some people set aside a special time to think about the person, perhaps visit a certain place where they can think about them without other distractions.

What to do

Remember that everyone has different needs at times of bereavement. What is right for one person might not be right for another.

It is better to avoid big changes in the months following a death. Things such as moving house or changing job are difficult to cope with at the best of times, so unless absolutely necessary it is best not to put yourself through such changes.

There is the question of your loved one's possessions and clothing. Dealing with these is one of the hardest parts of the grieving process. It takes a lot of courage to do it, but it can help you to come to terms with your loss. It may help to have someone to help – the time to do it is when you feel you can.

Try to keep healthy. Eat well and give yourself time to rest and exercise. Try to keep in touch with your friends and family so that you are not on your own when you don't want to be. It is tempting to resort to alcohol, but this is not a useful answer. It is likely to make you more depressed and less able to cope.

If you can, try to talk to someone about how you are feeling. Sharing your thoughts and feelings can be helpful in coping with your loss.

Others in your family or circle of friends might be finding it difficult to cope. Talking with them might help both you and them. Try not to avoid talking about your loved one. It can be helpful to ask a close friend to let others know how you would like to be approached. For example, the friend could tell people that you don't mind if they don't say anything about your loss when with you.

If you are worried about how you feel, or after some weeks you appear to be feeling worse, it might be worth speaking to your GP.

Children

If children are affected by the death, that should be acknowledged. Even very young children experience grief, and they need to be given the chance to talk about it. They might not yet have the words to express themselves or the ability to think things through.

There are some useful publications available for those supporting bereaved children (see page 10).

Key points:

- Loss affects everyone differently
- People cope with grief and loss in their own unique way
- There is no **correct** way to act or feel when you experience loss – you feel the way you feel

Further help

CRUSE Bereavement Care

National Helpline (Mon-Fri: 9.30am-5pm)
1677

Tel: 0808 808

www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

Marie Curie Cancer Care Scotland

www.mariecurie.org.uk

The Compassionate Friends

Supporting bereaved parents and their families

National Helpline

Tel: 0345 123 2304

www.tcf.org.uk

Way Foundation

www.wayfoundation.org.uk

The WAY Foundation provides a UK-wide self help social and support network for men and women widowed* under the age of 50 and their children. The aim is to help those widowed young to rebuild their lives by helping one another.

(*Widowed refers to the loss of a spouse or partner).

Winston's Wish

Helpline (Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm)

Tel: 08088 020 021

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Help for children after the death of a parent or sibling

Books

Collick, E. & Rayner, C. (1998) *Through Grief* Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd ISBN: 023251680

McNeill-Taylor, Liz (2000) *Living with Loss* Constable & Robinson
ISBN: 1841191051 (Personal experiences and advice, written from the perspective of a widow)

Lewis, C S (2001) *A Grief Observed* Faber & Faber
ISBN: 0571066240 (This is written from the perspective of a widower)

Books for those supporting children

Janney, Jill (2002) *Milly's Bug-Nut Winston's Wish*
ISBN: 09539123-4-5

Stickney, Dorris & Hernandez, Gloria O (1997) *Waterbugs and Dragonflies Explaining Death to Young Children* Pilgrim Press/United Church Press
ISBN: 1575420686X

Stokes, Julie A (2000) *The Secret C* Winston's Wish and Macmillan Cancer Relief ISBN: 0953912302 (Straight talking about cancer.)

Varley, Susan (1984) *Badger's Parting Gifts*

Wells, Rosemary (1998) *Helping Children Cope with Grief* Sheldon Press
ISBN: 085969559X

For a practical guide to cover times of bereavement, see *WHAT TO DO AFTER A DEATH IN SCOTLAND*, 7th Edition, published by the Scottish Executive.

This guide covers all the practical arrangements following a death:
Part 1 – everything from the time of death to the funeral;
Part 2 – possessions, property and children;
Part 3 – social security help for those who are left;
Part 4 – 'What else has to be done?'
Part 5 – useful addresses

(Available on www.scotland.gov.uk or from the Stationery Office Bookshop, 71 Lothian Road, Edinburgh EH3 9AZ, tel: 0870 606 55 66)

Notes

Reviewed 2019