



ST VINCENT'S
PRIVATE HOSPITAL
MELBOURNE

A FACILITY OF ST VINCENT'S HEALTH AUSTRALIA

Supporting your Grief

The death of a family member, a close friend or significant person in your life is a major event.

We hope this guide provides support and information to help you navigate life following a death.

“I thought I could describe a state;
make a map of sorrow.

Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process.”

C. S. Lewis

What is grief?

Grief is our response to loss.

Mourning is the process that one goes through adapting to the death of a person.

Bereavement defines the loss to which the person is trying to adapt.

Grief is a universal experience but is unique to each person and a natural response to loss. We all grieve in different ways. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and there is no time line. Some talk a lot about their loss and grief, others like to keep busy and others don't feel the need to do anything.

Grief can be affected by variables such as the relationship you had with the person who has died, their age, how the person died and social and historical factors. Your own personality and any concurrent stressors in your life will also impact on how you grieve.

“Grieving is a necessary passage and a difficult transition to finally letting go of sorrow – it is not a permanent rest stop.”

Dodinsky

“Grief and love are sisters, woven together from the beginning. Their kinship reminds us that there is no love that does not contain loss and no loss that is not a reminder of the love we carry for what we once held close.”

Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*

Impact of grief

Grief can affect us in a wide range of ways. Here are some examples of responses you may experience:

PHYSICAL RESPONSES YOU MAY EXPERIENCE

- Decreased appetite
- Shortness of breath
- Tiredness and lethargy
- Palpitations
- Sleeplessness or sleeping a lot
- Gastro-intestinal upsets
- Decreased/increased sexual drive
- Dry mouth

Remember to see your GP if you have any concerns with your health. People often neglect their own wellbeing when caring for someone else – now may be the time to attend to health checks you’ve been putting off.

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES YOU MAY EXPERIENCE

- Frequent bouts of unexpected tears
- Helplessness
- Sadness
- Anger/feeling short-tempered
- Yearning, longing, pining
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Wanting to be alone with your grief
- Feeling like you do not want to live
- Despair
- Numbness
- Relief
- Guilt
- Fear

Not everyone will experience all of these reactions. You may only experience a few. The intensity of these responses is likely to fluctuate, gradually reducing over time. However we experience our grief, the impact of a death of a family member/significant person of our life is far reaching.

COGNITIVE IMPACTS

- Forgetfulness
- Vagueness
- Distraction
- Obsessive thinking
- Confusion
- Denial
- Difficulty making decisions
- Hallucinations
- Inability to concentrate/think clearly
- Vivid dreams

Often people comment that they feel like they are going crazy.

BEHAVIOURAL RESPONSES YOU MAY EXPERIENCE

- Hyperactivity
- Lack of motivation
- Restlessness
- Low self esteem
- Social withdrawal

SPIRITUAL RESPONSES YOU MAY EXPERIENCE

- Questioning of previously held religious beliefs
- Questioning the meaning of life
- Loss of faith
- Sense of meaningless/pointlessness
- Strengthening of spiritual connections
- A sense of the presence of the person who has died

“Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.”

Earl Grollman

The first few days

Take time. Slow everything down.

Everyone grieves differently.

Many bereaved family members talk about not being able to really believe that the person has died, about needing to tell other family members and friends of not knowing what needs to be done.

Notifying family and friends and organising a funeral or memorial service are the first major tasks. You may prefer to call everyone yourself or accept assistance with making some of the calls.

ORGANISING A FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL SERVICE

A funeral or memorial service provides you with an opportunity to gather with friends and family to honour the life of your loved one who has died. It can be an important time to grieve, to remember and give thanks for their life.

Remember that there is no need to have a funeral or memorial service quickly. Families often come together and decide what best suits them.

WHO DO I NEED TO NOTIFY AFTER A DEATH?

You may find it necessary to notify some of the following organisations. This can be a daunting process for many, so prioritise the list and seek others to assist you.

- Employers
- Solicitor concerning Will and legal matters
- Medicare
- Accountant and/or financial planner
- Taxation office
- Electoral office
- Centrelink
- Department of Veteran Affairs
- Health Fund
- Banks
- Insurance companies
- Vic Roads re licence and car registration
- Health professionals e.g. dentist, doctor
- Clubs, public services e.g. library
- Subscriptions and charities
- Telecommunication providers re phone and internet
- Department of Immigration and Foreign Pension Authorities

“The agony is so great
And yet I will stand it.

Had I not loved so very much
I would not hurt so much
But goodness knows I would not
Want to diminish that precious life
By one fraction of any ounce.

I will hurt and be grateful to the hurt
For it bears witness to the depth of meanings
And for that I will be forever grateful.”

Elizabeth Kubler Ross

When supporting someone who is grieving...

It is important to allow the person to mourn in the way that is most appropriate for them, free from pressure or expectation.

WHAT DO I SAY? WHAT DO I DO?

- Avoid platitudes such as 'I know just how you feel' or 'he's in a better place now'. Such answers rarely console.
- Refer to the person who has died by her/his name.
- Be available to listen if the person wants to talk. Bereaved people often want to talk a lot about the person who died. Do not change or avoid the conversation.
- Be comfortable with silence. Sometimes it is your company that is needed.
- Don't judge – remember there is no right or wrong way to grieve – each person's grieving is unique.
- Weekends, evenings, anniversaries and holidays can be especially painful for the person. Extra contact and support at these times may be appreciated.
- Try to maintain your usual way of interacting with the person who is grieving. If it is a usual part of your relationship, continue with physical signs of comfort, such as touch and hugs.
- Try not to avoid the person. This will add to their sense of loss.
- Do not be afraid to cry or express feelings. This may help the person know that they are not alone and that someone understands and may help the person to express/release her/his feelings. However your emotional wellbeing should not be the responsibility of the bereaved.
- Be aware of the various reactions someone can experience when grieving.
- Sometimes a bereaved person may not want to talk. This does not mean they want you to stop contacting them. Reassure them it is okay to tell you this and you will continue to be there for them when they need and/or are ready.

- Offer help with practical matters e.g. meals, gardening, shopping, looking after family. Often very simple tasks are difficult when one is exhausted by grief. It is more helpful to offer specific assistance rather than asking the person what they want help with, as decision making can be difficult.
- Encourage the person to rest, eat well and care for themselves in a way that feels right for them.
- Remember that grief can last for a long time. Continue to visit, make calls and share your own life and thoughts – anything that reminds the person that they are valued and that you care for them.
- Children also experience grief and need time to talk and explore what is happening in the world around them.

“There are three needs of the griever: to find the words for the loss, to say the words aloud and to know the words have been heard.”

Victoria Alexander

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

- Be aware that you may feel uncomfortable and may feel you do not know what to say.
- Be aware that the self-esteem of the person may be low, and that they may initially appear self-centred. This will diminish with time.
- Be aware of your own feelings and needs. You may also be grieving. It is important to care for yourself at this time too.

“The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved, it simply wants to be witnessed exactly as it is.”

Parker Palmer

“You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it.
You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered.”

Elizabeth Kubler Ross

Who can you talk to?

It is helpful to talk things over with someone who understands and listens. Our hospital Pastoral Care staff offer compassionate emotional and/or spiritual support. They can be contacted on 94117147.

A grief counsellor is skilled and experienced in loss, grief and bereavement. They are independent, confidential and have completed specialist training.

Organisations that can provide assistance:

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

Counselling and Support Service
For information, referral, services and support
phone 9265 2100
www.grief.org.au

Compassionate Friends Victoria

229 Canterbury Road, Canterbury, 3126
24 Hour Grief Support Line:
phone 9888 4944 or 1300 064 068
www.compassionatefriendsvictoria.org.au

Grief Line

Community Telephone Counselling Service (free)
phone 1300 845 745
Monday–Sunday 8am–11pm
www.griefline.org.au

Kids Help Line

24 hour counselling service
phone 1800 551 800
www.kidshelpline.com.au

Lifeline

Provides a range of services including a free counselling service
phone 13 11 14
www.lifeline.org.au

Mercy Grief Services

Western suburbs
phone 9313 5700
www.health-services.mercyhealth.com.au/service/mercy-grief-services/

Hope Bereavement Care

Geelong / Barwon region
phone 4215 3358
www.bereavement.org.au

MensLine Australia

phone 1300 789 978
www.mensline.org.au

Your local GP

Be gentle with the one who walks with grief.

It is you, be gentle with yourself.

Swiftly forgive:

Walk slowly,

Pausing often:

Take time, be gentle

As you walk with grief.

Celtic Night Prayer



Developed in consultation with our patients

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