

Understanding bereavement

Bereavement and loss are universal. They affect us and everyone we know at some time in our lives.

When someone close dies

Only those who have been bereaved of someone close know how deep the pain goes, how grief comes in waves until it feels like there is no way forward and no way back, and how very real despair can feel. Only the bereaved know that it takes much longer than you expect to adjust to the changes forced upon you, and much, much longer than those around you allow.

In my first term at university I had an unexpected visit from my GP. She told me that my mother had died very suddenly. My parents were in Japan at the time and the rest of my family were also abroad. My world changed in an instant.

Not only did I lose my mother, my friend and mentor, but 'life as I had known it'.

Other painful losses since then have confirmed to me that losing someone close changes our world forever. But, although the journey through the 'valley of the shadow of death' can be long and painful, it is possible to find new meaning in life, a 'new normal' and joy again. Understanding bereavement and loss can help that difficult journey and also help us to help others who are grieving.

Barbie Reynolds

About grief

Working through grief is like a journey. It's a process that doesn't happen in nice ordered stages so that we can measure how far we are. We all grieve in different ways and it often feels like two steps forward and three steps back. The full impact of what has happened doesn't hit us all at once - it takes a long time to understand all the implications of our loss.

If we ignore our losses and don't allow ourselves to grieve, our grief won't go away. It will be waiting for us when we are ready to face it or we will take it with us into future losses. If we never face it - it will gnaw away inside us and come out in unhelpful ways. Talking about what has happened to us, and about the person who has died, is a healthy way to express our feelings and our pain. Bottling feelings up makes grief worse in the long run.

Grief - what is it and what does it do?

- It is a normal God-given process of coming to terms with loss.
- It affects every part of our lives - physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and spiritually.
- People grieve in different ways and it is easy to misjudge and misinterpret grief.
- If we didn't love and care so much - we wouldn't hurt so much when a special person dies. Grief is the price we pay for love.

- Realising the person has really gone and life will never be the same takes a long time, and can cause feelings of panic and disorientation.
- Tears are a healthy way to release painful emotions for both men and women.
- When we are hurting it is normal to feel angry with anyone who appears to have had some part in our pain or loss.
- Grieving takes a lot of courage and we need to give ourselves permission to grieve.
- Grieving takes time and energy.

About our feelings

It's normal... to feel fear, anger, frustration, as well as deep pain and sadness and even joy at where our loved one is now. But...we need to allow ourselves to feel the pain in order to be healed.



About grief continued from page 1

We can... find healthy ways to express our feelings. Remember... feelings are neither right nor wrong. It's what we do with them that counts.

It's OK... to feel our feelings even though sometimes we feel overwhelmed and want to run away from it all. We don't have to feel brave all the time.

And it's OK... to feel angry - even at the person who has died. Try to express your anger in ways that don't hurt others.

Important things to remember

- We may not be able to trust everyone, but there are people we can trust who will let us talk as much as we need to.

- We need to remind ourselves that no one can replace the special person/people in our lives. But we can let other people into our lives who care about us.
- Sometimes help and support come in ways and from people we don't expect.
- We need to remind ourselves that we will grieve our loved one on-and-off throughout life - but we can still have happy, fulfilling lives.
- We need never forget those we love.

Barbie Reynolds

Bethany's story

Life seemed so perfect, on holiday with our families, in beautiful Snowdonia. We proudly watched our delightful daughters, Bethany (7), Florence (3½) and Alice (1½), chasing puppies around the garden. We knew how special our family life was, but that was about to change.

Around midnight Bethany began to cough - nothing unusual, as she'd had a virus. I settled her, although she continued to be restless, and woke again coughing at 3am. She complained of a headache and was wheezing. A drink of water and her inhaler settled her but at 3.20am she asked for more inhaler. I went to call NHS Direct to check whether another dose was appropriate. Within seconds I heard Dave's deafening scream. Bethany had got up and her face was turning purple. I raced up the stairs but knew something terrible had happened and saw my Bethany's face turning blue. She walked towards me and fell to the floor. I raced to wake my father's girlfriend, who is a nurse. Together we tried to resuscitate Bethany and for a while it seemed successful as her colour returned. The paramedics arrived and took over, but it was no good - a mucus plug had blocked her airways and she was dead. All that life, love and joy gone. All those plans, dreams and smiles.

Being in a strange house and area added to the unreality. She looked so normal, so peaceful, when we saw her at the undertaker's. We felt such joy being with her. We said goodbye, that we loved her, how unfair it was and sorry we did not save her. Going to unfamiliar places with strangers to hear the autopsy results, to somehow sign the death certificate, to organise the undertaker, coffin and her journey back to our home; we were numb, scared and

broken. Our precious little girl was gone.

Once home I felt she'd be there somewhere, waiting. Denial took a long time to pass. Each morning I'd wake expecting her to be there and feeling euphoric, then that heavy broken-heartedness dropped on me as I realised she was not in her bed. Wherever we went, we saw her fair hair, her walk, heard her laugh - but it was always someone else. We heard her in every squeak or movement in the house. We so wanted to know she had gone to heaven.

We spent so much time going round and round - where had we missed it, how did we let our little girl slip through our fingers? What should we have done? Why Bethany? Had we done something wrong? Had she been punished? We never found answers and eventually realised that if we had, other questions would replace them. Questions still come back to haunt us, but less often now. Often, in good times, they seem to kick in again, triggering guilt and depressive periods. I suppose you learn to deal with these in your own way.

I remember some of the tiredness, numbness, mental fog, my husband's manic busyness, the cold, the physical pain - 3 years on these strange symptoms still return. Much of it, though, is like a dream. We have somehow survived so far, largely thanks to the caring, listening and practical support of our friends and the Bereaved Parents' Network who showed us that we were not alone. Others had walked this painful way too - the things we felt were normal. Night becomes day again and again, as we try to carry on.

Liz Austin (Bethany's mother)

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Paul's story

The split second that changed my life forever...

We heard the news that my wife had breast cancer in January 2001, on the eve of our daughter's third birthday. Just a few days later, my wife was in hospital. Months of chemo and radiotherapy followed. Thankfully, when we were feeling that we just couldn't take anymore, the treatment finished. Things looked good and we celebrated with a trip to Disneyland Paris.

In early 2002, my wife again began to feel unwell and secondary bone cancer was diagnosed. I found this unbelievable and struggled for many weeks to come to terms with it. Months of treatment followed and our lives once more revolved around hospital appointments.

In October 2002, she had to be admitted to hospital for some nursing care. Two days later I got a call from the hospital at 2am to say she was very uncomfortable. My wife died 6 hours later. Her last words still ring in my ears: 'Jesus is here, I'm going to die'. I was completely numb and in total shock. Having to go home and tell our four-year old daughter was the most painful thing I have ever had to do.

The cherished memories never fade. The pain of our loss never goes away. But life has to go on. As we slowly rebuild our lives, we somehow manage to get through these often very difficult times when feelings of loneliness and isolation stare us in the face.

I heard about 'A Different Journey' and plucked up the courage to attend a Breakthrough weekend. I soon felt it was a safe place to be. It was liberating to talk to people who actually understood my situation. Now I am at the point where I want to help others. I have become a volunteer with the Befriender's Network. If I can give someone support on their 'different journey' then I shall be glad to do so.

"Only the bereaved know that it takes much longer than you expect ... and much longer than society allows."

Things that help and things that don't

- Please keep phoning long after our loss BUT try not to come out with platitudes or trite answers about heaven.
- Do talk about our lost one by name - we love to hear about them BUT please don't tell us to count our blessings for those left in our family - we love them dearly but we grieve for the one who has gone and won't ever come back.
- Please encourage us to be kind to ourselves BUT not to push ourselves to meet other people's expectations or become overloaded.
- Please keep talking to us even if you don't know what to say BUT try not to give us the answers - sometimes there just aren't any!
- Try to be specific in your offers of help and understand that making decisions can be so hard BUT sometimes we just need you to BE there with us.
- Please still invite us to events and parties BUT understand if sometimes we feel we just can't face it or else feel we need to leave early as it is too painful.
- If you share in our sense of loss, please do tell us - it helps to ease our isolation BUT try not to say you know how we feel. The pain each person feels is as unique as each individual relationship with the one who has died.
- Don't be embarrassed at our tears and be willing to cry with us too BUT know that, in time, we will laugh again and enjoy remembering the fun times we have had together.
- Please tell us about your memories of our loved one BUT please don't avoid us - it hurts so much to see someone cross the road rather than meet us.

However, for those who want to support, all that can sound like a daunting tall order! Those who are bereaved are hurting deeply and their behaviour may at times be irrational. Please don't take offence if your help is rejected and please be brave enough to try again and stick with us on this long and painful journey of grief that we have to travel for the rest of our lives. Those further along the road have promised us that it won't always feel this bad and in time we will find a 'new normal'.

Those of us who are bereaved need to come to understand that the world cannot grind to a halt because of us and our situations, although we often wish it would. We too need to learn sensitivity and realise that those with whom we may feel angry or hurt are sometimes the very people who love us the most, who desperately want to help us, but just don't know how, and seeing us grieving so deeply causes them real pain too.

Compiled by Mike and Kath Coulson

What the bereaved say they have experienced

Physical sensations: such as numbness, pain, exhaustion, aching arms, shivering, difficulty with breathing and swallowing.

Feelings: such as fear, guilt, helplessness, sense of detachment from life, being out of control, time distortions, depression and loss of energy.

Behaviour: including compulsive eating, loss of memory, change of sleep patterns, hyper-activity, living on adrenaline, inability to handle stress.

Thoughts: (which can sometimes be irrational and obsessive) include - 'I'm going mad; I wish I could die too.' 'Will I ever feel joy again?'; 'What would they be doing now?'; 'What about the time I was angry with him/her?'; 'What could I have done differently?'; 'Was it my fault?'

Practical suggestions of ways to help

- Provide a meal rota for a few weeks (or months) for the family.
- Remember birthdays and anniversaries - a phone call, a card, or flowers can mean so much.
- Never tire of listening to the bereaved talk - often we need to repeat events again and again to secure them in our minds and help us realise the reality of it all.
- Listen to the happy memories too - and tell us some of yours.
- Offer to help with the planning of the funeral - months are spent planning a wedding, but there are only days to plan a funeral and say goodbye to someone special.
- Offer to do ironing, hoovering, shopping or other everyday tasks which may just be too much for the family to cope with.
- Suggest or even arrange a break away for the family after the initial turmoil has died down - the pain will still be there but time away together may be beneficial.
- Help to remove dead flowers from the house - seeing them beginning to decay can also be distressing.
- Offer to accompany members of the family on 'firsts' - e.g. trip to the supermarket, church, school, dentist, and be ready to help out if awkward or upsetting situations arise.
- Offer to inform dentists, opticians, etc. who may not otherwise hear until an appointment is due.

Quotes and definitions

Selwyn Hughes:

- The death of a parent is a loss of the past
- The death of a partner is a loss of the present
- The death of a child is the loss of the future

"If I snap at you for saying something 'helpful' please forgive me and try to understand that it came from my intense pain. Your dog might bite you when you try to pick him up at the side of the road after he's been hit by a car. That wouldn't mean he hates you or is ungrateful, just that he's been hurt and your touch - well intentioned though it be - has added more pain."

Elsie Wieben

The Compassionate Friends, Spring Newsletter, 1985.

Some definitions

Bereavement = what happens to you when you lose somebody or something important to you ('reave' comes from an old English word 'to rob').

Grief = all the feelings, thoughts and reactions we have when someone close to us dies or we experience a major loss.

Mourning = what we do in response to our loss. In Western society this is sometimes seen as unhealthy or even morbid. But death and dying are part of life and allowing ourselves and others to mourn is important for a healthy recovery.

Extra help

Support

The **Bereaved Parents' Network** is Care for the Family's support network for those who have lost a son or daughter, whatever the age or circumstance. It offers:

- A Day for Bereaved Parents
- A Weekend for Bereaved Parents
- A regular email Newsletter
- Web based resources
www.careforthefamily.org.uk/bpn
www.careforthefamily.org.uk/supportnet

A Different Journey is Care for the Family's support network for those who have been widowed early in life. It offers:

- A Different Journey Day
- A Different Journey Weekend
- A regular email Newsletter
- Web based resources
www.careforthefamily.org.uk/adj
www.careforthefamily.org.uk/supportnet

Details of other Bereavement Support Organisations can be found at:
www.careforthefamily.org.uk/article/?article=434

Care for the Family also seeks to offer support to Single and Step families. Further details at:
www.careforthefamily.org.uk/spf
www.careforthefamily.org.uk/stepfamily

For details of all networks, contact Care for the Family,
Freepost (CF4636), Cardiff CF15 7GZ
Tel: (029) 2081 0800. Web: www.careforthefamily.org.uk

Bookshelf

When Life is Changed Forever

Life can be lived fully again, although it will never be the same.
Rick Taylor
ISBN 0890819718

Living with Bereavement

Practical, emotional and spiritual help for anyone living with bereavement.
Sue Mayfield
978-0-7459-5295-6

Tracing the Rainbow

A look at bereavement through the eyes of a psychiatrist and those who have mourned.
Pablo Martinez & Ali Hull
1-85078-487-6

Finding your way after the Suicide of Someone you love

Compassionate and practical guide to the issues of survivors of suicide.
David Biebel & Suzanne Foster
978-0-310-25757-8

A Grace Disguised - How the Soul Grows Through Loss

Jerry Sittser
ISBN 0-310-21931-0

Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine

Offers practical and sensitive support for bereaved children with a helpful series of activities and exercises.
Diana Crossley ISBN 1-86989058-2