



Has someone died?

Restoring hope



Has someone died?

Coping with bereavement

The death of someone close can be shattering. Everyone experiences grief differently; there is no 'normal' or 'right' way to grieve. How we react will be influenced by many different things, including our age and personality, our cultural background and religious beliefs, our previous experiences of bereavement, our circumstances and how we cope with loss.

This leaflet is about what you can do to help yourself, how others can help you, how you can help other people who may be struggling to cope after the death of someone close, and where you can get more advice and support.

Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse is a national charity that provides advice, information and support to anyone who has been bereaved (children, young people and adults), whenever or however the death occurred. The service is provided by trained, experienced volunteers, and is confidential and free.

Cruse provides face-to-face, telephone, email and website support both post- and pre-bereavement. We have a national helpline, and local services throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our sister organisation Cruse Scotland provides services in Scotland.

We offer:

- someone to talk to face-to-face, or on the telephone
- online support
- groups – some bereaved people find it helpful to talk to others in similar circumstances
- information – about many aspects of bereavement and other sources of help and support
- face-to-face, telephone helpline and online support for children and young people.

For help and support and for details of your local Cruse service:

- visit our website at www.cruse.org.uk
- telephone our national helpline freephone on 0808 808 1677
- email us at helpline@cruse.org.uk

Children and young people can:

- telephone our young people's freephone helpline on 0808 808 1677
- visit Hope Again – our website designed by and for young people – at www.hopeagain.org.uk (see page 17 of this leaflet)
- email Hope Again at hopeagain@cruse.org.uk

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What people tell us

After a death you may initially feel shocked, numb, guilty, angry, afraid and full of pain. These feelings may change to feelings of longing, sadness, loneliness – even hopelessness and fear about the future.

These feelings are not unnatural, or wrong. They are all 'normal' reactions to what may be the most difficult experience of your life. Over time these feelings should lessen.

Every person's experience of grief is unique, but these are some of the things people often say when they come to us for help following a bereavement.

'I don't feel anything. I feel numb.'

The shock can make you feel numb. You may feel confused and lost. This should pass with time. You may find initially you can carry on as if nothing has happened. This is a way of managing the pain and loss and can help you get through the early days when there is so much to do.

'I feel out of control. My emotions are all over the place – one minute I'm OK, the next minute I'm in tears.'

Mood swings can be very frightening but they are normal. You may feel as if you are on an emotional roller coaster. You may feel overwhelmed and find it difficult to do even everyday tasks. It can be hard to concentrate. Some people find it helpful to throw themselves into work; others find they need to take some time out of day-to-day life and activities. Everyone needs to find their own way of coping.

'I can't eat or sleep.'

Physical reactions to a death are very common. You may lose your appetite, have difficulty sleeping, or feel exhausted all the time. People are also often very vulnerable to physical illnesses after a bereavement. If you are not sleeping well, you may feel mentally drained and unable to think straight. These are normal reactions to distress and loss, and should pass in time. But you may want to consult your GP if the problems persist.

'I keep hearing his voice. I'm worried that I'm going mad.'

It may take you some time to grasp what has happened. Don't worry. It is quite normal to see the person, to hear their voice, or find yourself talking to them, especially if they were an important presence in your life. It can often happen when you least expect it, as if your mind has temporarily 'forgotten' that they have died.

'I feel such pain. I keep on thinking again and again about what happened. I keep going over every detail of her last few days.'

This again is a common reaction, particularly where the death was sudden and unexpected, or occurred in traumatic circumstances. It is the mind's way of dealing with what has happened. You may feel immense emotional pain – some people can find this overwhelming and frightening.

'I feel so guilty.'

A lot of people talk to us about feelings of guilt – for being alive, when the person is dead; for not having somehow prevented their death; for having let them down in some way. You may find yourself constantly thinking: 'If only...' If only I had contacted the doctor sooner, if only I had showed them how much I cared when they were alive. You may be constantly asking yourself 'why?' Why them? Why did this happen to us? Why didn't I do more? Death can seem cruel and unfair. It can make people feel powerless and helpless. These emotions can be very painful to live with, but feeling guilty will not help. It is important to try to focus on the good times, and not to dwell on things in the past that you cannot change.

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'I feel so depressed. Life has no meaning without her. I can't see the point of going on.'

Hopelessness and despair are understandable reactions when someone who has been a central part of your life dies. It is not unusual for people facing bereavement to think about their own death, and even think about taking their own life as a way of escaping the pain. It is important to talk to people you trust about these thoughts, and to remember that life does go on, and while there will always be someone missing in your life, there are many things that are worth living for. It may be helpful to talk through these feelings of hopelessness and despair with someone experienced in bereavement support or bereavement counselling.

'I feel so angry with him. How could he leave me like this?'

You may find yourself facing family, financial and domestic responsibilities with which you don't feel able to cope. You may feel very angry that suddenly you have to deal with all these things. You may feel angry with someone you feel is responsible in some way for the death. Anger is a completely normal part of grief. It is a

perfectly healthy and understandable response to feeling out of control, powerless and abandoned.

'Everyone just vanished after the funeral. Now friends won't look me in the eye when I see them in the street, and no one calls round any more.'

Friends and acquaintances may seem to be avoiding you, particularly once the funeral is over. This is often because they don't know how to behave or what to say. You may want to talk about the person who has died, and find that people keep trying to change the subject, or suggest that it is 'bad for you' to talk about them so much. Talking about the person who has died is an important part of the grieving process, and hopefully there are people in your life who will listen and understand, and be able to share your memories.

'I can't concentrate at work.'

People can find it hard to concentrate following a death, which may create difficulties at work. Explain this to your manager. You may be able to come to some temporary arrangement about shorter working hours, or other ways of helping you through this difficult time.

'I thought I'd be over this by now. It's been months and I still find myself bursting into tears.'

Sometimes it is just when you think you should be feeling better that you feel as if you are falling apart. In the early days following a bereavement, family and friends often rally around and it is only later, when everyone has gone home and you are left with your grief, that the reality of the death hits you. The physical and emotional loneliness can be very hard to bear. There is no time limit on grief. If you feel that you are struggling with your emotions or that you are not coping with life, then it may be time to seek help and support.

'Since our mum died my sister and I row all the time.'

Even close family members who are sharing the same loss will respond differently to a bereavement. Everyone has their own way of grieving, and their own ways of showing and coping with their feelings, but sometimes this can be hard for others to understand. A death can bring people together, but it can also create huge tensions and strains within families. Conflicts can emerge – for example, about funeral

arrangements, legacies and responsibilities for dealing with the dead person's possessions and property.

'I don't know how I'll cope with the anniversary of her death.'

You may be particularly affected on and near significant anniversaries for many years after a death. Some people find it helpful to plan in advance what they are going to do on those days, to avoid feeling left alone with their emotions. Some people create a tradition of visiting special places that remind them of the person who has died. Others find this too painful. There is no right and wrong way to mark these anniversaries. You need to find the way that is right for you.

If you need reassurance, or information, or simply to talk to someone, ring the Cruse national helpline on 0844 477 9400.

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Taking care of yourself

It is important that you take care of yourself following a bereavement.

One of the most helpful things is to talk about the person who has died and your relationship with them. Who you talk to will depend on you. It may be your family, friends, a faith/spiritual adviser, your GP or a support organisation.

Do.....

- Talk to other people about the person who has died, about your memories and your feelings.
- Look after yourself. Eat properly and try to get enough rest (even if you can't sleep).
- Give yourself time and permission to grieve.
- Seek help and support if you feel you need it. Tell people what you need.

Don't....

- Isolate yourself.
- Keep your emotions bottled up.
- Think you are weak for needing help.
- Feel guilty if you are struggling to cope.
- Turn to drugs or alcohol – the relief will only be temporary.

Helping other people

If you are supporting someone else following a bereavement – family, friends, work colleagues – these are some suggestions that may help you, and them.

People who have been bereaved may want to talk about the person who has died. One of the most helpful things you can do is simply listen, and give them time and space to grieve. Offering specific practical help – not vague general offers – can also be very helpful.

Do...

- Be there for the person who is grieving – pick up the phone, write a letter/email, call by or arrange to visit.
- Accept that everyone grieves in their own way – there is no 'normal' way.
- Encourage the person to talk.
- Listen to them.
- Create an environment in which the bereaved person can be themselves and show their feelings, rather than having to put on a front.
- Be aware that grief can take a long time.
- Contact the person at difficult times – special anniversaries and birthdays, for example.
- Offer practical help.

Don't...

- Avoid someone who has been bereaved.
- Use clichés: 'I understand how you feel'; 'You'll get over it'; 'Time heals.'
- Tell them it's time to move on, they should be over it – how long a person needs to grieve is entirely individual.

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Looking to the future

Life will never be the same again after a bereavement, but the grief and pain should lessen and there will come a time when you are able to adapt and adjust and cope with life without the person who has died.

Many people worry that they will forget the person who has died – how they looked, their voice, the good times they had together. There are so many ways you can keep their memory alive. These are just a few suggestions:

- talk about them and your special memories
- write down your memories
- keep an album of photos
- keep a collection of some of their special possessions
- do something that commemorates them, such as planting a tree, paying for a park bench, or making a donation to a charity.



Helping bereaved children and young people

Although most of the information in this part of the leaflet refers to younger children, much will also apply to young people in their teens.

Uncertain but certain

It's uncertain.

You're gone. But not gone.

You're lost. But not lost.

You're here. But not here.

It's certain.

You're always in my thoughts. No matter what.

Life will go on but my memories of you will flow along with it.

Forever, not never. I miss you.

In loving memory of my grandma, who is always in my thoughts.

A poem by Katie

How children react

Children are no different to adults when it comes to bereavement. There is no 'right way' to react and every child will respond differently. How they react will be affected by a lot of different things – their age, their understanding of death, and how close they were to the person who has died.

Like adults, children may feel hopeless and despairing when someone they love dies. They may feel angry that the person has left them; they may question why it has happened and blame themselves. They may express their feelings of loss and pain in different and sometimes, to an adult, surprising ways – it may seem as if they do not care.

Because children cannot sustain emotional pain in the way that adults can, they tend to move in and out of grief. They may appear to be coping much better than we expect. It is important to remember, too, that children may not have the words to express their feelings, and may show how they feel through their behaviour.

Children who are bereaved may react in some of these ways:

- **mood swings** – happy one minute, and very angry or distressed the next
- **unable to concentrate** – on schoolwork or other focused activities for some time after the death
- **quiet and withdrawn** – some children find it difficult to share and express their thoughts and feelings, and may prefer to be alone
- **disturbed sleep patterns** – some children may find it difficult to settle to sleep for a while. They may wake in the night and have bad dreams
- **behaving like a younger child** – many children start doing things they did when they were younger, like sucking their thumb, wetting, or clinging to you
- **difficulties with friends** – the death may make a child feel different from their friends and less confident with other people. They may be bullied, or even bully others
- **breaking rules, stealing, truanting from school** – a child may feel there is no point in behaving well

- **being very good** – some children may become frightened of causing further upset. They may be hoping that, if they are very good, the dead person will come back. Some children work very hard at school, or behave like an older child and try to take care of the adults around them
- **being aggressive towards other people, or behaving destructively** – with toys, for example.

For the majority of children, these behaviours will pass in time. If you are worried, ask your GP or a support organisation for help.

If your child is harming him or herself or talking about wanting to be dead, you should seek help urgently.

What can you do?

Cruse has extensive experience of supporting parents, carers and people working with bereaved children and young people, and of providing support to bereaved children and young people themselves.

Below are some suggestions, based on our experience, for what you can do to support a child/young person who has been bereaved.

One of the first things to bear in mind is the importance of looking after yourself, for your children's sake as well as your own. You will be better able to help your child if you are taking care of yourself too.

You may not feel able to talk to your child about some of these difficult issues when you yourself are very distressed. You could ask a trusted friend or relative, whom the child or young person also trusts and knows well, to talk to them.

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'What should I tell him?'

It is best if you or someone who knows your child well tells them about the person's death. They should be told as soon as possible. Explain that you have sad news and then talk to the child honestly and openly, using words they can understand. Many adults worry that they will frighten a child by telling them the truth but a child's own ideas about what has happened may be far more frightening to them. Use words like 'death' and 'dead', not 'gone to sleep' or 'gone away'. Tell them what happened. Explain that death happens to everyone at some time – but that not everyone dies at the same age and in the same circumstances, and most people live a long time.

You may need to tell younger children several times that when a person dies they will not come back. You could explain that the body no longer works, and that the dead person does not eat, sleep or breathe.

People have different ideas about what happens to the essence of a person after death, and it may help to share your own ideas with your child. Bear in mind that younger children may find it harder to understand, and may ask more questions. Answer these as simply, honestly and truthfully as possible. If you don't know the answers, say so.

Many children worry that something they said or did, or didn't say or do, caused the person to die. It is important that they are allowed to talk about this and are reassured that this is not the case.

You may have to repeat these things several times over the weeks and months following the death, especially with younger children.



'Should I show my feelings?'

Don't hide your feelings. If you are sad, don't hide your tears. If children see you cry, it will let them know that it is alright for them to cry too. If you are angry, explain why, so your child doesn't think it is their fault. If you are feeling overwhelmed by grief and unable to care for your child, you could ask a relative or close friend, whom both of you know and trust, to help for a while. Reassure your child that it's ok to talk to other people if they want to.

'Should I let her view the body?'

It is important to consider carefully whether it might help a child or young person to see the body, if they want to. Doing so may help them understand that the person has died and is not coming back, and that it is time to say goodbye. Explain that they can touch the body and put something in the coffin if they want to. Tell them what they will see, and what the body will look and feel like. Check if they still want to before they go in to see the body. Reassure them that it is fine to change their mind, or to look from a distance if this is what they want to do.

'Should I take her to the funeral?'

In most cases we would say that a child should be given the choice to go to the funeral if they want to, unless there are particular religious, cultural or family reasons not to. Going to a funeral can help children understand the finality of death and join family and friends in saying goodbye. Explain what the funeral is for and what will happen. Explain that there are no 'shoulds' about how they feel at the funeral.

Include your child in planning the funeral and find ways in which they can take part in the service if they want to. Children may want to write something to be read out during the funeral, or put something in the coffin, or they may want to say something themselves. It is important that they do not feel under any pressure to do this. Explain to them that they can change their mind, even at the last moment.

You could ask someone you and your child trust to help take care of them during the ceremony, to explain to them what is going on and to go out with them at any point if they wish to do so.

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If your child decides not to go to the funeral, make it clear that this is ok. Try to find other ways to involve them – for example, by taking photographs and writing down and talking about what happened at the service. Try to work out with them other ways they can say goodbye.

'How can I make sure he doesn't forget her?'

Children and young people may need help to hold on to memories. They may want to draw and write their memories of times spent with the person who has died. You could help them create some kind of memory box containing items that remind them of the person who has died – photos, drawings, a piece of clothing, something picked up on a walk together, something that smells of their perfume/aftershave. The box can be added to over time. Older children may prefer to put the box together on their own.

'What should I tell the school?'

School can provide stability and routine in what can be a chaotic time for your child. It is important to tell the school what has happened so teachers can be sensitive to your

child's needs and understand why they may be behaving in particular ways. It may be helpful for you and your child to agree with teaching staff what the other children should be told. Teachers may need to be aware that particular anniversaries and dates will be significant for your child. Keep in regular contact with the school to discuss how your child is coping.

Do...

- Be honest in your explanations.
- Show your own grief – it gives your child permission to do so.
- Give plenty of reassurance and affection. Let them know you love them and will be there for them.
- Keep to usual routines as much as possible.
- Look after yourself.
- Be aware that changes in your child's behaviour may be an expression of grief.
- Take time to listen to and answer their questions. Let them know their feelings are important.
- Help them remember the person who has died.
- Take things one day at a time.

Don't...

- Try to hide your own grief. It's ok to cry in front of your child, but try not to overwhelm them.
- Tell your child not to worry and not to be sad.
- Feel like you have to have all the answers and get it right all the time.
- Be surprised by a child's ability to set their grief aside and have fun and play. Play enables children to express themselves and release anxiety.

Hope Again

Hope Again is the youth website of Cruse Bereavement Care. Hope Again has been designed by bereaved young people as a safe, interactive place where young people aged 11-18 can share their stories about loss and begin to find ways of hoping again. They can also find a listening ear, information and advice.

The site includes video links and memory-making ideas, along with Pinterest, blogs and photos. Our Youth Advisory Group helped design and shape the website, and our trained and supported Youth Response Team and growing Hope Again Youth Team responds personally to emails from the many young people who click on the "Contact Us" button.

Often, teenagers are more likely to seek help online rather than face-to-face, and respond better to peer support than adult support. Hope Again benefits young people and the adults who care for them by giving them a voice and compassionately responding to them in the midst of their grief.

Has someone died?

Cruse offers several different kinds of support for young people. Our local Areas and Branches offer face-to-face support. Young people can also visit Hope Again at www.hopeagain.org.uk, telephone the freephone helpline **0808 808 1677** or email Hope Again at hopeagain@cruse.org.uk

Coping day to day

Spend time with your child. Show them you love them. Keep talking about the person who has died, and encourage your child to talk about them too. Let them know it's ok to show their feelings – to feel sad, to laugh, and to feel angry. It will help them if you are able to show your feelings too.

Try to maintain routines as far as possible, as these provide a sense of security. Try to keep to your child's usual bedtime, as far as possible, and encourage them to keep up with schoolwork and their other usual activities and interests.

Your child may become worried or upset when you go out. Say where you are going and what time you will be coming home.

Grief is normal and natural. There is no time limit. As a child grows up there may be times in their life when they will feel the absence of the person more acutely. These may be sad times for both of you, when you and your child will need to talk and show your feelings.

Children and young people, like any bereaved person, need understanding, time, space, reassurance, to be held and to be listened to when they need to talk. Over time, with love and support, children and young people can be helped to get through this difficult and painful time. If you telephone Cruse, we can suggest leaflets that you can give your child, and recommend books they may find helpful. There are a number of other organisations that offer specialist help and support to bereaved families and children and young people. You can get information about services available in your area by contacting Cruse or your GP.



Working towards equality and diversity

How to contact Cruse Bereavement Care

National Helpline freephone number

0808 808 1677

Email helpline@cruse.org.uk

Cruse website www.cruse.org.uk

Cruse young people's website

www.hopeagain.org.uk

Central Office

Cruse Bereavement Care

PO Box 800

Richmond TW9 1RG

Telephone **0208 939 9530**

Fax **0208 940 1671**

Email info@cruse.org.uk

Cruse Northern Ireland

Knockbracken Healthcare Park

Saintfield Road

Belfast BT8 8BH

Telephone **028 9079 2419**

Cruse Wales

Ty Energlyn

Cwrt Llanfabon

Caerphilly

CF83 2TP

Telephone **029 2088 6913**

Cruse Isle of Man

6c Village Walk

Onchan

Isle of Man IM3 4EA

Telephone **01624 668 191/2**

In Scotland services are provided to the same standard by

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland

Riverview House

Friarton Road

Perth PH2 8DF

National phoneline **0845 600 2227**

Email info@crusescotland.org.uk

www.crusescotland.org.uk

Cruse relies on donations to fund our work. If you would like to make a donation, please contact Cruse central office at the address above, or visit our website www.cruse.org.uk

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