



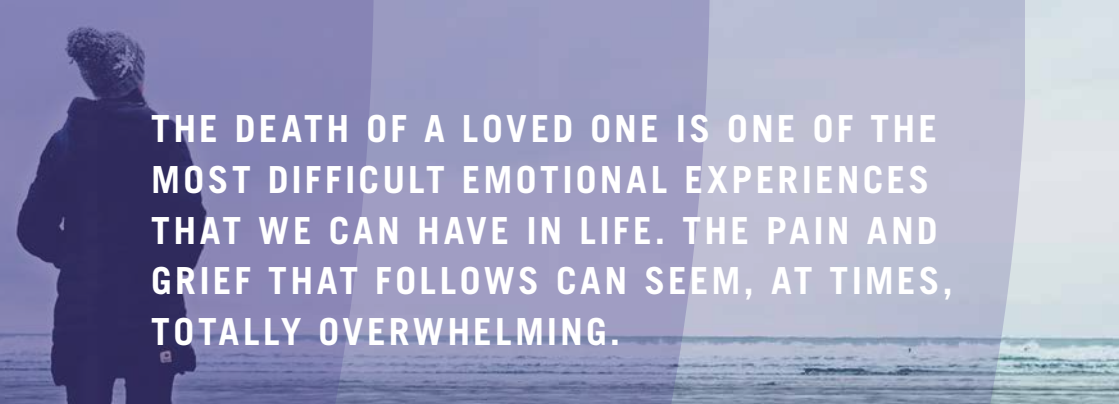
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# SUPPORTING YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Coping with death and grief  
during the Covid-19 pandemic

OTHERS



**THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE IS ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES THAT WE CAN HAVE IN LIFE. THE PAIN AND GRIEF THAT FOLLOWS CAN SEEM, AT TIMES, TOTALLY OVERWHELMING.**

Grief is often portrayed as one feeling, but it includes a range of emotions and reactions which affect how we think and how we behave. It is personal and will vary depending on your relationship with your loved one, the circumstances of the death and the experiences after the death. Grief often continues long after the death that triggers it.

Although extremely painful, grief is a normal response to any loss and is a way of helping us heal. While life may never be the same again, grief helps us readjust and cope with life without our loved one. It helps us find ways of maintaining our bond with our loved one when they are no longer physically present.

Being bereaved can be an extremely lonely time. Talking with friends and family can be one of the most helpful ways to cope after someone close to us dies.

One of the particular challenges of loss during the Covid-19 pandemic is that increasing numbers of people and households are being told to

self-isolate or socially distance from friends and family.

This may mean you find yourself physically alone during this time, which can increase your feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Or you may be isolating as a family together, which may be supportive at times but may also make tensions and arguments bigger and more upsetting. Children and teenagers may find not being able to be with their friends difficult, and families may find keeping them occupied more challenging when also dealing with their own emotions.

As well as the emotional challenges, many practical considerations may arise, such as getting help with meals and shopping, as family and friends may also be isolating or preoccupied with their own family's situation.

Grief at any time is difficult and painful, and whilst Covid-19 may present additional challenges to the process, you will also experience all of the normal pain of loss and separation.

## WHAT FEELINGS AND THOUGHTS MIGHT YOU EXPERIENCE AFTER THE DEATH OF YOUR LOVED ONE?

People who have experienced the death of someone close often describe experiencing some or all of the following feelings and thoughts. The social distancing measures required due to Covid-19 may also result in additional feelings and thoughts.

Shock, numbness or disbelief, especially immediately afterwards when people often report difficulty accepting or believing what has happened. This may be especially true during the pandemic, when you may not have the opportunity to see your loved one at the time of death or afterwards.

Anguish and despair, which can be accompanied by real pain and physical heartache as the reality of the loss sinks in. This may be increased as a result of not being able to have a full funeral during the pandemic. You may feel that the death has not been formally marked, that the person hasn't 'had the send of they deserved'. It does not give a sense of 'closure' nor brings community support.

Anger and irritability and the associated questioning of 'Why did this have to happen?'. This can include feeling that the death was untimely (even if expected) because it has been caused by the pandemic. This may also arise from feeling like the death of an older person is considered less important than for younger people during the pandemic. Anger can result in feeling that someone is to 'blame' for the death. For example, oneself for infecting the person, or people who are not social distancing, and government policies.

Restlessness or agitation, which are some of the typical physical side-effects of grief. For example, trouble sleeping or difficulty concentrating.

Longing or yearning for the person who has died. This normal part of grief is often associated with thinking that they have seen or heard the person who has died, and while this can be an upsetting experience, it should not cause alarm.

Loneliness, even when surrounded by others. This may be increased by being in isolation or having more limited contact with family and friends due to the restrictions in place.

Guilt, for things they may have/have not said or done. There can also be guilt that you are still alive when your loved one has died, or that you feel relieved that a loved one has died after a long illness or suffering. This may be especially true during the pandemic where a loved one may have had to go into intensive care, despite having indicated they wanted to die at home; or the person not being able to return home after recovery from Covid-19 due to existing or new health concerns.

Worry or fear for what lies ahead. There may be ongoing worry about your own health, or for other family members concerning Covid-19 infection. This may delay the reality of your loss due to being distracted by worries for others.

Deep sadness as you miss the one you love.

## HOW MIGHT YOUR BEHAVIOUR CHANGE AS A RESULT?

How feelings are expressed varies from person to person, but it is very normal for feelings to change suddenly without warning. Some people liken this to being on 'an emotional rollercoaster'. Other people describe how their behaviour changes too. For example, people who are normally outgoing may start to avoid family and friends. The desire to talk constantly about the loved one may change to not being able to mention their name. Some people get comfort being somewhere that they associate with their loved one, while others will avoid such places as they are too painful.

Given the global impact of Covid-19, it is hard to escape from information about its impact and the losses that others are experiencing. Activities such as watching the news on TV, reading the papers, and spending a lot of time scrolling and reading things online may bombard you with information that will trigger your own feelings of sadness. You may feel overwhelmed by the wider losses and need to take some time out from such information in order to concentrate on looking after yourself and your own loss. This can make you feel guilty, but remember to be kind to yourself. In grief, you can only do the best you can.

Grief affects not just our emotional wellbeing, but can have an impact on physical health as well. You may notice changes in your sleep and appetite. It is normal to feel tired, often simply because of the intense emotions and stress experienced. While this may increase your need for sleep, you may experience disrupted sleep and struggle to have an uninterrupted night's rest.

Often people report a fear of sleeping because waking up is like being bereaved all over again. Your sleep should improve in time and of its own accord, but if it causes you concern, speak to your doctor or other health

care professional who will be able to offer you further help and advice.

It can be common to see, hear or feel the presence of someone who has died. This can be more common in the case of traumatic bereavement and may cause particular distress if you are now isolating in the same location where your loved one died, or where you are constantly reminded of their illness. It is important not to be frightened if this happens. Phoning someone and checking in about your experiences can really help.

Other changes that you may notice include:

Fatigue or tiredness.

Being more prone to colds and minor illnesses. This may cause increased anxiety when you are more vigilant to worries about infection.

Losing enthusiasm for your normal activities.

Forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating.

Grief can have an impact on physical health as well as emotional wellbeing.

## HOW MIGHT YOU COPE WITH BEREAVEMENT?

Each person will cope in their own way and it is important to know that there is no 'correct' way to grieve: for example, members of the same family may respond to the same death in different ways. This can sometimes leave relationships within families tense and strained. People often want to know for how long they should grieve. This will differ from person to person and adjusting to bereavement may take time. Your feelings may also ebb and flow.

You may find that you are initially kept busy with tasks such as arranging the funeral or sorting out your loved one's legal and practical matters. The pandemic means that some of the usual practices that help keep us distracted and busy in the first few days are restricted, meaning that your emotions may be speeded up.

Members of the same family may respond to the same death in different ways.

After this, you may notice that you begin to feel worse instead of better. This is also very normal, as it may be that the full impact of the bereavement is only beginning to register.

Your experience and response to bereavement may be influenced by your culture, faith community or belief group. For example, you may believe in life after death and find religious or spiritual ceremonies comforting. Equally, you may have no religious beliefs and may want to mark the death in a very individual way, for example, having a remembrance gathering in a place that was special to the person who has died. The pandemic may mean that it is difficult to do things exactly as you or your loved one might have wished and it is important to look at alternative ways of remembering, or acknowledging that some wishes will need to wait for a later day.



## WHAT CAN HELP?

You may find that you can cope by yourself; however, you may need the support of others. This can come from your family and friends, from other sources such as your local community or faith/belief group or perhaps from a health/social care professional. While you may appreciate some quiet time by yourself, it can be helpful to avoid withdrawing from other people.

Keeping in contact can take many different forms, and at this time of physical isolation, you and those around you can use alternative ways to prevent social isolation. Finding new ways to communicate may feel like an additional burden when you already feel exhausted and overwhelmed. However, it is worth pursuing these new ways of contact, as they will help keep you connected with others who love you and are concerned for you.

Because we carry many beliefs about online communication being inferior to in-person interaction, it surprises many people to learn that online interaction can be very effective in helping us to feel close to others, to give and receive social support, and to maintain existing bonds with friends and family. Seeking practical and/or emotional support – remotely or otherwise – is not a sign of weakness.

The pandemic may make it easier to become more isolated and withdrawn, when your energy and interest in connecting with others is low. It may be additionally important to help yourself connect by having set times to link with family and friends and encourage yourself to engage even when you don't really feel in the mood.

It is important to make some time to care for yourself. Returning to normal activities can help you to re-establish your routine. It is important to eat regular meals and take adequate rest so that your body can keep going. These steps will help you to feel more in control. Other activities such as taking some light exercise or doing something relaxing, such as taking a bath or listening to soothing music, may be beneficial.

**It's important  
to make some  
time to care for  
yourself.**





## SOME OTHER HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS

Allow yourself time to grieve. Remember that special times, such as anniversaries, birthdays or Christmas can intensify feelings of grief after a person has died. You may benefit from extra support at these times.

If you feel like crying, don't prevent yourself from doing so. This is a normal way to release your feelings and is not a sign of weakness.

It may be helpful not to rush into decisions about your loved one's possessions and personal effects.

It can be useful to delay big decisions, such as moving house, so that you do not commit to making a change that you may not have had enough time or space to consider.

Try to stick to a healthy diet and engage in some form of exercise. Avoid unhealthy practices and dependencies such as: fast food, alcohol, medicine, drugs etc. which negatively impact on overall health and wellbeing.

As time passes, you will be reassured that any worries you had about forgetting your loved one are unfounded and that they will always be an important part of your life and memories. Keepsakes, such as photographs or other possessions, may be painful to look at early on, but can provide much comfort in the future.

If the intensity of your feelings adversely affects your daily life, do not hesitate to contact your GP.

## COMPLICATED GRIEF

When the circumstances surrounding the loss are unique, this may result in 'complicated grief'. This can result in you feeling like you cannot bounce back and returning to your normal routine and responsibilities is impossible. The current pandemic presents a number of quite unusual circumstances which may result in additional thoughts and emotions (as outlined on page 2).

Complicated grief leaves the person who has been bereaved feeling stuck and in a struggle to cope with the emotional impact of their grieving.

As time goes on, the attempt to cope with these feelings can begin to have a long-lasting negative influence on normal day-to-day living. For example, daily tasks may become impossible and communication with close family and friends is difficult. In the long term this can contribute to your mental and physical health wellbeing.

As outlined above, if you feel that the intensity of your feelings affects your daily life, do not hesitate to seek support and contact your GP.

## SUPPORTING SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING

People frequently worry about saying the wrong thing to someone who has experienced a loss and can avoid mentioning the death or making any reference to the person who has died. This often shows that a person is trying to be considerate, but it is important to remember that the bereaved person may be feeling lonely and your concern may help them to feel cared for. It can

be helpful to pause before speaking and think about how the person who is grieving might hear what you are planning to say: for example, some people might find the phrase 'he has gone to a better place' more upsetting than comforting. It is often useful to remember that simply listening can be the most helpful thing to do.

## OTHER WAYS OF BEING SUPPORTIVE

Acknowledging the death, for example, by sending a card or letter, or by conveying your condolences in person. This is particularly significant for losses during the pandemic. The normal visits to the home, attendance at funerals cannot happen, so it is important to ensure that you acknowledge the loss in different ways. We can worry about 'bothering' people, but often, it is the lack of acknowledgement that can cause the most hurt.

Spending time with the person who is grieving can provide comfort, although remember to check with them if they need some time alone. The support that you may give can be emotional, for example, listening to any worries they may have or memories/stories of the person who has died. Practical help could also be offered, such as doing shopping or cooking and serving a meal. This will be more difficult during current circumstances, so you may need to consider phoning or using social media to connect more frequently.

Understanding that if the person is expressing strong feelings, such as anger or irritability, they may not be intending to hurt your feelings.

Respecting that people may have particular cultural or religious beliefs and traditions that differ from those you hold.

Remembering significant events, such as birthdays or wedding anniversaries, may be comforting to the person who has been bereaved. Your thoughtfulness may be needed long after the funeral. Be mindful of how the person may wish to remember the event as special dates can be extremely difficult for them.

Following through with any offer of support, however, be aware that the support needed and your capacity to provide it, may change over time.

Being mindful about the impact that the bereavement may have had on you. Remember that it is okay to recognise and take care of your own needs.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

**CRUSE Bereavement Care** | [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk) | 0844 477 9400

**The Compassionate Friends UK** | [www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk) | 0845 123 2304

**Winston's Wish** | [www.winstonswish.org](http://www.winstonswish.org) | 08452 030405

**The WAY Foundation** | [www.widowedandyoung.org.uk](http://www.widowedandyoung.org.uk) | 0300 012 4929

**Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide** | <https://uksobs.org> | 0844 561 6855



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St Andrews House,  
48 Princess Road East,  
Leicester LE1 7DR, UK

☎ 0116 254 9568

🌐 [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)

✉ [info@bps.org.uk](mailto:info@bps.org.uk)

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BRE30a | 27.04.2020