

Grief and bereavement during the COVID-19 pandemic

**Supporting yourself
and others**



This information has been collated for the Public Health Agency, by Professor Nichola Rooney, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, in conjunction with Dr Sarah Meekin, Consultant Clinical Psychologist and the Department of Health Regional Bereavement Coordinators Network, Northern Ireland.

We would like to offer our sincere sympathy to you, your family and friends who are affected by this sad loss. We are so sorry that you are having to cope with your loss at a time of additional stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to reduce the spread of COVID-19, there is new guidance on procedures that must be in place following a death. Some of these may severely restrict our normal ways of grieving and supporting each other.

We hope that this booklet will help you if you have been bereaved or know someone who has lost a loved one during this difficult time, by providing some information on feelings and thoughts that accompany grief and what you can do that might help.

You will also find contact details for the Bereavement Coordinators within each Health and Social Care Trust, should you need further guidance and help.



Coping with the loss of a loved one

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. 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 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 can 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:

- 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.
- Anger and irritability, and the associated questioning of “Why did this have to happen?”
- Restlessness or agitation which are some of the typical physical side-effects of grief.
- Longing or yearning for the person who has died. This normal part of grief is often associated with thinking that you 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 you 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.
- 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, or linking with friends on social media, may all 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 can affect not just our emotional wellbeing, but our 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 feels 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 talking 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.

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.

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 or 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 social distance and restricted visiting, you and those around you may need to use alternative ways to keep in touch. Learning new skills and using new technology 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. Seeking practical and/or emotional support 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 feel connected 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.

Some of the following suggestions may also help.

- Allow yourself time to grieve. Remember that special times, such as anniversaries, birthdays or holidays 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 so that you do not commit to making a change that you may not have had enough time or space to consider.
- Try to avoid depending upon substances such as alcohol, medications or drugs to help cope with your feelings.
- 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.

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 may include the following:

- Acknowledge the death, for example, by sending a card or letter, or by conveying your condolences over social media such as WhatsApp or Facebook. This is particularly significant for losses during the pandemic. The normal pattern of visits to the home and 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.

- 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 delivering a meal (while observing social distancing).
- Understand that if the person is expressing strong feelings, such as anger or irritability, they may not be intending to hurt your feelings.
- Respect 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.
- Follow through with any offer of support; however, be aware that the support needed, and your capacity to provide it, may change over time.
- Be 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.



Help and support

Each Health and Social Care Trust has a Bereavement Coordinator who may be able to help with your concerns or connect you to appropriate services.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Heather Russell, Trust Bereavement Coordinator
heather.russell@belfasttrust.hscni.net
Tel: 028 9063 3904

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Gwyneth Woods, Trust Bereavement Coordinator
Gwyneth.Woods@northerntrust.hscni.net
Tel: 028 9442 4992

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Paul McCloskey, Trust Bereavement Coordinator
paul.mccloskey@setrust.hscni.net
Tel: 028 9055 3282

Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Sharon McCloskey, Trust Bereavement Coordinator
sharon.mccloskey@southerntrust.hscni.net
Tel: 028 3756 0085


Western Health and Social Care Trust

Carole McKeeman, Trust Bereavement Coordinator
Carole.McKeeman@westerntrust.hscni.net
Tel: 028 7134 5171 ext 214184

You can also access bereavement support by telephone or online:

- Cruse Bereavement Care provides free support, advice and information for adults, children and young people.
National Freephone Helpline: 0808 808 1677. Opening hours Monday-Friday 9.30am-5.00pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, until 8pm.
- GriefChat (www.griefchat.co.uk) is a safe online space where people can share their story, explore their feelings and be supported by a qualified bereavement counsellor. The service is free of charge and is open Monday-Friday, 9am-9pm (UK time) for people who are grieving or bereaved.
- You can find details of local support organisations at www.mindingyourhead.info in the “Services” section.



 **Public Health
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Public Health Agency
12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

Find us on:



 **Bereavement
Network**