

Bereavement

Coping with the death
of a loved one



Information written with you in mind.

Our guides are produced with the help of older people, carers and expert peer reviewers.

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What this guide is **about**

The death of someone close to us can be one of the hardest things we ever go through. Whether it's expected or not, it can affect us in lots of different ways – and all we can do is cope as best we can.

Grief is very personal, and there's no right or wrong way to deal with losing someone you care about. This guide explores how you might be feeling, why you might be feeling that way, and some of the things that could help – now and in the future.



All of the information in this guide applies in England. This symbol indicates where it differs for Wales and Northern Ireland. If you're in Scotland, contact Age Scotland for advice.

“It took me a long time to come to terms with my husband’s death, but talking about it really helped. I actually wish I’d done it sooner.”

Cassie, 73



Advice on the practical things

After a loved one dies, there are certain practical things that need doing, such as registering the death and arranging a funeral.

This guide focuses on the emotional side of things – but if you need to manage practicalities too, our other guide **When someone dies** can help. It takes you step by step through the different things you need to do after a death.



Good to know

You might not feel ready to read this guide now – and that’s OK. You might decide to come back to it at a different time. You might also prefer to look at it with someone you’re close to, or with a bereavement counsellor.



Coping with your emotions

Unfortunately, the older we get, the more likely we are to experience a bereavement. This might be the death of a parent, a friend, a partner or even a child. How we react is likely to depend on our relationship with the person, the circumstances of their death, and any past experiences.

Grief is very personal, and it can take time to come to terms with how you feel. Your emotions might be overwhelming at times, but things do get easier – even though it might not feel like it at first.

Often, the best way to start feeling better is to talk to someone – whether they're a loved one or a professional, such as a doctor or bereavement counsellor. There's no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to seeking support – the important thing is to do what feels right for you.



Good to know

There are support groups and professionals that can help you deal with your loss – many of which are listed at the end of this guide on pages 20-22. Whatever your feelings, you don't need to deal with them alone.

How you might feel

It's common to experience a conflicting mixture of emotions when someone close to you dies. It can be overwhelming – but it's important to remember that there's no right or wrong way to feel. Everyone grieves in their own way.

The emotions you experience as you grieve can be intense, and you might feel some more strongly than others. There might be days you cope better and days you feel overwhelmed.

You might cry a lot – and that's OK. Lots of people find that they feel better after crying. You might not cry at all – and that's OK too. There's no formula for how to respond to the death of a loved one.

With time, and the right support, feelings of grief tend to become less intense, and you can start to adjust to the loss.

Numb

After a loved one dies, you might feel a sense of numbness and disbelief, even if the death was expected. You might feel like you're in a daze for some time. As this initial shock passes, you may experience other strong emotions.

“At first, I stopped doing all the things I used to do. I felt much better after I went back to bingo – but I needed that time to process things.”
Kay, 85



Empty and sad

The feeling of emptiness that can follow someone's death might feel overwhelming – and like it'll never go away. At this time, sadness can come in waves – some days or weeks might seem easier to cope with than others. This is a natural response when someone dies.

It's during this period of sadness that some healing can take place, even if it doesn't feel that way.

Some people find that this sadness doesn't pass, and it develops into depression. If you feel depressed, if you can't think about anything but the person who's died or if you're struggling with things like eating and sleeping, talk to your doctor or a loved one. It's important to get support if you need it.



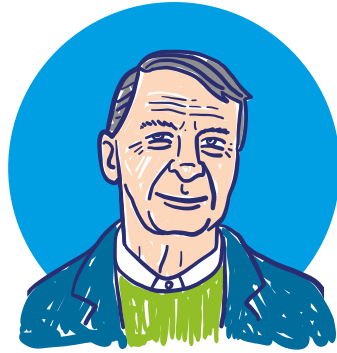
Good to know

If you're feeling depressed or you're worried about how you're feeling, you can call Samaritans (page 21) at any time of the day or night on **116 123** if you need someone to talk to. In Wales, you can also contact the C.A.L.L. helpline (page 20). In Northern Ireland, you can also contact Lifeline (page 21).

Your emotions might be so overwhelming that you feel you might hurt yourself in some way. If so, you should talk to someone as soon as possible, whether that's your doctor or a specialist helpline.

If you've harmed yourself or you think you're about to harm yourself, call **999** or go to A&E.

“I don’t think I’ll ever really get over losing Pauline, but I’ve learned to cope and enjoy life again.”
Michael, 78



Afraid

It’s natural to feel scared and anxious after a bereavement. You might worry because your thoughts and feelings seem hard to control, or about what’s coming next, such as the person’s funeral. You might feel scared of losing someone else in the future – or you might feel scared by the thought of your own death one day.

If you’re feeling scared, anxious or overwhelmed, it could help to talk to someone. If you’re worried about coping with practical day-to-day things, see page 15.

Angry

You might feel angry with the person who’s died for leaving you. You might feel angry at yourself – questioning whether you could have done more or regretting things you said or did. You might feel angry at those around you for not understanding. You might not even know who or what your anger is directed towards.

People of faith can feel angry too – and might even find themselves questioning their beliefs at such a difficult and emotional time.

Dealing with anger can be challenging, even though it’s perfectly natural. Some people find it helpful to write their thoughts down. Others find that talking helps – whether that’s to someone you’re close to or a professional, such as a doctor or bereavement counsellor.

Guilty

It's common to experience feelings of guilt when someone you're close to dies. You might wonder whether you could have done more to help them, or you might regret something you said – or didn't say – when they were alive.

Try not to be too hard on yourself or anyone else. With time, you're likely to reach some acceptance of what's happened and be able to move forward with positive memories. If your sense of guilt doesn't go away or becomes more intense, try to talk about it with someone you're close to, or with someone who specialises in bereavement support.

Relieved

You might experience feelings of relief when someone you love dies. This can be unexpected and unsettling – but there are lots of reasons you might feel this way. It might be because the person is no longer in pain or distress after an illness, or because the person themselves had said they felt ready to die. It might be because you're no longer experiencing the stress and worry of caring responsibilities.

The reasons people feel relieved after a death are very individual to them and their relationship with the person who's died – but whatever your situation, it's nothing to feel guilty about.



Good to know

You might experience feelings of grief while someone is still living. This is sometimes called 'anticipatory grief' and is commonly felt when a loved one has a life-limiting condition. You can access bereavement support for this.

Lonely

Losing a loved one can leave you feeling lonely. This might be because you were very close to them – for instance, they were your partner or spouse – or because you were their carer for a long time. Or it might be because you can't face talking to other people or socialising like you used to.

Whatever the reason, feeling lonely can affect your confidence. If you can, talk to others about how you're feeling and try to stay connected to friends and family.

If you were very close to the person who died, other people might not know how best to be there for you. If you feel able to, reaching out to ask for help or to let them know you're ready to talk could make them more confident in offering support.



Good to know

Our guide **Feeling lonely?** has more detailed information and advice.

Talking about your feelings

Whatever you're feeling, it's important to talk about it. This can be easier said than done, as many people feel uncomfortable talking about death – whether they're bereaved themselves or trying to support someone who's lost a loved one.

But death affects us all. Talking to someone about how you're feeling, or just talking about the person who's died, can make you feel better. It's also a chance to remember the person and celebrate their life and what they still mean to you.

Starting this kind of conversation with others can help them feel more comfortable talking to you about what's happened. It might also give them the opportunity to discuss feelings they've felt unable to share.

It isn't easy. While there might be some days you enjoy talking about the person who's died, there might be days when it just feels too difficult. It might also be some time before you feel able to talk about them and how you're feeling. Some people might never really feel ready to open up.

You don't necessarily have to talk to someone you know. You might feel more comfortable talking to someone else – and the good news is there are lots of support groups and professionals that can help you deal with your loss. You can find many of them listed at the end of this guide on pages 20-22.

When you've been bereaved, people may not know what to say, or might worry that they'll say the wrong thing and so avoid the topic altogether. But that doesn't necessarily mean they don't want to offer support. Sometimes it can be helpful if you bring up what's happened in conversation – this shows the other person that it's OK to talk about it.

Talking to loved ones

You often share the experience of bereavement with loved ones. Family dynamics can be tricky at times like this – but there may also be lovely moments that you can share together.

While everyone grieves in their own way, having people around you can be a great support – and you can support them too. If possible, encourage your loved ones to share how they're feeling and reassure them that they're not alone. Talking, listening and sharing stories about the person who's died can help you all begin to feel better.

Talking to young children

It's important to talk, be open, and answer any questions young children have. Try to answer them as honestly as you can, even if it's difficult for you.

“Talking about Carol is actually a great comfort to me. I make sure I tell my grandson all about his grandma.”

Mark, 64



Good to know

Organisations such as Winston's Wish (page 22) offer support, information and guidance to people caring for a bereaved child or young person.

Past bereavements

If you've lost someone close to you before, you might expect to have similar feelings again. But different losses can affect us in different ways. Some emotions may be stronger after the death of certain people, or you might experience emotions you haven't felt before.

Bereavement can trigger memories of past losses too. You might find these unhappy times coming back to you particularly strongly.

It might be that emotions weren't as openly discussed at the time, for instance, or that your feelings as a child were overlooked. Miscarriage or the death of a child may have been particularly hard to cope with at the time you experienced it.

You might feel the need to mourn and talk about these losses before you can start to cope with your more recent bereavement. If you can, talk to friends and family about how you're feeling. If you'd prefer to talk to a professional, you can see your doctor or a bereavement counsellor.



Good to know

You can contact specialist organisations for more help. Sands (page 22) supports those who have lost a child during pregnancy or after birth. The Compassionate Friends (page 22) supports people who've been affected by the death of a child of any age.

The armed forces charity SSAFA (page 22) supports those who have served or lost someone who served.

Looking after yourself

Bereavement can have a physical impact as well as an emotional one. But it's important that you do what you can to look after yourself.

Sleep and rest

Grief is tiring – whether it's arranging the practicalities, travelling, sleepless nights or just being overwhelmed with everything going on. Be kind to yourself and rest when you can, even if you can't sleep or your sleep is disrupted.

The charity Mind (page 21) has practical tips on how to improve sleep.

Food and drink

It might be the last thing on your mind, but try to eat and drink regularly. Even if you've lost your appetite, it'll help keep you healthy and boost your energy levels. Don't worry too much about eating a balanced diet for now – eating anything is better than eating nothing.

Sometimes, drinking can become an escape from a difficult time – so it's good to be mindful of how much you're having. If your drinking is becoming unhealthy, or you notice that someone else is starting to rely on alcohol to cope with their grief, talk to a specialist organisation such as Drinkaware (page 21).



Good to know

Our guide **Healthy living** has more information on keeping yourself in good health.

Self-care

It can feel difficult to take care of yourself following a bereavement. This might mean you don't wash as frequently as you used to, you don't take your medication, or you miss doctor's appointments. But it's important to keep doing these things.

If you find yourself neglecting your care needs, or you notice loved ones neglecting theirs, it's worth talking to someone you're close to or a professional, such as a doctor.

If the person who's died used to help you with practical things like washing or getting out and about, see page 18.

Staying connected

After the death, you might find yourself becoming more withdrawn, avoiding social situations and staying at home more. But it's important to try to stay connected with friends and loved ones.

It can feel hard to talk to others, especially when you might not feel like being social. But if someone was close to the person who's died too, they might be feeling a similar way – so a chat might help you both.

There might be a bereavement support group in your local area. These groups can offer a safe and comforting environment to talk about your experiences with people who've also had a bereavement.

There are other ways to stay connected, from trying a new course to volunteering. Our **Feeling lonely?** guide brings together advice from people who have experienced loneliness or isolation.



Looking ahead

It can be difficult to think about the future while you're grieving, and there's no rush – do everything at your own pace. But looking after yourself and talking about how you're feeling can help you start to look ahead.

You might feel guilty at first, but finding enjoyment in life isn't a betrayal of the person who's died, or a substitution for the life you had with them. Life will never be quite the same again, but that doesn't mean it can't be lived to the fullest. Spend time with those close to you and do things you enjoy. It might be a good time to learn something new, take up a new hobby or make new friends.

Give yourself things to look forward to. You might not feel ready for this for a while, but when you do, booking a trip or an activity can give you a nice break from your day-to-day routine.

Birthdays, anniversaries or other dates that are significant to you and the person you've lost can be particularly difficult. You might find it helpful to consider in advance how you'll deal with them. You might want to use them to celebrate the person's memory with others – for example, by sharing stories or raising a toast – or you might prefer to have time on your own to remember them privately.

Most importantly, remind yourself that there's no formula for grief and you may have strong and unexpected feelings. This is perfectly natural – losing someone can be the start of an incredibly emotional time, and everyone reacts differently. And if you do find yourself struggling to cope or if you'd like to talk to someone, there's help and support available.



If you're now alone

If someone close to you has died and you're adjusting to being by yourself, the future can look very different.

There are helplines you can call if you want to talk to someone about how you're feeling or how to cope – see pages 20-22 for details. You can also ask your doctor about what support services are available locally to help you manage.

If the person who's died was someone you relied on day to day, you might be struggling with things like cooking, shopping or dealing with finances. If that's the case, contact your local council and ask them to organise a care needs assessment for you.

If you'd like companionship, there might be things going on in your local area. Get in touch with your local community centre to see what's available. Getting involved with some new activities can be a great way to meet people.



Good to know

If you need help with practical things, such as money or legal issues, health or housing, you can contact the Age UK Advice Line (page 20) for support. In Wales, contact Age Cymru Advice (page 20).

How Age UK can help

If you're looking for some companionship, Age UK has a range of friendship services that you might like to try – whether it's a regular call or just a friendly chat when you need one.

The Telephone Friendship Service: If you'd like to receive a weekly call, our Telephone Friendship Service matches people with a friendly volunteer. You can search 'telephone friendship' on the Age UK website or call **0800 434 6105** to find out more. You need to be over 60 and meet eligibility criteria.

The Silver Line Helpline: If you just want to speak to someone on an ad hoc basis, you can call The Silver Line on **0800 4 70 80 90**. It's a free, confidential telephone service for older people and it's open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.



In Wales, call Age Cymru Advice or contact your local Age Cymru to find out about the Friend in Need service. In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI to find out about the Check In and Chat telephone service.

There might also be befriending services available through your local Age UK. Contact your local Age UK to find out more.



Useful organisations

Age UK

We provide information and advice for people in later life through our Age UK Advice Line, publications and website.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65

Lines are open 7 days a week from 8am to 7pm.

www.ageuk.org.uk

In Wales, contact Age Cymru Advice: **0300 303 44 98**

www.agecymru.wales

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI: **0808 808 7575**

www.ageni.org

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland: **0800 124 4222**

www.agescotland.org.uk

AtaLoss

Website that helps people find the right bereavement support services for their situation.

www.ataloss.org

C.A.L.L. Mental Health Helpline for Wales

Confidential support and listening service in Wales.

Tel: **0800 132 737**

www.callhelpline.org.uk

Cruse

Supports bereaved people via their website, helpline and online chat function, as well as in person.

Tel: **0808 808 1677**

www.cruse.org.uk

Department for Work and Pensions Bereavement Service

Checks surviving relatives' eligibility for benefits, and takes claims for bereavement benefits and Funeral Payments.

Tel: **0800 151 2012**

www.gov.uk/bereavement-support-payment/how-to-claim

In Northern Ireland, contact the **Bereavement Service**

Tel: **0800 085 2463**

Drinkaware

Provides information and advice on responsible drinking.

Tel: **0300 123 1110**

www.drinkaware.co.uk

Lifeline

For people experiencing distress or despair in Northern Ireland.

Tel: **0808 808 8000**

www.lifelinehelpline.info

Mind

Provides support for anyone experiencing a mental health issue.

Tel: **0300 123 3393**

www.mind.org.uk

National Bereavement Service

Offers guidance on the practical arrangements you need to make after a death, alongside emotional support.

Tel: **0800 0246 121**

Email: **info@thenbs.org**

www.thenbs.org

Samaritans

Helpline offering confidential support to people in distress or despair, 24 hours a day.

Tel: **116 123**

Email: **jo@samaritans.org**

www.samaritans.org

Sands

Provides support to parents, grandparents and their families when a baby dies during pregnancy or after birth. You can get in touch at any time after the loss – even years later.

Tel: **0808 164 3332**

Email: **helpline@sands.org.uk**

www.sands.org.uk

SSAFA, the Armed Forces Charity

Offers support and advice to anyone who has served in the armed forces or who has lost someone that served.

Tel: **0800 260 6767**

www.ssafa.org.uk

The Compassionate Friends

National self-help organisation through which parents who have been bereaved offer friendship and support to other bereaved parents, grandparents and their families.

Tel: **0345 123 2304**

Email: **helpline@tcf.org.uk**

www.tcf.org.uk

The Good Grief Trust

Provides advice, support and contact details for other organisations that help people affected by grief in the UK.

Email: **hello@thegoodgrieftrust.org**

www.thegoodgrieftrust.org

Winston's Wish

Offers support, information and guidance to people caring for a bereaved child or young person.

Tel: **08088 020 021**

Email: **ask@winstonswish.org**

www.winstonswish.org

Help us be there for someone else

We hope you found this guide useful. When times are tough, it's so important to get some support. You can help us reach everyone who needs us:

1

Tell us your story. If Age UK's information and advice has helped you, we'd love to hear about it. Email stories@ageuk.org.uk.

2

Donate to us. We rely on donations to support older people when they need us most. To make a donation, call us on **0800 169 8787** or go online at www.ageuk.org.uk/donate.

3

Volunteer with us. Our volunteers make an incredible difference to people's lives. Find out more at www.ageuk.org.uk/volunteer or contact your local Age UK.

4

Campaign with us. We campaign to make life better for older people, and rely on the help of our strong network of campaigners. Add your voice at www.ageuk.org.uk/campaigns.

5

Remember us in your will. A gift to Age UK in your will is a very special way of helping older people get expert support in the years to come. Find out more by calling **020 3033 1421** or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/legacy.

What should I do now?

You might want to read some of our relevant information guides and factsheets, such as:

- **When someone dies**
- **Your mind matters**
- **Healthy living**

You can find all of our guides and factsheets on our website, along with lots more useful information. Visit **www.ageuk.org.uk** to get started.

You can order free printed copies of any guide or factsheet by emailing **orders@ageuk.org.uk** or calling our Advice Line on **0800 169 65 65**. Our friendly advisers can also help with any questions.

All of our publications are available on request in large print and audio formats.

If contact details for your local Age UK are not in the below box, call Age UK Advice free on **0800 169 65 65**.



0800 169 65 65
www.ageuk.org.uk



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