



After the death of  
someone very close

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Caroline Morcom worked for many years as a Cruse counsellor and has extensive experience of helping bereaved people in a variety of different situations and circumstances.

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The death of someone we love deeply is probably the most devastating experience that will ever happen to us.

We can find ourselves bewildered by the unexpected strength and intensity of the feelings that overtake us. The loss and pain that we feel strikes very deep; people have described it as feeling like ‘being cut in two’, or as if they had lost some part of themselves.

## Losing someone we love

It is natural and normal to grieve when someone we love dies; it is not an illness, although for a time it may make us feel ill. It will not last forever, although there may be times when it seems as though the pain will never end.

This booklet is about grief and describes some of the feelings that people have when they lose someone close. Not everyone will experience all of these feelings: some will be felt more strongly than others and they may come in any order or be mixed up together.

Grief does, however, usually have an overall pattern and we hope that this booklet will help to reassure those who grieve that they are not alone in what they feel.

### **A unique loss**

We are all individuals and when we lose someone we love, we lose not only a person who was special and unique but a relationship that was unique too. And yet, when we grieve, most of us follow a similar journey: from the first shock and disbelief, through the waves of intense sadness and pain, the looking back over the past, the regrets, the longings, the loneliness, perhaps anger and depression too, through to the time when it becomes possible to begin to rebuild our lives again.

There is no 'right' way to grieve and we each react in our own way. Some people are able to carry on almost normally; others may feel for a time as if they are falling apart.

## Healing comes slowly, but it does come.

Nothing can replace the person who has died and yet gradually we do find new sources of strength within us that help us to survive. Some people find it easier to show their feelings than others, but most find at some stage that it helps to talk.

### **Life is turned upside down**

When a death occurs, many people find that their whole way of life is changed; their day-to-day routine as well as their hopes and plans for the future may be completely overturned. Although the deep hurt that you feel may make you want to retreat to some dark corner and stay there, you usually have to face up to all sorts of practical problems. Forms have to be filled in and there may be difficulties with money, housing, keeping a job going, disposing of a home and its contents or worrying about who will look after children or elderly relatives. All these pressures come at a time when, because of your grief, you feel less able to cope with them. You may find you need to get practical advice from someone you trust who can help you sort out which problems have to be dealt with urgently and which can be left until later, when you are better able to take decisions.

Although most people's thoughts will be turned inwards to their loss and sadness at this time, keeping going with a job or regular routine can help to hold together the framework of your life. Contact with people at work, or simply getting on with what has to be done inside or outside the home can help you through, even though you may have little energy and find little meaning in what you are doing.

### **I can't believe it**

People feel shock when someone dies and your first reaction may be disbelief: it cannot be true.

The shock can affect you physically and you may feel numb, stunned and unreal. It is hard to believe that the person you love will no longer come walking in through the door, or that you will not see them again.

When the death is sudden or unexpected, it is especially hard to accept that it has happened, but it can also be difficult when there has been a long illness beforehand.

Because you often wish so much it had not happened, the truth takes time to sink in. The reality of the funeral and the presence there of family and friends can help you begin to accept the fact that the person you love has died.

### **Why did it have to happen?**

Death can seem cruel and unfair, especially when you feel someone has died before their time.

Although we know that all human beings have to die, the death of someone close shakes our sense of security and challenges our beliefs. Often we cannot help asking why it had to happen.

There is no simple answer to this question, and part of the pain of grief lies in the struggle to find an answer or explanation that will help to make sense of a death that seems a waste, or senseless.

### **I feel such pain**

The shock and pain of bereavement can affect both mind and body in a number of different ways. Some people feel physically ill; others feel strange and unlike their usual self.

These are some of the more common physical and mental symptoms:

- loss of appetite
- sleeping difficulties
- a general feeling of mental and physical exhaustion
- being forgetful
- difficulty in concentrating
- feeling restless and irritable
- anxiety
- feelings of panic.

Because in your heart and mind you go on searching for the person you have lost, you may think that you see or hear them – in a crowd perhaps, or sitting in a favourite chair. The intense yearning can feel overwhelming and you may be afraid of breaking down or going mad.

Some people suffer uncontrollable outbursts of crying; others, both men and women, feel unable to cry. For many people, crying is an outlet for grief; others find relief and expression for their sadness in other ways.

### **I go over it again and again**

Many people cannot stop themselves from re-living the events surrounding the death. These thoughts may seem to take over your brain, like a film constantly re-running the same sequence.

This going over and over is linked to shock. As time goes by it will happen less frequently and the painful details will become less vivid. It can, however, come back much later on, perhaps at an anniversary or when something triggers your memory.

In the early days, too, you may find it difficult to think of the person as they were in happier times; it may only be possible to remember them as they were when dead or dying. It can help, when this happens, to make a conscious effort to call to mind some good memory to place alongside the painful one.

### **I feel so angry**

Sometimes the hurt of losing someone you love bursts out in feelings of anger or rage. You may feel angry with God, or fate, with those who may appear to have been responsible for the death, or with yourself for being helpless to prevent what has happened. You may also feel angry with the person who has just died, perhaps for not having taken better care of themselves or just for leaving you to struggle with the pain of living without them.

Unfortunately some deaths happen as a result of violence or what appears to be negligence and there may then be grounds for a formal complaint. Anyone who feels this should talk to someone who is competent to advise on what can be done. The Citizens' Advice Bureau is a useful starting point. Sometimes the opportunity for a more lengthy discussion of what happened can help you get a fuller picture and so reduce the anger and distress.

### **If only...**

Part of grieving is trying to make sense of something that often seems senseless. We spend a great deal of time thinking about what might or should have been done, or done better. Sometimes we blame ourselves and feel a sense of guilt.

*'If only I had got the doctor sooner.'*

*'If only we'd had time to say goodbye.'*

*'If only things had been better between us.'*

Grief sometimes distorts our feelings as we look back over the relationship. We may find it hard to forgive ourselves for anything that went wrong, or hard to forgive the person who has died.

All the things left undone or unsaid may loom very large, and behind these feelings is often a deeper sense of regret that whatever has happened is now in the past and cannot

be changed or put right. It can be hard at this point to remember that no one is perfect, we cannot help making mistakes, and no relationship is ever without problems.

### **Life has no meaning**

The people who are dear to us give our life a large part of its meaning. When one of them dies we can lose for a time our sense of purpose. Nothing seems worthwhile. Everyday activities, seeing friends, work, hobbies, going out, all seem pointless or are full of painful reminders. Many people feel that, as well as losing the person who has died, they have also lost the best part of themselves, leaving an empty shell.

Depression, despair and loneliness can be very real, even though there may be support from family, friends or others. Take each moment or each hour as it comes and concentrate on living through it, without worrying too much about what the next hour or day may bring. Getting through each day can be an enormous effort, and you should give yourself credit for just surviving. By getting through the day, you have achieved something, however worthless it may seem to you at the time.

If you feel seriously depressed you should consult your doctor. It can also help to talk to someone who will understand what you are going through.

## **Grief comes in waves.**

There are dark days when it seems as though nothing can ever be right again.

But there will also be better days when the pain eases and it is possible to begin to hope and believe in the future again.

### **Bad days and good days**

At first there may be more bad days than good, but slowly the balance will begin to change, although there can also be periods when things seem to be getting worse, not better.

Gradually you will begin to notice what helps to comfort you and get you through difficult times. Often these are little things: wearing something that belonged to the person who has died, talking to a friend or relative, making a hot drink, taking a bath or going for a walk. Often they are things that form a link with your childhood or an earlier, happy time.

It is uphill work to start with, but learning how to take of yourself and to rediscover small pleasures does help people along the road to recovery.

### **Anniversaries and special times**

Family anniversaries and festivals such as Christmas and New Year can bring special sadness as you are reminded of happier times. Family events such as weddings or the birth of a new baby can also bring pangs of grief when you think of the person who is no longer there to share the joy.

As time passes, however, these special days can also help you focus on happy memories of good times in the past.

### **Families**

We all like to think that, in times of trouble, our family and friends will comfort and help us out, and for many people this is so. But some have no family, or their family is far away. Also, families do not always get on well and it is not realistic to expect a death to reunite a family where there have been disagreements and strains in the past.

The help that is offered, too, is not always the sort that is wanted or needed. Each person in the family may be struggling with his or her own grief and may find it hard to understand the needs of the others. Some members of the family may feel they have to be strong and support everybody else, giving themselves little opportunity to talk or cry. Sometimes children's needs are overlooked or adults' attempts to protect them can make them feel shut out and unable to express their grief. Occasionally the whole family tries to avoid showing grief, for fear of upsetting each other or losing control.

### **Friends**

Although friends and neighbours can be a great support, they do not always react as you would like them to and you may even feel hurt and let down.

Faced with someone else's deep grief, many people feel they do not know what to say. They may be embarrassed, uncomfortable or too painfully reminded of their own



troubles or losses. Some may simply not understand the intensity of grief, or feel that to talk of such things is morbid. They may see the death as a happy release or be unaware of how important the dead person was to you.

Sometimes people find that friends and acquaintances do not invite them round any more or seem to avoid speaking to them in the street. But many also discover warmth and kindness in the most unexpected places and from people they may not even know very well.

### **Loneliness**

The long-term effect of a major bereavement is often loneliness. We may have lost not only someone special that we love, but also someone who linked us to our network of family, neighbours and friends and gave us a sense of belonging. We may also miss their physical presence; the loss of loving tenderness and intimacy is often one of the hardest things to bear.

Grief can make us feel very isolated. We may turn in on ourselves, our minds full of the person we have lost and of the past. We may feel out of place and uncomfortable in company and yet have a great need for human warmth and friendship.

The death of someone close can also change our status in a painful way. We are no longer regarded as that person's partner, child or parent, and we can find it hard to see

ourselves in this new light. It takes energy and courage to reach out and build new relationships. Meeting new people and exploring new ways of doing things is a challenge that can bring disappointments, but can also bring rewards, new laughter and new friends.

### **Does time heal?**

When you have lost someone you love, things cannot be the same again. An enormous change has taken place that cannot be undone. It is not so much that time heals; it is more that the passing of time allows you to do the work of grief and allows healing to follow.

For some people the period of grieving can be relatively short; for others it can continue well into a second or third year. Unexpected reminders – visiting a place where you were happy together, hearing a favourite song – can trigger pangs of grief and make you feel for while that you are back at square one.

When you have been bereaved, you need to allow yourself time for your grief to run its course. However, as time passes, there is a need to let go of the sadness and to face the future again. Some people are aware of turning points when their grief seems to lighten; others find they have to make a conscious effort. Some are helped by the presence of other people in their lives who need their love and attention; others come to realise that they owe it to themselves, or to

the person they have lost, to turn away from grief and get themselves going once more.

Gradually you will come to feel that, although the person you love has gone from you physically, they are still there with you in many other ways. You may see things through their eyes or feel them at your side as you go about your daily life. It is possible to discover strengths within you that you did not know existed and these strengths can become the seeds of a new beginning.

## What can help

- Crying or letting others know how you feel.
- Allowing yourself time to grieve – it can take a long time.
- Accepting help from others, but not letting people persuade you into doing things that do not feel right, or before you feel ready.
- Taking care of yourself. Try to eat sensibly and check with the doctor about any health worries.
- Keeping your life as normal as possible, with some sort of regular routine. If you can, avoid major changes during the first year, such as moving home.
- Taking things one day at a time when you're feeling low.
- As time passes, trying new things and getting to know new people.



## How Cruse helps bereaved people

Cruse Bereavement Care is the leading national charity providing bereavement support services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We provide advice, information and support to anyone who has been bereaved (children, young people and adults), whenever and however the death has occurred.

Cruse offers face-to-face, telephone, email and website support. We have a national helpline and local services throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also have a website and freephone helpline specifically for children and young people. Our services are provided by trained volunteers and are confidential and free.

## Cruse books and publications

Cruse Bereavement Care stocks a wide range of books, leaflets and resources on bereavement. Please visit our website at [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk) or telephone **0208 939 9530** email [info@cruse.org.uk](mailto:info@cruse.org.uk)

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Working towards equality and diversity



You can find Cruse on the web at

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where you can also find details of your nearest local branch

Cruse's children and young people's website is at

**[www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk)**

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