



LawCare Ltd.  
Health Support and Advice for Lawyers

# Grief and Bereavement



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# Bereavement

Benjamin Franklin wrote "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes". By middle age, most of us will have experienced the death of a close family member, but knowing that death is inevitable and unavoidable does not make it any easier to cope with. If you have suffered a loss you will be struggling with events and feelings which have turned your world upside-down. At this traumatic time it is hoped that this document might help you understand what is happening to you and accept the grieving process. Nothing can make your loved-one come back, but it may help you to work through your feelings and eventually come to terms with your loss.

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# Suffering a Loss

Bereavement means "To be deprived by death." Those who are bereaved are indeed deprived – often of their hope for the future, peace of mind, confidence in the world and optimism. The death of someone close is the most stressful and traumatic experience we can go through. Quite apart from the grief, many deaths leave families without adequate financial or emotional support, and there may be many practical problems to be overcome.

There is no easy way to lose someone. Those who watch a loved one die after a long drawn-out illness may comfort themselves with the thought that he or she is free from pain, or had a full life, or was ready to go, but it does not make their loss any less. In more shocking deaths – those which come suddenly, or as the result of suicide, murder, or in disturbing circumstances – there are far more issues than just mourning to be faced.

- ♦ A spouse's death is very traumatic, and necessitates major social adjustments. It may also cause financial hardship. If there are young children, they need to be told honestly what has happened, and not protected or shielded from it. Their sense of security is likely to be affected, and they may have some behavioural problems as a result – for example, seeming insensitive or reverting to bed wetting. This, and the need to take over the role of the missing parent, can create additional strain for the bereaved spouse.
- ♦ A child's death arouses a huge sense of injustice – for lost potential and unfulfilled dreams. Parents may also feel responsible, no matter how irrational this may seem, because they see it as their duty to protect their children even if it is "from" an illness. They also tend to feel that they have lost a vital part of their own identity, and their grief often takes the form of a desperate and enduring longing for the child.
- ♦ Elderly people can be especially vulnerable when they suffer a bereavement, because it often reminds them of their own mortality, and the loss may be compounded by several others as their friends succumb to age and ill health. In addition, those around them tend to imagine that deaths due to old age are just part of the natural process, and should not be grieved as much as the death of a younger person, but to a 65-year-old woman who loses her husband, and thus a lifetime of shared experiences, it does not feel any less devastating than for a 45-year-old.
- ♦ A loss due to suicide can be among the most difficult losses to bear. They may leave the survivors with a tremendous burden of guilt, anger and shame, and possibly even feeling responsible for the death.

There are a great many support groups available for those who have lost loved ones, including groups for those who have lost a child, or have lost someone through suicide, murder or other traumatic circumstances. If you need help finding a support group in your area, contact LawCare on 01268 771333.

As you go through the process of mourning it helps to remember the grief is not something you should try to ignore, put aside or get over. It is testament to your love for the person you lost that you should miss them and mourn them. Neither should you imagine that time will heal and you will forget. Try imagining your grief as a large black stain. With time other things will come along and start to cover it over until it can't be seen. But it will always be there. You will always feel sadness at the loss of your loved one, that will not – and should not – change, but with time other aspects of your life will encroach on your grief, and your mind will begin to be occupied with other thoughts. You won't forget – you'll just move on. And the process of mourning, and moving on, is a tribute to the person you have lost.

# The Stages of Grief

Those working with bereaved people have identified stages which those in mourning go through. Experts vary in the number of stages they recognise, and the duration of each stage varies with the individual, but knowing the feelings associated with bereavement, and what to expect, can help the process. In some circumstances, where the death was expected – even welcomed – these feelings may begin even before it occurs.

1. *Shock, Numbness and Denial*

Disbelief is often the first emotion after a bereavement. The bereaved person may be unable to accept the reality, often feeling numb and going on “on automatic pilot”. Dry-eyed funerals, even apparent practical cheerfulness, are all symptoms of this stage. Many people in counselling even express guilt because they don’t feel anything. This stage may be the mind’s natural protection, helping to cushion the blow in the days immediately after the death.

2. *Anger and Bargaining*

Shock gives way to anger, often accompanied by dramatic mood swings, as the anger alternates with the depression of stage 3. Often these feelings of anger are confused, as the bereaved person has no outlet for these expressions of rage. They may be angry at their loved one for leaving them, or toward God for taking him or her, even towards themselves. They may also seem very insensitive and short-tempered with those who want to help.

3. *Depression, Despair and Panic*

This is the stage at which the loss really seems to hit home. Common feelings include helplessness, loss of control, anxiety and deep despair. There may be a preoccupation with the deceased and yearning for them, often reliving memories over and over again.

4. *Acceptance*

Finally there comes a time when the person finds they have adapted to their changed circumstances, where they can go about daily life without the grief being a hindrance, and when they have come to terms with the death. This does not mean that there is no longer any sorrow or sense of loss, or that the loved one is no longer part of their life, only that they have moved on.

# The Experience of Grief

There are feelings, physical symptoms and behaviours which can occur at any of these stages. Everyone is different, and each will experience a different grieving process.

## *Lingering Feelings*

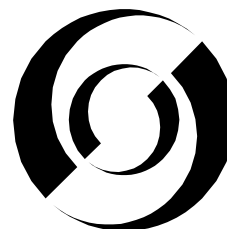
The stages of grief described on the previous page have been identified, but within them there is a whole host of other feelings and experiences. Feelings which may occur include guilt, regret, loneliness, self-reproach, hopelessness, confusion, apathy and depression. Other feelings may be experienced depending on the circumstances of the death, for example, people who lose a loved one through suicide often report feelings of acute embarrassment.

It is natural and right to feel depressed after a loved one dies, but it is also important that the grieving process eventually leads to acceptance, recovery and the rebuilding of your life. Clinical depression is a mental illness which can be caused by the shock of losing a loved one, and needs to be treated. If, after the first few weeks, you find yourself thinking about joining your loved one, or still having problems sleeping, lacking concentration or motivation, or feeling constantly weighed down by your problems, see your GP urgently. There are safe and effective drugs which can kick-start the chemicals in your brain which help you to recover from the loss, and counselling may also be helpful.

## *Physical Symptoms*

The mind and body are closely linked, and the shock of bereavement can lead to physical changes. You may lose your appetite or, conversely, "comfort eat". You may find yourself being oversensitive to noise, tired, breathless, weak and unable to sleep. Again, these should pass with time, but if they do not it is worth speaking to your GP.

It is also surprisingly common to feel a sense of the presence of the person who has died, even having visual or auditory hallucinations. This may well be a "place memory" – you are used to the person being there, so your senses continue to tell you that he or she is. A simple example of this can be demonstrated in the circle pattern on the right. If you focus your eyes on it for sixty seconds and then look at a blank piece of paper, you will still see the image for a second or two.



## *Behaviour*

Many behaviour changes are necessary after a bereavement, usually for practical reasons because the person who previously cleaned the home, or wrote to the family, is no longer around. Others, however, may stem from the grief. These include restlessness and over-activity, visiting places which are reminders of the deceased, absent-mindedness and sleep disturbances. As unwelcome as some of these behaviours may be, they will almost certainly pass with time.

# What Can You Do to Help Yourself?

When your mind is constantly occupied with thoughts of the person you long for, it can be difficult to remember that you are still alive and need to care for yourself. But there is much you can do which, while not making your loss any less, can help you to deal with it, both physically and mentally.

- ♦ **Get plenty of sleep.** The mind works over its problems in sleep, and it is important that you rest well. If you have problems sleeping then ask your GP about going on a short course of sleeping pills. These can be addictive, so should only be taken for a short space of time, perhaps a week while you re-establish your sleep pattern and give your body a chance to get the rest and escape it needs. There are also several herbal remedies which may help you sleep.
- ♦ **Seek out caring people and express your feelings with them.** Find relatives and friends who can understand your feelings of loss and will be prepared to listen as you tell them how you are feeling, or reminisce about your lost loved one. If necessary, a support group or counsellor might fulfil this role.
- ♦ **Take care of your health.** Eat regular balanced meals, and take some exercise, even if it's just a walk to enjoy the sunset.
- ♦ **Be patient.** Accept that it will take time before you feel "normal" again. It takes months or even years to absorb a major loss and accept your changed life. During the mourning period, try not to make any major life decisions or changes, allow yourself time to adjust.
- ♦ **Use spiritual resources.** Studies have shown that people with firm religious convictions are able to cope with bereavement better and recover quicker. If you have a minister, rabbi or other spiritual leader available to help you, then use them. It may help you to examine your beliefs about death and reassure yourself about the status of your lost loved one. If you do not have any religious belief, or are unsure of your views, then be aware that the period immediately following a death is a very vulnerable time. Many bereaved people are tempted to consult spiritualists or mediums, or are easy prey for religious fanatics. By all means investigate religion and spirituality if you want to, but wait until you are feeling less raw and distressed. Joining a religion just because it offers you comfort in the aftermath of loss is not a good idea.
- ♦ **Accept help.** Do not be too proud to allow a friend to bring you a meal, or a relative to arrange the funeral. This time is one where you should focus on yourself, allowing yourself to grieve and heal as necessary, and trying to do too much can be detrimental to this. Allowing others to take care of things for you is also very good for them. Friends often feel useless when faced with someone going through a difficult time. It can often seem to them – or you – that anything they can say is trite and pointless. More practical help can help them as much as it does you. In the years to come it will help both of you to remember when "I sat you down with a tub of ice-cream and a good film while I put his things in bags for the charity shop."
- ♦ **If it helps, do it.** Putting fresh flowers on the grave each week, talking to a photograph, or even starting a new relationship – if you find a particular activity or behaviour helps you come to terms with your loss, then focus your attention on doing that and don't worry about what others may think. Creating a scrapbook of photographs and mementoes of the person you have lost may be cathartic, for example.

# What Can Others Do to Help?

If you know someone who has suffered a bereavement, you may feel powerless to help them. In many respects this is true, because no one and nothing can bring back the person who has died. However you can help to alleviate the loneliness which comes with bereavement, and facilitate the grieving process. It is also important that others look for warning signs – this is a vulnerable time, and bereaved people can succumb to clinical depression and other long-term problems.

- ♦ **Allow the bereaved person to talk.** They may want to talk about their loss, either about their own feelings or about the deceased person. Freely discussing memories of him or her can help tremendously, and is often a very happy and cathartic experience. Even if they are not ready to talk about it, having someone to chat to about the minutiae of life can help provide much needed grounding and distraction from their sorrow. You needn't even talk – silences needn't be awkward if your presence alone helps alleviate the loneliness.
- ♦ **Don't take offence.** Be sensitive to the fact that the bereaved person may like to spend time alone with his or her thoughts at times, and will turn you away when you arrive at the home, despite your good intentions. Those going through grief can also be moody and angry. Develop a thick skin and don't allow anything that is said or done during this time to sour your friendship – the time will come when you will be welcomed and needed.
- ♦ **Don't offer false comfort.** "It's for the best" or "You'll get over it in time" sound very hollow and trite to a bereaved person. A simple expression of sorrow is all that is required.
- ♦ **Offer practical help.** Your friend or colleague may be too proud to ask, but help with tasks formerly done by the deceased, or assistance with practical matters such as transport for the funeral, can lift the burden. Think laterally and imaginatively to identify areas where help may be needed.
- ♦ **Be patient.** You may have to offer your support for many months or years. There is no point at which they might be expected to be over it, and birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas will be difficult for years to come.
- ♦ **Be observant.** "*I want to join her.*" Take seriously any comments which could be a threat of suicide, and seek help if, after the first few weeks, the person does not seem able to go about daily life effectively – failing to dress themselves or eat properly, for example. Encourage your friend to seek professional help or, if you feel that suicide is a real risk, urgently alert the community mental health team in your area – a doctor's surgery should be able to put you in touch.

# Organisations Which Can Help

It is natural and appropriate to feel grief and sorrow after the death of someone close to you. Many people need only time to come to terms with their loss and reshape their life, but others find that talking to someone can help with this process. If you have a sympathetic and trusted friend or relative then discussing your feelings with them may help, but if not then professional counselling is an option.

Counselling isn't for everyone, but it can help to clarify your feelings. As has already been noted, ongoing despair can be a sign of clinical depression, and counselling has been shown to be beneficial to those suffering this condition. A counsellor should also be able to identify warning signs and ensure that you get all the help and support you need.

- CRUSE is a national bereavement counselling charity with centres in towns and cities across the UK where you can speak to trained counsellors in complete confidence. Their national number is 0870 167 1677.
- The National Association of Funeral Directors also has a bereavement counselling service. If your funeral director is a member of this trade association then he or she will be able to put you in touch.
- Many private local counsellors also offer bereavement counselling. Look under Counselling and Advice in your local Yellow Pages, or try the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy website at [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk). LawCare also has a database of counsellors, many of whom have connections with the legal profession. Counselling costs from around £25 to £150 per hourly session depending on your location, but may be available free on the NHS through your GP. There are several different types of counselling including the following:
  - Basic counselling focuses on discussing the problem with you and helping you to clarify matters and discover your own solutions or acceptance. Four to six sessions are usually sufficient to enable you to find your own strength to cope.
  - Psychotherapy takes far longer, often several years, and involves examining the client's entire life, from childhood relationships to current dreams.
  - Coaching is a more practical approach which aims to provide balance in the client's life, often through exercises and a close examination of behaviour and feelings.

## Practical Matters

There are many matters which need to be dealt with in the immediate aftermath of a death.

- The death must be registered within five days in the area where it occurred, and the process will be quicker and easier if the deceased's birth or marriage certificate and NHS card are taken along. A Medical Certificate will also be required stating the cause of death. This will be provided by the attending doctor if he or she was treating the deceased for an illness in the last 14 days. If not, then the coroner will become involved and will issue the certificate instead.
- An undertaker must be selected and contacted. This can be done before the death is registered, but the undertaker will need a green form from the registrar before the funeral can take place. A good funeral director will take care of all the arrangements from newspaper announcements to transport and catering at the wake.
- The funeral service needs to be planned. There is no legal requirement to have a vicar, or any religious minister, take the funeral. Anyone may conduct a funeral, and whatever is in keeping with the personality of the deceased and family is appropriate.
- You are entitled to up to three days paid compassionate leave, although many firms and organisations may offer more. Many people find they require far more time off than this in order to get over the initial shock, but others find that continuing to work restores some normality into their life and helps them to forget their grief for a while.

## The Future

Your grief is not something you should try to "get over", perhaps saying "He wouldn't want me to be sad". If your lost loved one meant anything to you, then mourning and sorrowing their loss is a tribute to them, and something you should welcome. It demonstrates how important they were in your life, and it is an entirely understandable and natural reaction. Grief is not selfish, you are entitled to mourn the loss of someone who was important in your life, to despair for your own changed circumstances.

Long after others will assume you are back to normal you may still have "bad days". Birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas may be difficult for many years, and others may steer clear of the subject of your loss which might cause some awkwardness at times. There may be other long-term effects too, as smaller problems re-open old wounds.

There may never come a time when you no longer feel sad about your loss, but there will come a day when you realise you have not thought about it for a while. Eventually you should have adapted to the change and built new relationships, hobbies and habits. There is no need to feel guilty about this, even if it seems to you – or others – that you are moving on too quickly. Many people discover a new lease of life after a bereavement, and this is to be celebrated and enjoyed. You, after all, are still living.