

Coping with bereavement, grief & loss guide

Introduction

Welcome to this Foothold and Rightsteps guide on how to cope with bereavement, grief and loss, particularly in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This guide will help you consider:

- **What bereavement is**
- **What grief feels like**
- **The grieving process**
- **How to develop and use strategies for managing grief, loss and bereavement**

There are also some links to further resources at the end of this guide that can be used to access more information about burnout and how to keep well and healthy.

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What is bereavement?

Bereavement, sometimes also referred to as grief, is a term used to describe the natural sense of loss we feel when something or someone we cared about is taken away.

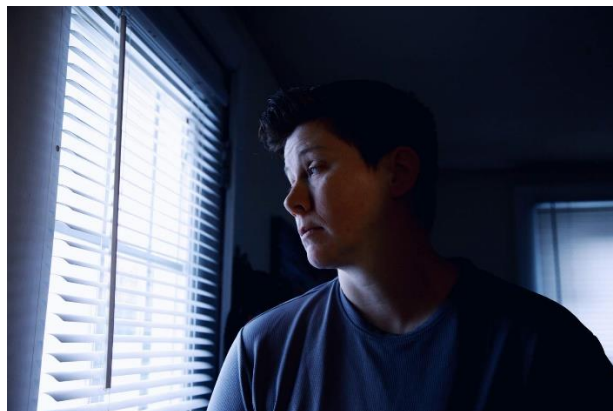
Even though grieving a loss is an inevitable part of life, coping with it is one of life's biggest challenges. We often associate grieving with the death of someone we loved—which is often the cause of the most intense type of grief—but any loss can cause grief, including:

- Divorce or relationship breakup
- Loss of health
- Losing a job
- Loss of financial stability
- A miscarriage
- Retirement
- Death of a pet
- A loved one's serious illness
- Any other change that alters life as we know it

The global COVID-19 pandemic has created a new reality marked by grief and loss.

Not only are we dealing with the collective loss of our daily routines and the world as we knew it, we are also facing an increased loss of life, often under very difficult circumstances.

Bereavement is always a difficult time. However, there are many things we can do to help ourselves through it, and eventually, feel better.



What grief feels like

While grief affects people in different ways, we may experience some of the following when we're grieving:

Feelings

We may experience a mixture of emotions, for example:

Shock

Right after a loss, we might continue to feel calm and even worry we are uncaring; however, this is often a common sign of shock and it is likely that we'll feel the impact of loss at a later time.

Sadness

We may have feelings of profound sadness, despair, yearning, or deep loneliness. We may cry a lot or feel emotionally numb.

Guilt

We may feel guilty about things we did or didn't say or do. We may feel guilty for not doing something to prevent the death, even if there was nothing more we could have done.

Anger & Blame

Even if the loss was nobody's fault, we may feel angry and resentful. We may be angry with ourselves, others, or even the person who died for abandoning us.



Agitation

We may become overly agitated, doing things like cleaning out the whole house, or going back to work when we are not really ready.

Fear

We may feel anxious, worried, helpless, insecure, overwhelmed or even panicky. The death of a loved one can trigger fears about our own mortality, and facing life without them.

Physical symptoms

While grief affects people in different ways, we may experience some of the following when we're grieving:

Grief often involves physical symptoms too, for example:

- Tiredness or fatigue
- Nausea
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Aches and pains
- Breathlessness, heart palpitations or dizziness
- Lacking energy
- Disturbed sleep patterns



Behaviours

When we grieve, we also experience changes in our behaviour too.

For example, we might:

- Withdraw from social contact
- Avoid talking about the loss
- Avoid doing, seeing or remembering things relating to the loss
- Become overly active and restless
- Have trouble focusing on usual tasks
- Report seeing, hearing or feeling the person who died

Even if we are experiencing many of these symptoms following a loss, it may help to know that our reaction is natural and that we can feel better in time.

The grieving process

Grieving is a highly individual experience; everyone grieves differently.

Some people will wear their feelings on their sleeve and be outwardly emotional. Others will experience their loss more internally, and may not show their emotions.

Grieving also takes time; we can't force or hurry it. Some people start to feel better in weeks or months, whereas for others, it might take much longer.

The context and circumstances in which bereavement takes place can also affect how easy or difficult we may find dealing with it. For example:

- How long we knew the person
- How old they were
- What relationship we shared
- Whether the death was expected or unexpected
- Our past experiences of loss

Whatever our grief experience, it's important to be patient with ourselves in order to allow the process to naturally unfold.



The five stages of grief

We tend to go through different stages of grief as we deal with loss. For example, some common stages of grief are:

STAGE 1: Denial

Our first reaction is often to deny the reality of the situation. “This isn’t happening, this can’t be happening” It is a common response that serves to help us cope with our overwhelming emotions.

STAGE 2: Anger

We may be angry with others, or we may feel angry with ourselves. We might be shouting at others or feel irritated at everything, from minor events to significant let downs.

STAGE 3: Bargaining

We focus on faults and regrets and we might attempt to bargain through a series of “If only” statements, such as: “If only we had seen the doctor sooner...” “If only I hadn’t said or done this....”

STAGE 4: Depression

There comes a time when we are slowly faced with what is happening and the sense of loss feels more present and unavoidable. In those moments, we tend to pull inward as the sadness grows. “I’m too sad to do anything.”

STAGE 5: Acceptance

When we come to a place of acceptance, it is not that we no longer feel the pain of loss. We will never like the new reality or make it OK, but eventually we learn to live with it and accept it.



**Not everyone who grieves goes through all of these stages or experiences them in a neat, sequential order.*

We may go back and forth between these stages throughout the grieving process, or might even resolve our grief without going through any of these stages.

However, these stages can help us to understand and put into context where we might be in the grieving process.

What can I do?

Over time, it's normal for our feelings to become less intense and gradually ease as we begin to accept the loss and start to move forward with our life.

In the meantime, there are also many things we can do to manage and look after our wellbeing, or help others who are experiencing loss.

Next, we'll look at how you can help yourself, and how you can help others.

How you can help yourself

Grief can be an isolating experience under normal circumstances, but current social distancing and self-isolation measures have been making the process even harder.

If you are unsure how to manage your feelings of grief, the strategies below may help.

Accept your grief is valid

There can often be an unspoken feeling that certain deaths are more tragic than others. Whilst most people would agree that it is particularly heart-breaking when a child or younger person dies, every death can be difficult for everyone left behind.

During this worldwide health crisis, we may feel that our own grief is less worthy of attention, and feel guilty about asking for help and support.



It can be helpful to remember that while many other people are struggling, it is OK for us to ask for help, too.

Our own feelings are valid, even if others are also facing their own tragic circumstances. Talking about how we feel can help, as can remembering the person and sharing memories.

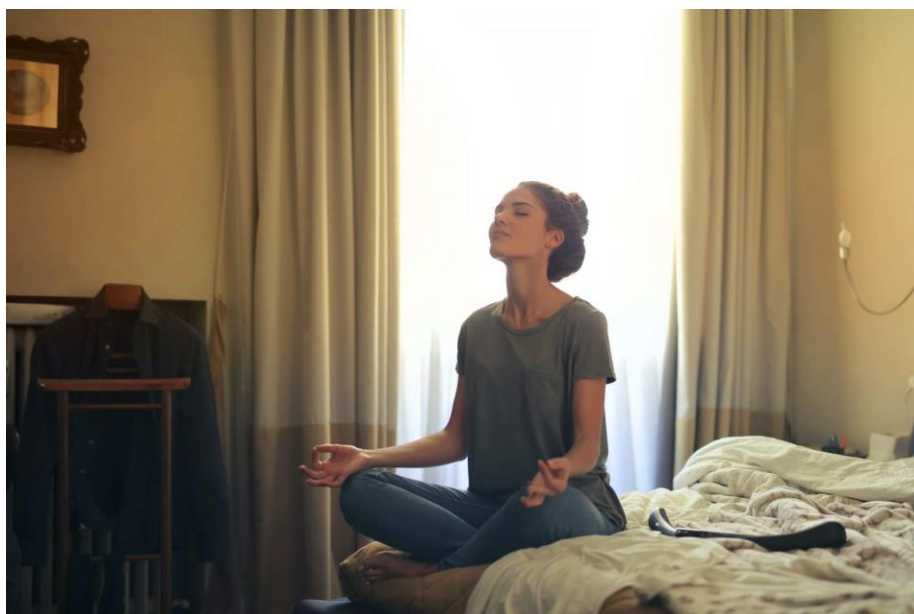
Let go of regrets

It is important that we are kind and compassionate towards ourselves and accept our feelings, even if we don't like them. It is okay to feel sad, angry, worried or overwhelmed.

For example, we could try to forgive ourselves for anything we feel bad about in relation to our loss.

Death can often feel cruel and unfair and it is normal to have regrets about things that could have been done or said differently, but try to let these go, if you can.

Practising mindfulness can help us to avoid dwelling on things in the past that we cannot change – whereas sharing our feelings with people around us and engaging with relaxing or enjoyable activities can support our emotional wellbeing and help us to feel better.



Look after yourself

It is important that we look after our wellbeing during this difficult time.

We could try to eat well, rest adequately (even if we can't sleep well), exercise and get some fresh air each day – going for a short walk or opening a window can help.

Talking things through with people we trust can be very comforting. Family, friends and colleagues can be a great source for support following bereavement.

It is also important that we have things going on that can distract us from the pain of grieving and give us a break from it; watching a film, painting, knitting, gardening or anything that works for us.

Finally, we don't need to put pressure on ourselves to return to our normal daily routines too soon during these challenging times. Giving ourselves time to grieve can allow us to integrate the loss into our life and work through the pain in a more manageable way.

Ask for help

We are only human.

It might be helpful to monitor ourselves regularly for any persisting symptoms or any other emotional or mental health difficulties.

If you aren't feeling better over time, or your grief is getting worse, it might be helpful to speak to your GP or a mental health professional. There are many treatment options to help us feel better.

How you can help others

We might know people who are bereaved already.

Many more people are going to be bereaved because of Covid-19 and even more people are not going to grieve in the way they would expect during previous times.

There is a lot we can do to help people feel less alone, and more supported. The following ideas might help:



Reach out

We are all experiencing unprecedented times.

Some people might be on their own dealing with grief, unable to even have a hug from a friend. Many will not attend a funeral and some will have multiple bereavements.

It, therefore, matters more than ever that we reach out to people who are experiencing a loss, while they are likely to be more isolated than ever.

We may want to support others, but feel quite overwhelmed or worried about what to say to them.

We don't need to worry too much about saying exactly the right thing; but, if we are finding it difficult, here are some suggestions:

- I don't know what to say but I am so sorry to hear this news.
- I am so sorry to hear this – you are in my thoughts.

If we don't want to talk, sending a card, text or email can also help remind people that we are there for them, as much as we can be.

Don't force it

We can encourage people to talk about their emotions and experience, but it is also important to provide understanding and validation if they are not ready to talk just yet.

We can offer them space to grieve by letting them know that we are available and accessible when they will be ready to talk. We can remind them that they can take as much time as they need, and that we will be there for them whenever they feel ready.



Avoid fixing

We may want to provide uplifting or hopeful comments or even try to offer people humour so they can feel better. Although our intentions are well meaning, this approach can sometimes leave people feeling as if their pain is not seen, heard, or valid.

Just being there can be a great comfort for others. Acknowledging that we can't fix their pain but we can help them to feel a little less lonely by listening or allowing them to talk or share their feelings with us, can make a real difference.

Be kind to yourself

It is understandable to feel worried, helpless, or have our own fears.

Confronting someone else's grief may also bring up difficult feelings about our own experiences and bereavements, and that's OK and normal.

Even if we haven't lost anyone close to us, we may still be very fearful that it might happen. At the present time there is so much in the news about deaths and illness, and many of us are understandably feeling anxious. It might help to seek support from other people, after speaking to the bereaved person, to share our own feelings, too.



Next steps

There are many reasons why you may have chosen to work through this Find Out More. Perhaps you were unsure about how to manage bereavement and grief, or you just wanted some more general information.

Whatever your reason, it's good to consider what you might want to do next.

Further support and resources

Many of us have lost loved ones in the pandemic or are struggling with the loss of life around us. If you're finding it hard to cope, we want to help.

Foothold support

Click here to find out more about how Foothold can support you at work.

[Click here](#)

Foothold counselling and therapy grants

Click here to find out more about financial support from Foothold.

[Click here](#)

You can also access more information about Foothold through the website, or send an email to hello@myfoothold.org. You may also be able to access NHS services for counselling.

IAPT

You can find mental health support from your local specialist IAPT service. They can discuss things with you in more detail and suggest next steps, if appropriate.

[Click here](#)

