

Coping with grief



Information to support people
experiencing grief after a
bereavement

* Calls are free from landlines and mobiles. Your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

Introduction

This booklet provides information about what grief is, what might help and how you can get support.

If you don't feel ready to read this booklet yet, you might decide to come back to it another time.

We have more information about grief on our website including information about work, supporting children, and videos about grief. Visit mariecurie.org.uk/grief

We also offer free emotional support to anyone affected by terminal illness, including a Telephone Bereavement Service (see page 14). If you would like to speak to someone, call the Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309***.



Contents

Grieving in your own way	3
How you might feel	4
How long does grief last?	6
Looking after yourself	10
Getting support	12
Supporting children	20
How Marie Curie can help	22
About this information	24

Grieving in your own way

Everyone's experiences of grief are individual. Whatever you're feeling, try to remember that it's normal and there are people who can support you if you need it.

Grief is a natural response to losing someone you care about. There's no right or wrong way to grieve. The important thing is to do what's right for you.

Grieving can be painful and it can't be fixed or made to go away. But the grief and pain will lessen and there will come a time when you can adjust and cope without the person who has died.



iStock

How you might feel

Grief is not just one feeling, but many emotions that follow on from one another. You may find your mood changes quickly, or that you feel very differently in different situations. People who are bereaved sometimes say they feel 'up and down'.

You may feel:

- shocked or numb
- sad
- anxious or agitated
- exhausted
- relieved
- guilty
- angry
- calm
- lacking in purpose
- resentful.

You might also find it difficult to concentrate or carry out tasks that would normally be easy.

There's no right or wrong way to feel and no timetable for grief. Everyone is different. It's common for people to swing between feeling OK one minute and upset the next. You might find that these feelings come in waves or bursts – this can be unpredictable and might make you feel worried, ashamed or afraid.

After the funeral

Some people find it especially difficult to deal with grief after the funeral for their family member or friend. You might find that other people don't check in with you as much and their lives seem to go back to normal. You might feel that they expect you to move on.

At the same time, the death is still very recent and you are adjusting to life without the person who has died. It's normal for this to take time. This can be a really difficult time, and it's important to ask for help if you need it (see pages 12 to 19).



iStock

How long does grief last?

People sometimes ask how long they will grieve for. There's no right answer to this as it will be different for each person. You may have different feelings that come and go over months or years. It's normal to sometimes feel loss and sadness years after the person has died.

Gradually, people find that their feelings of grief aren't there all the time and aren't as difficult to cope with. Some people tell us that their feelings of grief don't get smaller, but things do change. They become better at living with their grief and, as they adjust, their life grows around their grief and they can begin to find joy in new memories and experiences.

At times, these feelings of grief might still be stronger. This might happen completely unexpectedly or it might happen at particular times, for example, at anniversaries, birthdays, special occasions or in certain places. This is completely normal and it can help to get more support around these times.

“The first few Christmases without my husband were hard. We go out for Christmas now so it's different, and that makes it easier.”

Jennie, family member

How long does grief last?

Some people find that their feelings of grief don't lessen, and they find it difficult to manage daily activities. For example, they might struggle to go to work, look after children or socialise with friends. If you're experiencing this or you're not able to cope, you might need more support to help cope with your grief. You can speak to your GP. You can also call the Samaritans on **116 123**.

Not everyone experiences grief in the same way

People don't always grieve in the same way – not everyone will cry or feel sad. Some people might feel shocked, angry or numb, especially in the first days or weeks.

For others, the death of a close friend or family member is a relief. For example, if you had a complicated relationship with the person or they were in pain or suffering. If that's how you feel, it's OK.

If you're feeling upset, but a close family member seems unaffected, it might be easy to think they 'don't care'. But grief is different for everyone, and people process it in different ways.

“You think you're ready but the end comes very quickly. There's a great relief that they're no longer suffering but the selfish side of you wants them to stay with you forever.”

Natalie, family member

Thinking about your loved one

When someone's died it can seem as if part of your life has stopped. You may want to find ways of treasuring your relationship with the person. Looking at photos or writing down your memories may help you. Talking about your loved one with other people who knew them well may be comforting. If you're worried about upsetting other people, you can also talk about them with people who didn't know your family member or friend personally – for example, through our Telephone Bereavement Service (see page 14).

“The support helped me re-live my life with Michael and gave me that opportunity to talk about him without feeling embarrassed or awkward. I would highly recommend this type of support to anyone who recognises similar feelings, just try it and see how it is for you.”

Donna, who used Marie Curie's Telephone Bereavement Service

You may experience longing or yearning. You may dream about them, or think you've heard their voice or seen them in the distance. This is quite a common experience after someone has died. It might help to be gentle with yourself and give yourself time. Sometimes people can worry that they might forget what their loved one looked like or how their voice sounded. But there are many ways to keep their memory alive.

Physical symptoms of grief

It's common for grief to produce physical symptoms. This can be very frightening if you're not sure what's causing the symptoms.

Here are some of things you might experience:

- a hollow feeling in your stomach
- tightness in your chest or throat
- oversensitivity to noise
- difficulty breathing
- feeling very tired and weak
- a lack of energy
- a dry mouth
- a loss or increase in appetite
- finding it hard to sleep or fear of sleeping
- aches and pains.

Some people worry that these symptoms are a sign that they are seriously ill. It's a good idea to speak to your GP or another healthcare professional, especially if you're feeling very anxious about your health. Telling them that you think it could be related to grief can help them to understand what you're experiencing and work out the best way to support you.

Looking after yourself

Your friend or family member's death may have been sudden, or it may be something that was expected for a long time. Either way, it can be a shock and it can take you time to adjust.

After the funeral, when everyone else's lives seem to go back to normal, you may be left wondering how you're going to cope.



iStock

There's no single solution. Here are some ways to take care of yourself that may be helpful.

Eating and sleeping

Even if you don't feel like it, try to eat as healthily as you can. This will give you the energy to get things done. There's lots of information about healthy eating on the NHS website (see page 15).

Emotional stress such as grief can make you feel tired and disrupt your sleep. If you're having trouble sleeping you can visit your GP. You can also try things such as exercising during the day, avoiding caffeine and alcohol, and going to bed at the same time each night.

You may be kept awake at night thinking about your loved one. Being able to talk about your thoughts and feelings may help. You could speak to your family or friends or find other people who can support you (see pages 12 to 19).

Crying if you want to

Crying can be the body's way to reduce stress and soothe itself. It is a normal reaction to someone's death. It doesn't matter whether it's days, weeks, months or years after the death. If you feel like crying, try not to question it.

Getting support

You don't have to go through bereavement alone. There are lots of ways to get support, whether you prefer to talk to someone in person, on the phone or join an online community. If you would like to speak to someone about your feelings and what support might be available, contact the Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309***.

Support from friends and family

If you're bereaved, other people might worry about how to behave around you and could keep their distance. They might think they'll leave it to you to get in touch when you're ready.

If you feel like company, you could call for a chat or suggest meeting up for a coffee. Although it might seem like an effort to reach out to people, you could feel better for some company. Perhaps you could suggest meeting at your house for a meal. You could keep it casual and ask everyone to bring some food so you don't have to do too much at a time when your energy and motivation may be low.

If there are things you don't want to talk to family and friends about, or you don't have someone suitable to talk to, you can contact one of the charities that support bereaved people (see page 14). You could also contact your local spiritual adviser or religious leader.

Written information and guidance

There are several organisations and charities with bereavement information online and in booklets. You might find it helpful to read about the feelings you're having and how to get support. You can find lots of information at mariecurie.org.uk/bereavement and find other organisations that can help at mariecurie.org.uk/useful-organisations

Online communities

If you'd like to chat to others in a similar situation, there are several online communities or forums where you can discuss what you're going through in a confidential and safe environment. Many charities, including Marie Curie, Sue Ryder, and Bereavement UK have these. They're free and quite easy to use. You might have to create a username and password to join.

You might also find groups on social media where people share their experiences and offer support to each other.

If you're not comfortable contributing to discussions straight away, just reading what other people have written might be helpful.

Telephone support lines

If you'd like to talk to someone but aren't able to or don't want to leave the house, there are several telephone support lines you can call. These are usually charged at local call rates, although many are free. They include:

- Marie Curie **0800 090 2309***
- Samaritans **116 123**
- Cruse Bereavement Care **0808 808 1677**
- Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland **0808 802 6161**
- Lifeline (Northern Ireland) **0808 808 8000**

You can also contact Marie Curie's Support Line by web chat at mariecurie.org.uk/support or email support@mariecurie.org.uk

Marie Curie's Telephone Bereavement Service

Bereavement support can help you talk about how you're feeling, understand what you're going through and find things that might help.

Through our bereavement support service, you can access a number of weekly bereavement support sessions from a trained volunteer over the phone. This is free – there is no cost. It can be used by anyone who has lost someone who has died from an illness. It doesn't need to have been recent and you don't need to have accessed Marie Curie services before.

Visit mariecurie.org.uk/bereavement for more information.

“Talking to Tracy was such a great help. It was just so beneficial to be able to talk to someone neutral, a non-family member. I didn’t want to upset my sister or daughter given that they too, had taken their mam/nana’s death extremely hard. It was Tracy who helped me realise that what I was feeling was completely natural.”

Diane, who used Marie Curie’s Telephone Bereavement Service

Bereavement counselling and psychotherapy

Some people benefit from talking to a professional counsellor or psychotherapist. You might need help if your emotions are so intense you feel you can’t go on, or if you can’t cope with your day-to-day life.

If you think you might need grief counselling, there are different ways that you can access this. You can speak to your GP. They may be able to refer you for this. They may also be able to give you information about local counselling services and support groups.

You can also access an NHS psychological therapies service without a referral from your GP. These services are sometimes called ‘talking therapies’ and the NHS programme is called Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT). You can refer yourself for this on the NHS website at [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)

Many hospices, including Marie Curie Hospices, have bereavement support services for families. This is usually available for close family and friends of people who have received hospice care. How much support a hospice is able to give will depend on their resources.

If you're employed, you may want to check if your organisation has an employee assistance programme. These often entitle employees to a set number of free counselling sessions. Ask your manager or human resources department for information.

You can also find a counsellor privately and pay for sessions. To find registered psychotherapists and counsellors in your area, search the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy online directory at bACP.co.uk/therapists or call **01455 883300**. Costs will vary. Many therapists have their own websites explaining how they work and what to expect.



iStock

Group support

Some people find meeting other bereaved people in a support group helps them come to terms with their own feelings.

Many charities, hospices and faith leaders will be able to help you find a bereavement support group if they don't run one themselves. You could also search online for a group in your local area. The organisation At a Loss has a website to help you find local bereavement services – visit ataloss.org

Going back to work

You may find that the routine of work is a welcome distraction after someone dies. Supportive colleagues and a job to focus on can help. Some people find it difficult to focus on work and need longer to adjust to life without their family member or friend. If you can, try to take things at your own pace and only go back when you feel ready.

If your work has an employee assistance programme offering counselling or a helpline, it's worth noting that you can still use this while you are off from work.

How much compassionate leave you get from work varies. If your compassionate leave from work is ending but you don't feel ready for work yet, speak to your manager. Although bereavement isn't an illness, you may have other symptoms such as depression as a result and need more time off before you're able to work.

Talking to your employer about how you're feeling might also help relieve some of the worry you're feeling about going back. You may find that they're quite happy for you to take things at your own pace, for the first few weeks or months.

You can find out about your rights at work as well as tips on returning to work at mariecurie.org.uk/grief-at-work

Getting involved in the local community

You may find you have more free time after your loved one has died, and you may want to meet new people in your area. There are lots of community groups around the UK where you can meet people with similar interests – either for conversation, or for activities ranging from reading to rock climbing. Meet Up is a website where you can search for groups by interest or location – visit meetup.com You can even start your own group – it's completely free.

Volunteering

If you have time, you could volunteer. It's an excellent way to meet new people and try new activities. It can also have many physical and emotional benefits. There are various volunteering sites with lots of opportunities near you. Try not to worry about the pressure or requirements of a volunteering role. Often, you can do as little or as much as you'd like.

Do-it has a searchable database of volunteering opportunities – visit doit.life

Getting support

If you're a cat or dog lover, you could contact the Cinnamon Trust to see if there's an older or unwell person nearby who needs someone to walk their dog or help look after their cat – visit cinnamon.org.uk

At Marie Curie, we have many volunteering opportunities and you may find one that suits you – visit mariecurie.org.uk/volunteer

If you have a favourite charity, you can look on their website to see if they need volunteers.

If you feel isolated

If a loved one has died and you're now on your own, you may feel isolated. If you're a member of a local organisation such as a church and you'd like someone to visit you, they may be able to organise this.

There may also be charities near you who can offer a befriending service, ongoing support or group activities. Call the Marie Curie Support Line to find out what support might be available on **0800 090 2309**.

“Since my husband died, I’ve kept myself busy – I’m a school governor, I mentor children, and I pick up my grandchildren from school a couple of times a week.”

Jennie, family member

Supporting children

How grief affects children

Grief can affect children in different ways. How they react will depend on their personality, individual experiences, age, relationship to the person and their understanding of what has happened. Children might react in the following ways:

- They might take a while to understand what has happened and might seem unaffected by the person's death.
- They may swing quickly between different emotions – they can seem fine one minute, then sad the next.
- Their behaviour can change – they might be clingy, distant, angry and their sleep might be affected.
- They may ask questions about death or the person who died – it can be difficult to answer these questions, especially if it upsets you.

How you can help the child

As their parent, relative or friend, you know the child best and how to support them. These tips might help:

- Encourage them to express their feelings – they might want to talk about the person who died or draw a picture of them.
- Allow them to ask questions about what happened. Try to answer these honestly and clearly if possible.
- Give them plenty of reassurance. Let them know they're loved and that there are still people who will be there for them.
- Help them to keep their memories of the person alive by creating a treasure box with some of their things, telling stories about the person or creating drawings.
- Take things one day at a time. If at any time you feel unable to cope, other people can help – family, friends, teachers and bereavement specialists.



We have more information about how to support children on our website at mariecurie.org.uk/grief and in our booklet, **Supporting children and young people when someone dies**. You can order or download this booklet for free on our website or call our Support Line on **0800 090 2309**.

How Marie Curie can help

Marie Curie is here for anyone with an illness they're likely to die from, and those close to them. Whatever the illness, wherever you are, we're with you to the end.

Marie Curie Support Line

0800 090 2309*

Our free Support Line is for anyone with an illness they're likely to die from and those close to them. Our team, including nurses and specialist Energy Support Officers, offers practical and emotional support on everything from symptom management and day-to-day care to financial information and bereavement support. Our Support Line is available in over 200 languages, or via webchat at mariecurie.org.uk/support. Open between 8am to 6pm from Monday to Friday, and 11am to 5pm on Saturday.

Marie Curie Companions

Companion volunteers focus on what's important to you and those close to you. It might be accompanying you to appointments, being there to listen to how you're feeling without judgment, or stepping in so family or carers can take a break. Companions provide the emotional and practical support you want – at home, in hospital or over the phone.

mariecurie.org.uk/companions

Marie Curie Telephone Bereavement Service

Get ongoing bereavement support over the phone from the same volunteer. You can access up to six sessions of 45 minutes. We can help if your bereavement was expected, happened recently or was some time ago.

mariecurie.org.uk/bereavement

* Your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

Marie Curie Online Community

Our Online Community is a space for you to share thoughts, feelings and experiences. It's moderated by the Marie Curie Support Line team, who can also help answer your questions.

community.mariecurie.org.uk

Marie Curie Hospice care where it's needed

Our hospices

Our hospices help people with any illness they're likely to die from, and the people close to them, receive the support they need. From medical and physical support to psychological and emotional care, whatever your illness, at whatever stage of the journey, we help you to live the best life possible, right to the end.

mariecurie.org.uk/hospices

Hospice care at home

Our nurses, healthcare assistants and other healthcare professionals bring the clinical, practical and emotional help you need to you, in the comfort of your own home. And we offer support to the people close to you too – from reassurance and practical information to letting them take a break.

mariecurie.org.uk/nurses

Looking for more information?

If you found this booklet useful, we have free information available online at mariecurie.org.uk/support or to order at mariecurie.org.uk/publications

About this information

This booklet was produced by Marie Curie's Information and Support team. It has been developed with people affected by terminal illness, and health and social care professionals.

If you'd like the list of sources used to create this information, please email review@mariecurie.org.uk or call the free Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309***.

Notice

The information in this publication is provided for the benefit and personal use of people with a terminal illness, their families and carers.

This information is provided as general guidance for information purposes only. It should not be considered as medical or clinical advice, or used as a substitute for personalised or specific advice from a qualified medical practitioner. In respect of legal, financial or other matters covered by this information, you should also consider seeking specific professional advice about your personal circumstances.

While we try to ensure that this information is accurate, we do not accept any liability arising from its use. Please refer to our website for our full terms and conditions.

Did you find this information useful?

If you have feedback about this booklet, please email us at review@mariecurie.org.uk or call the free Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309***.

Marie Curie

Marie Curie is the UK's leading end of life charity. Whatever the illness, wherever you are, we're with you to the end.



0800 090 2309*

Marie Curie provides free support over the phone in over 200 languages, and via webchat, to anyone with an illness they're likely to die from and those close to them.

Our team, including nurses and specialist Energy Support Officers, offers practical and emotional support on everything from symptom management and day-to-day care to financial information and bereavement support. Visit mariecurie.org.uk/support

We also have an Online Community where you can share thoughts, feelings and experiences at community.mariecurie.org.uk

We can't do it without you

Our free information and support services are entirely funded by your generous donations. Thanks to you, we can continue to offer people what they need, when they need it.

To donate, visit mariecurie.org.uk/donate

* Calls are free from landlines and mobiles. Your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

