

Bereavement Coping with Grief and Loss

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Bereavement and Loss

Bereavement and loss are an intrinsic part of life. We will all experience bereavement or loss during our life time. We may be bereaved through a natural death, accidental or sudden death, suicide or miscarriage. We may suffer other losses, e.g. the breakdown of a marriage or relationship, a loved one suffering a degenerative illness or disability due to an accident or medical condition.

Grief is a natural and normal reaction to the death or loss of someone close. Few of us are prepared for the long journey through grief, which is sometimes devastating, frightening and almost always lonely.

The Employee Assistance Officer (EAO) is aware of the difficulties experienced through grief and is available to offer both practical and emotional support to bereaved staff. This leaflet is intended to offer an insight into the grieving process, and explain the role of the Employee Assistance Officer when someone suffers a loss.

What is the grieving process?

The grieving process is experiencing the emotional reaction to loss, coming to accept the loss and adapting to a new life afterwards. Grief is unique to each individual. There is no 'right way' to grieve.

Some people will experience many physical and emotional reactions associated with grief while others may experience only a few but at different intensities. The intensity of feelings will depend on how significant the relationship was with the person who is now absent or deceased.

The initial reaction to news of a death is usually one of shock, disbelief and numbness – even when the death is expected. These feelings are very normal and are nature's way of gently sedating us to give us time to begin to realise what has happened.

These feelings may last a few hours or a few days. Some people continue with their daily lives accepting the fact that the death has taken place but not realising it emotionally. The rituals around death and burial are important stages in the grieving process. They allow us an opportunity to celebrate the life of a loved one.

The effects of grief

As the initial numbness wears off the bereaved person may experience the pain of grief in a number of ways:

Physical effects:

Tiredness, sleep and appetite disturbances, tightness in chest or throat, nausea, dry mouth, lack of energy

Emotional effects:

Sadness, anger, relief, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, yearning for your loved one.

Psychological effects:

Disbelief, forgetfulness, confusion, difficulty concentrating.

Spiritual effects:

Trying to make sense of what happened, searching for meaning, questioning your spiritual beliefs.

All of the above are normal reactions following a death or personal loss. You may not experience all of the above reactions and that is OK. Whatever the level of grief, it is important not to repress any feelings that may arise. It may be that the bereaved person depended on the deceased and therefore is fearful that they may not be able to manage alone. They may feel anxious about their own death and it will help to think and talk about it. There can also be feelings of relief, especially if the death occurred after much suffering or a long period of illness requiring on-going care. If the deceased was overpowering or possessive the bereaved may experience a sense of freedom. Regrets and self blame about things left undone or words left unspoken may contribute to feelings of guilt.

Acknowledging guilt and forgiving oneself are all part of the grieving process. Another phase of grieving is adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing. This may include a change in responsibilities and the development of new skills.

Children and grief

Grieving is a very difficult and painful process for children. In the emotional turmoil surrounding a loss, a child's grief may often be overlooked. Children need the love, attention, support and understanding of adults to help them in their grief. It helps both the adult and the child when feelings, tears and memories are shared.

Children will have different levels of understanding about death depending on their age and level of intellectual development. Very young children can be affected by a major loss. In bereaved teenagers behavioural problems such as eating and sleeping disturbances, a fall off in the quality of school work or physical symptoms such as pains and aches are common.

On-duty EAO available at 0818 008120

Monday - Thursday: 9am - 5.15pm

Friday: 9am - 5pm

Appointments are available evening
and weekends if required

Email: cseas@per.gov.ie

www.cseas.per.gov.ie

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Some children may feel responsible for the death - feel that they caused it by "being bad" or by doing something wrong. Reassure the child that he or she was in no way responsible for the death. Generally, it is not until a child reaches age nine that he/she grasps the concept that death is biological, inevitable and irreversible.

You may not know what to say to a child, and explaining a loss while coping with your own grief can be extremely difficult. Try to be as open and honest as possible and try to share as much as you can with the child.

Silence can make children feel isolated and may convey the message that they should limit their grieving. Giving extra hugs and holding hands go a long way towards easing a child's pain.

Like adults, children adjust to loss in phases. Give them all the time they need. They may experience anxiety, be unresponsive at times or distracted at school for a while. This is normal. You can help the child by keeping with daily routines and familiar activities. Also, encourage the child, even during grieving, to do the things they enjoy, to continue to enjoy life.

Remember that the most important factor in how well a child adjusts to a loss is the support he or she receives from loved ones.

Will I Recover?

Unlike an illness, the death or loss of a loved one is not something requiring recovery. Over time the intensity of your feelings of loss will lessen. Grieving is a process. It allows you to come to terms with your loss and, over time, integrate it into your future life. The person you loved may no longer be physically present but your memories of them form a continuing bond into the future.

Would Bereavement Counselling Help?

Most bereaved people come to terms with their loss with the support of family and friends and do not require bereavement counselling.

For some people, however, feelings of loss may become debilitating and not improve even after time passes. This is known as complicated grief. In complicated grief, painful emotions are so long lasting and severe that the bereaved person has difficulty accepting the loss and resuming their own life. When grief becomes complicated, counselling can help the person come to terms with the loss and to reclaim a sense of acceptance and peace. In cases of complicated grief it is important that the bereaved person seeks appropriate professional help.

What do I need to do?

Suppressing your grief will not make it go away. Friends and well wishers may seek to distract you from your grief because it is uncomfortable for them. It takes courage to grieve as it is often difficult and painful. Talk about your feelings with someone who will listen in a caring and confidential way.

The Role of the EAO

EAO's can provide:

1. Emotional support and information on bereavement counselling where appropriate.
2. Practical support in matters relating to social welfare entitlements, pensions, etc.

Useful contacts

- Anam Cara
www.anamcara.ie
- The Irish Hospice Foundation
www.hospicefoundation.ie
- The Irish Cancer Society
www.cancer.ie bereavement-support
- Miscarriage Association of Ireland
Ph: 01 873 5702
www.miscarriage.ie

For Children and Young Adults

- Rainbows Ireland
Ph: 01 473 4175
www.rainbowsireland.com
- Barnardos Bereavement Helpline
Ph: 01 473 2110
www.barnardos.ie

Useful Booklet

When a loved one dies

www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/3/acutehospitals/hospitals/cava_nmonaghan/when-a-loved-one-dies.pdf

Information for those affected by bereavement

www.citizensinformation.ie/en/death/

*Grieving allows us to heal
to remember with love rather than pain
It is a sorting process
One by one you let go of the things that
are gone and you mourn for them.
One by one you take hold of the things
that have become part of who you are
and you build again.*

Rachel Naomi Remen

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