

Emotional and physical symptoms of grief

This information is from the booklet *After someone dies-coping with bereavement*. You may find the full booklet helpful. We can send you a free copy – see page 5.

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What is grief?

Grief is a word for the range of feelings you may have following the death of someone close to you.

Grief can begin before the person dies. You may already have felt a sense of loss. You may have missed the way your relationship used to be and all the things you used to do together.

The thoughts and feelings you have will vary. At times they may be very intense and stop you doing things. At other times they may be in the background and you'll find you can still do your day-to-day activities.

How you feel and react will depend on a number of different things, including:

- the relationship you had with the person who died
- whether their death was expected
- how they died
- any previous experience of death you have had.

Some people describe being overwhelmed and even frightened by the intensity of their feelings. Others describe feeling numb and that they can't believe what has happened. You may have regrets about things you wish you had done or said. Or you may just wish you had more time together. Some people may feel relieved that their relative or friend is no longer suffering.

There is no right or wrong way to feel. Your feelings may change from day to day or even hour to hour. One day you may feel you are coping. The next day you may be overwhelmed by feelings of sadness and loneliness. It is quite normal to have ups and downs like this.

Emotional symptoms of grief

Shock and numbness

Many people describe feeling shocked and numb in the days and weeks immediately after the death of a relative or friend. This can happen even if the death was expected. People sometimes talk about 'going through the motions' as they make arrangements for the funeral and start to sort out practical things.

Anger

Anger is a common feeling following the death of a relative or friend. Some people describe being shocked at how angry they feel. Try not to worry about it, because it's a normal feeling to have. Anger may be directed at different people. You may feel angry with:

- the doctors for not being able to cure your relative or friend's cancer
- your relative or friend for leaving you on your own with so much to sort out
- the people around you for not understanding how you feel.

Guilt

People feel guilty for different reasons after the death of a relative or friend. You may think that if you had said or done something differently, they might not have died. If you are feeling like this, you might find it helpful to talk to the doctor or a nurse who was caring for your relative or friend. You could also talk to your GP.

There may be some things you wish you had been able to say to your relative, or friend or do with them while they were still alive.

Some people feel guilty because they are relieved that their relative or friend has died.

Loneliness

Many people describe feeling intensely lonely following the death of a relative or friend. This is very understandable, particularly if the person who has died is someone you have shared your life or your home with for a long time.

Loneliness is often described as a constant feeling that doesn't go away. People describe feeling lonely even when they are going about their everyday lives and surrounded by family and friends. This is not unusual and it will take time to get used to the person not being around. You may think you see a glimpse of the person and then remember they are no longer here. You may find yourself talking to the person who has died. It is fine to do this and you may find it helpful.

Fear

Fear is another common and natural feeling following the death of a relative or friend. For example, you may be fearful of having to do things on your own and how you're going to manage. Or you may feel afraid of going back to work. Some people are frightened by the intensity of their feelings.

Many people are scared they will get cancer themselves and feel anxious every time they feel unwell. These feelings are understandable and usually get better with time.

Sadness

The sadness you feel following the death of a relative or friend can be overwhelming. Some people describe it as a physical pain. It can stop you wanting to do things like going out with friends, going to work or even getting out of bed. Some people become very depressed and stop looking after themselves properly. If this happens, they may need extra support.

Longing

Some people describe a feeling of intense longing to see, speak to or hold the person who has died. They desperately wish the person could come back again. This can make it difficult to get on with doing other things. Some people dream about the person who has died. This can be very upsetting when they wake up and realise the person is no longer here.

For some people, the longing is so intense, it feels that life without that person is unbearable. If you feel like you can't continue, ask for extra help and support to help you.

Crying

Many people find that they cry easily after the death of a relative or friend. Crying can be a response to all the emotions we describe here. People often say they suddenly start crying when they least expect it, and often many months or years later. This may be triggered by hearing a song on the radio, or visiting a place that has happy memories for you and your relative or friend. Try not to worry about how often you cry. It's a healthy response to your feelings.

Some people find they can't cry, and this may worry them. There is no need to worry if you don't cry. It doesn't mean you don't feel the loss. Crying can't usually be forced. Just do what feels right for you.

Relief

Some people describe feeling relieved when their relative or friend dies. This may particularly be the case if they were very ill for a long time, needed a lot of care from you, or had symptoms that were difficult to control. When someone is suffering, it is natural to wish for their suffering to end. There is no need to feel guilty about this.

If you had a difficult relationship with the person who has died, you may not feel any of the emotions we have described here. Or you may be surprised at how intense your feelings are.

Physical symptoms of grief

Many people have physical symptoms after the death of a relative or friend. These can be frightening. Some people say the symptoms are so strong that they worry they are seriously ill or may have cancer themselves. But physical reactions are quite common. They can include:

- feeling sick
- difficulty sleeping
- exhaustion
- poor concentration
- your heart beating fast (palpitations)
- dizziness
- a poor appetite
- losing weight.

If you have any of these symptoms and they continue for more than a week or two, you should discuss them with your GP.

Your feelings

All the emotions and physical symptoms we have described in this section have been used by people to describe how they feel after the death of a relative or friend. You may experience some or all of these feelings. You may have them at different times and in different ways. But you may not have any of them, and you may experience your grief differently.

Although they may be extremely difficult and painful, they are all natural. No one can take away the pain and anguish you might feel. But there are different things you can try that may help.

More information and support

More than one in three of us will get cancer. For most of us it will be the toughest fight we ever face. And the feelings of isolation and loneliness that so many people experience make it even harder. But you don't have to go through it alone. The Macmillan team is with you every step of the way.

Visit macmillan.org.uk or call us on **0808 808 00 00**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm.

You can order a copy of *After someone dies - coping with bereavement*, or any other cancer information, from be.macmillan.org.uk or by calling us.

Hard of hearing? Use textphone **0808 808 0121**, or Text Relay. Speak another language? We have telephone interpreters. We provide information in a range of languages and formats. Visit macmillan.org.uk/otherformats or call us.

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