

Coming to terms with a loss

Why am I feeling like this?

Bereavement is a uniquely personal event, evoking a wide range of reactions. Your personal reaction will be affected by many factors including your relationship to the person you've lost, the way they died, your previous experiences of loss, and your own personality.

You may experience any of these emotions, or others not listed: It's understandable after the shock of bereavement if your emotions fluctuate wildly. Most people find that they go through a variety of emotions after the loss of someone important (see the reading list at the end of this leaflet for details of the book describing this process, by E. Kubler-Ross).

You may be surprised that an upsetting event can affect your behaviour or cause physical symptoms, but it is quite common to have one or more of these symptoms: There is no timescale to any of the reactions above, which can occur at any stage of grief.

Feelings:

- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Fatigue
- Yearning
- Numbness
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Shock
- Self-reproach
- Freedom

Behaviour:

- Sleep disturbances
- Avoiding reminders of the deceased
- Appetite disturbances
- Searching and calling out
- Absent-minded behaviour
- Sighing
- Social withdrawal
- Periods of over activity
- Muscle weakness and lack of energy
- Dreams of the deceased
- Crying
- Physical sensations
- Hollowness in the stomach
- Tightness in the chest and/or throat
- Oversensitivity to noise
- A sense of unreality
- Breathlessness
- Dry mouth

How can the circumstances of the death affect our reactions?

There are some differences between a sudden, unexpected death and one that has been on the horizon for a while. In the first case, you had no time to prepare yourself through 'anticipatory grieving'. After this apparently random event, the world may suddenly seem a much more unpredictable and dangerous place.

The sense of loss may take longer to sink in simply because you need to get used to the fact that the death has occurred. You may wonder if you or someone else could have prevented this. You may also have regrets about unresolved aspects of your relationship with the person who has died.

However, even if your friend or relative has had a terminal illness, the death was anticipated and you felt you were prepared, you may still be intensely affected. It might be a surprise to find that you don't react at all. This is also a normal reaction. Others may find it strange, but we each deal with a loss in our own way.

What about when someone my own age dies?

The death of a friend or fellow student may also bring some of the same emotional reactions as the death of an older relative. However, the fact that your shared experiences may have occurred in familiar places that you continue to see daily gives an added dimension to the loss.

Other friends will also be grieving and your sense of your own mortality may be more acute than when someone of an older generation dies. Consequently, a death can trigger a review of the meaning of your own life at a less than convenient time.

How should I react – what is the “right” way to behave?

There is no set way of experiencing or reacting to these feelings. At times you may feel low and at other times find yourself laughing and joking. Life goes on even after quite traumatic events so there is no need to feel guilty when you find yourself having to return to everyday activities such as attending lectures, seminars, sport or even visits to the pub with friends. Activity can be helpful as long as you allow time and space for reflection and feelings. This is especially so if you were so close to someone that part of the bereavement process has to be a demerging of identities and you regaining an individual one.

What if I couldn't be there?

For some people who are studying a long way from home, it may be impossible to return for the final days of an ill relative, or the rituals which follow death. If the funeral and burial must take place quickly for religious or practical reasons and there isn't time to return home, missing out on these significant events may raise conflicting emotions in you.

Sometimes the reality of the loss doesn't register until the next visit home. Sometimes there is a sense of guilt at not being able to participate in the family's grieving. Sharing these feelings with friends, and perhaps finding a time and place to mark the death wherever you are, may help.

I feel desperately sad, am I depressed?

Grief can cause you to have some of the symptoms of depression, such as sleep disturbance, appetite changes and intense sadness, as well as other symptoms such as headaches, mood swings, difficulties in concentrating and panic attacks. All this is quite normal; these are widely experienced after a bereavement.

University life can be demanding and whilst at times it may be a relief to be busy, at other times you may feel low and fearful that the demands will overwhelm you. If you are worried that you may be depressed, you may find it helpful to talk through your concerns with your GP or a counsellor.

How can I help myself?

Take good care of yourself - try to eat a balanced diet, watch any increase in drinking, smoking or drug taking which could block out normal moods and feelings and which could increase problems with sleep or concentration; recall strategies that have successfully helped you through difficult times in the past; take one day at a time and don't expect too much of yourself.

Talk - try to be open with friends and people who care about you; let your lecturers and other relevant people know that you may need extra time to meet deadlines; keep your lines of communication and sources of help open, good friends won't find you unrewarding to be with or 'overemotional'.

Talking to a member of the Student Welfare Team, your Hall warden, a chaplain or a counsellor can help, so do make use of the professional support on offer. After bereavement the pain will lessen over time, and allowing yourself to talk your feelings through several times will aid this process.

Revisiting the events and emotions is a way of establishing the meaning the person had for you. If what you are doing isn't working for you, don't just retreat feeling depressed. Some people feel they need a bit of extra help to get them through this difficult time. If you feel stuck, try contacting one of the services listed at the end of this leaflet.

Looking to the future

Life will never be the same again after bereavement, but there will come a time when you are able to adapt and adjust, and cope with life without the person who has died.

Many people worry that they will forget the person who has died; how they looked, their voice, the good times they had together. There are many ways you can keep their memory alive. These are just a few suggestions:

- talk about them and your special memories
- write down your memories keep an album of photos
- keep some of their special possessions

- do something that commemorates them, such as planting a tree, paying for a park bench or making a donation to a relevant charity

How can the University's Student Welfare Team help?

Speaking to someone not involved in your everyday life can help clarify your thoughts and feelings. If you continue to feel bad and see no sign of improvement over time, or you have increased your use of drink or drugs in order to cope, a welfare officer can listen empathically in a non-judgemental way so that you can come to a new perspective to find a way forward.

If you are concerned about someone else's reaction to bereavement and you are not sure how to help, speak to a member of the team and they will be able to guide you.

Can someone from the University Chaplaincy help even if I'm not religious?

Within the University, religious representatives (from all denominations) support both religious and non-religious people trying to understand the meaning of life and death. They have long experience in these matters and will not try to convert you to their faith community.

Is there anything I can read which may help?

Yes. Bereavement unfolds in phases and is unique to the individual, so reading can give excellent perspectives, understanding and insight. Many find that combining reading with processing the new ideas – by talking with friends or professionals – is a productive way forward.

Suggested books:

- Bereavement: Studies of grief in Adult life by Colin Murray-Parkes
- On Death and Dying by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Other useful contacts:

[Student Welfare Team](#) - (0118) 378 4777

[The University Medical Practice](#) - (0118) 987 4551

[RUSU Advice Service](#) - (0118) 378 4110

[Chaplaincy Centre](#) - (0118) 378 8797

[Counselling and Wellbeing Service](#) - (0118) 378 4216

[The Samaritans](#) - 116 123

[Cruse](#) (bereavement care) - 0808 808 1677