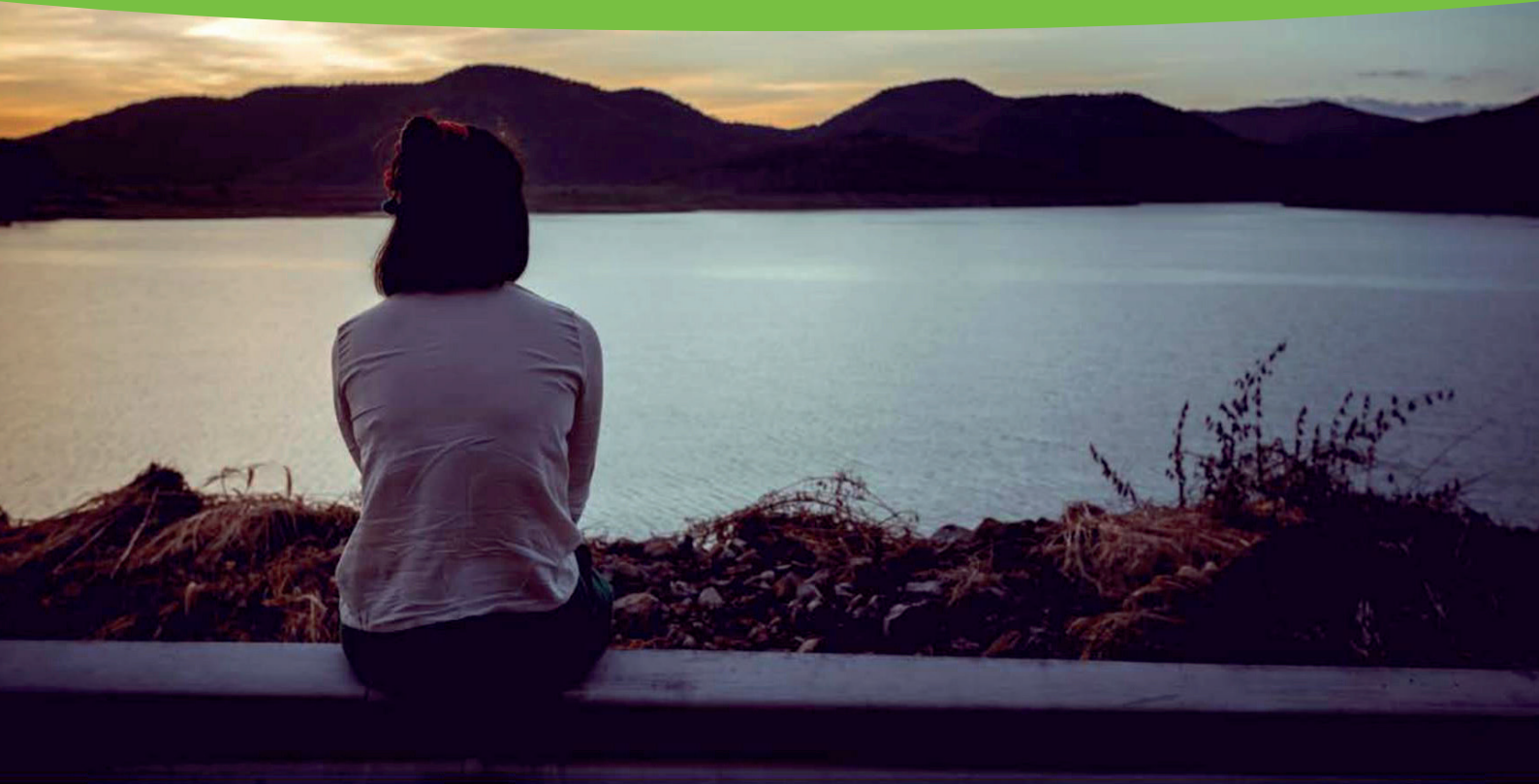


Grief and loss



The recent disclosure by HRH Prince Harry about the turmoil he felt as a result of the loss of his mother at the age of 12 highlights the fact that grief can affect anybody regardless of class, age, or personality.

If we do not allow ourselves to grieve it can surprise us by coming to the forefront and overwhelming us many years later. All of us at some stage in our lives will experience it, although the ways in which we grieve and the circumstances of each loss will be different for each individual. Grief can knock you sideways, it can physically hurt and leave you wondering how you will possibly ever get through it. It can be so painful that you may be tempted to do whatever you can to avoid feeling it, but blocking the grieving process can lead to other issues and prevent the natural return to interest and meaning in life that follows the grieving process.

On top of the ache of losing someone many people are confused by grief; they don't know what to expect, what is

normal and how to grieve in a healthy way. Many of us think of grief as being triggered by a death but grief and loss can appear in many forms throughout our lives such as when a relationship breaks down, when we move home, change job etc. In this helpsheet we will focus on grief and loss as a result of bereavement but some ideas may be applicable to other losses. What follows are some guidelines highlighting what you might experience during the grieving process and how you can support yourself throughout. If there is anything raised that you would like to discuss further you can speak with one of our trained therapists on the Adviceline.

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What is normal?

There is no set timetable for grieving. Nobody can tell you how long it will take. Some people may feel a sense of peace and renewed hope after a few months while others will experience waves of grief for years to come. The circumstances of the death can have a bearing on this – whether the death is anticipated, sudden, peaceful or violent, the quality of relationship with the deceased and their age.

After a loss you may experience:

- ▶ **Sudden waves of grief.** While you go about your everyday business you may unexpectedly feel overcome with sadness. Sometimes there is an obvious trigger – a reminder of the deceased such as a song you both enjoyed, or a place you visited together – but at other times it may feel as though it has come from nowhere.

- ▶ **Loss of concentration.** Losing your thread mid-sentence, forgetting dates, details and difficulty focussing on certain tasks are all common.
- ▶ **Numbness.** Life may seem unreal, as if you are just imagining it. It might be difficult to connect with any of your emotions and you feel flat.
- ▶ **Hopelessness.** Grief can make you feel emptiness, loneliness and despair.
- ▶ **False hope.** You may expect your loved one to come back and resume life as normal.
- ▶ **Guilt.** You might churn over regrets about your relationships and wish you had acted differently.
- ▶ **Anger and injustice.** You may feel life is unfair and be angry at what has happened.
- ▶ **Relief.** It is a heavy burden to witness the suffering of someone we care for and often we feel relief when death brings an end. We may also feel relief if we have had significant caring duties which have affected our own quality of life.

Physically you might experience:

- ▶ Frequent minor illnesses due to lower immune system
- ▶ Disrupted sleep
- ▶ Headaches, stomach aches, general aches and pains
- ▶ Hair loss
- ▶ Heightened anxiety
- ▶ Weight gain or loss
- ▶ Low energy and fatigue
- ▶ Hair loss

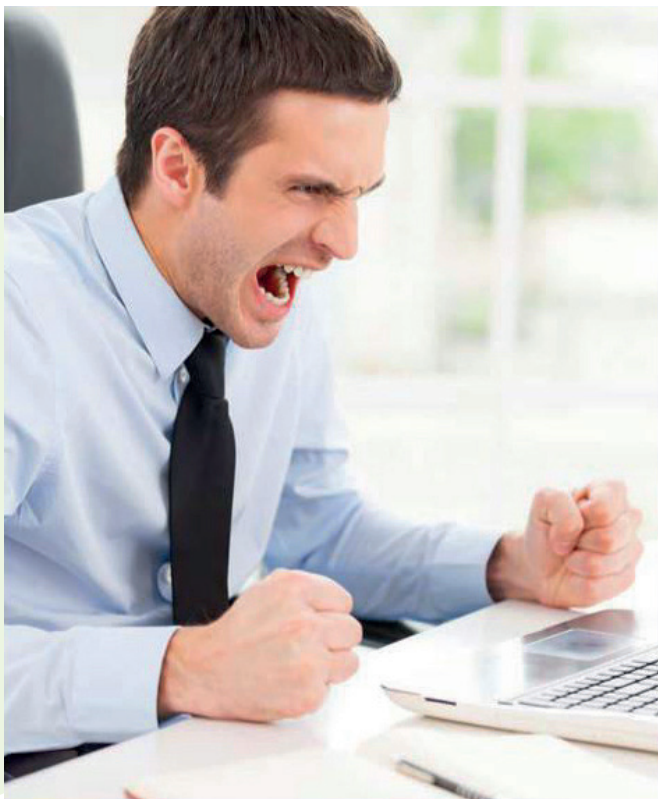
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The Stages of Grief

Psychiatrist and author Elizabeth Kubler Ross worked for many years with dying patients and the bereaved. Through her work she identified five stages that a person typically goes through when they are grieving: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. These are not necessarily followed in that order, and not everyone will go through all the stages, but they can be used as tools to help us identify what we are feeling during our own individual grieving process.

Denial

When we first lose someone we often find ourselves in shock and denial. Denial doesn't mean that we literally don't know or acknowledge the loss; rather we struggle to fathom that they won't show up in our lives again. It can feel like the deceased are simply away on holiday. The harsh reality of the death of a loved one can be so painful that we struggle to figure out



how to carry on without them. Shock and denial often bring feelings of numbness, or we imagine we are dreaming and will wake up to normal life again. In Kubler Ross's words 'Denial helps us to pace our feelings of grief... It is nature's way of letting in only as much as we can handle.' Denial and shock help us to cope and make survival possible.

Anger

There are many reasons a person may feel anger after a loss; a need to understand why it happened and whether it could be prevented; at the unfairness of it; the hole that the person leaves behind; or we may turn our anger inwards and blame ourselves. It is natural to be angry and important to acknowledge our feelings.

Bargaining

During this phase we may try to negotiate the situation. This could be with another person, ourselves or a spiritual deity. We may beg to be given a second chance and offer to make things better in any way that we can – by being a better person, changing our habits or attitudes. Whilst this is an understandable reaction at some point we need to face our limitations, to know that we can't change death, and life cannot go back to how it used to be. Often once we have done this the next phase occurs.

Depression

Once we realise that the loss is real and cannot be reversed we may fall into a deep sorrow. Feelings of loneliness and hopelessness are common and remorse and regret may intensify. Life can feel pointless. It can be painfully sad, with many tears and a real lack of energy and engagement in life.

Acceptance

This stage involves accepting the reality of the loss and learning to live with it. It does not mean, as some people mistakenly think, that we are 'over it', or inured to the heartache. We may always miss those that were dear to us but we accept and face the gap that they leave behind. It is the realisation that life cannot continue as if they were still part of it; our identity, habits and roles must evolve. When we accept the reality of the loss and allow our feelings we begin to heal

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in our own time and move beyond suffering. This may initially mean having more good days than bad, and there may be times we feel guilty about enjoying ourselves and betraying those we have lost, but eventually we begin to invest in life again and make new meaningful connections. We cannot replace what we have lost but even in new circumstances we can find peace within ourselves.

What can help?

Talk about it. When we talk about our loss and express any related feelings – anger, regret, relief, sadness and more – we move towards acceptance. It is not unusual to find that some people feel embarrassed and awkward and are unsure how to help. Be prepared to tell them what you need, whether it is to talk or some practical help. Talking to others who have experienced loss can help as they may have a greater understanding of what you are going through. Some people find it beneficial to talk with a professional and have a space where they can process whatever they are feeling and experiencing with someone who will listen and offer support.

Support groups. Support groups offer an opportunity to share your experience with others who are also recovering

from loss. They can be particularly helpful when it feels like the world is moving on and you are still grieving. They provide a safe place to talk about your experience, draw support from others and to learn from them.

Allow your tears. Crying allows painful feelings to be expressed and can provide a sense of release.

Find emotional rest. Being in direct contact with the pain of loss can be overwhelming and we are not prepared to be in such a heightened emotional state for prolonged periods. Think of grieving as a process of going in and out of the grief. There will be good days and bad, moments when we feel we are coping and moments when we feel undone. Rediscover the things you do that allow your emotions to rest without judgement – watching TV, reading, going for a walk, seeing a good friend, pottering about or simply having a lazy Sunday morning.

Look after yourself. Grief can take its toll on the body. Ensure that you eat a balanced, nutritious diet and get regular exercise. If your energy levels are low start with something gentle like walking, cycling, swimming or yoga.



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Be kind to yourself. Whilst you are grieving the limits of what you can achieve or manage are likely to be compromised. As concentration, energy levels and your emotions are affected try to adapt your timetable as much as you can. This may mean working reduced hours, skipping certain social events if they feel more like an obligation than a pleasure or building in more time for rest.

Grief and depression. Grief can look very similar to depression and sometimes grief can be a catalyst for depression. Feelings of hopelessness, lack of pleasure, changes in sleep and eating habits are normal responses to loss but if you continue to feel that life is meaningless, are unable to enjoy life or have persistent thoughts of ending your life it is important to seek professional help.

Complicated Bereavement. Although we all grieve in individual ways there are some warning signs that we are struggling to work through our grief:

- ▶ Extensive avoidance of painful feelings and reminders of the deceased. This may be through being busy, reliance on drugs or alcohol, impulsive spending or gambling.
- ▶ While it is natural for those mourning to experience disruption to their daily routines a prolonged crippling loss in ability to function is cause for concern.
- ▶ Continued feelings of hopelessness, inability to feel any pleasure, persistent thoughts of ending your life.
- ▶ Sometimes loss is expressed through physical ailments, if you experience frequent complaints that are not easily diagnosed it could be a sign of unresolved grief.

If you experience any of the above it is time to seek help. Speak with your GP or contact one of our therapists on the Adviceline.

Further Resources

Cruse Bereavement Care provides information, therapy and support:

www.cruse.org.uk

Some local hospices offer bereavement therapy and support groups:

www.hospiceuk.org/about-hospice-care/find-a-hospice

On Grief and Grieving:

Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss

by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler

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