

General Critical Care Unit

Bereavement

A guide to help you from General Critical Care Bereavement Service



Introduction

Bereavement is a very personal and often traumatic event, and perhaps especially difficult after someone dies in Critical Care.

Everyone reacts differently to loss and our way of grieving is as unique as our fingerprint. Sometimes this can cause difficulties when a family is affected by grief as each person will have different needs and ways of expressing their sadness. It is important to remember that there is no normal or right way to grieve but certain emotions are commonly experienced by us all. The aim of this booklet is to help you realise what feelings you or your family are likely to experience and where to get support if needed.

The Critical Care Bereavement Team will contact you after about six to eight weeks after your loss to offer support if needed.

Disbelief

In the first few hours or days following the death of a close relative or friend, most people feel as though they can't believe it has actually happened.



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A sense of shock and emotional numbness takes over and can be a natural way to help us through the initial time when a lot has to be done to arrange the funeral and let others know of the death. The feeling of unreality can become a problem if it goes on for too long. Seeing the body and saying goodbye is an important way of beginning to overcome disbelief. The funeral or memorial service is when most of us start to feel the pain of grief and the reality of death. Avoiding or protecting others from such painful experiences is not always helpful in the long run. Expressing feelings and sharing grief is difficult but probably more beneficial.

Your body

Physical pain is often felt during bereavement, particularly in the early stages. Other common changes are loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, restlessness, shortness of breath, anxiety, and a feeling of being on edge. Susceptibility to colds or other infections and being more accident prone can also happen. It is important to take extra special care of yourself and not to try and do too much while you are grieving. Try and eat regularly even if it is small amounts, and take extra time to rest as you may feel more tired than usual. Gentle exercise and making an effort to socialise will help you feel better, but remember it will take time for you to get back to anything near 'normal' after the shock of your bereavement. Don't be afraid to talk to your GP about anything that is bothering you.

Your feelings and what to expect

Many people feel too shocked to feel anything much to start with, even if the death was expected. It is not uncommon in the early stages to sense that you have heard or seen the person who has died. This can be very unsettling but is perhaps a subconscious way of adjusting to the loss of some one who was part of everyday life. Some people report feeling as if they are going mad as they try to adjust and function normally. Try not to panic; things will not always be this difficult.

As time passes there are a number of emotions, sometimes very extreme, which are common whilst grieving. Be aware that you may have different feelings at different times. Your feelings may change suddenly and unexpectedly or you may feel nothing at all which can be just as stressful and exhausting. It can help to let people around you know that your emotions may be unpredictable, and that you need their support and understanding for a while.

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It is natural to experience feelings of anger and irritability, even about the deceased. Try not to suppress these emotions, accepting how you feel is part of the road to feeling better again. It is also normal to experience periods of intense questioning and a need to go over and over what happened. Talking things through with a listening ear or someone who shares your loss will help. At some stage almost everyone will experience a rush of grief and sadness with periods of intense yearning which can feel overwhelming and unmanageable. It is important to allow yourself time to feel the pain of your loss even though it may be tempting to bottle things up and avoid situations that trigger tears and sadness.

Remember there is no standard grief; you may or may not experience similar emotions or experiences. The important thing is to express your feelings and share them with others if possible. If you do not have any one who can listen to you or prefer to talk to someone else or feel you would benefit from counselling, there is a list of bereavement agencies at the back of this booklet; you are not alone.

Getting used to the death

Getting used to the death of someone close seems to happen in fits and starts and is often not as simple as it sounds, especially if you have lost a lifelong partner. You may have lost a younger relative; when a young person dies it reverses the natural order of life and death and can seem particularly unjust. Allowing your feelings to come out can really help you get used to the reality of your loss. Talking about the death and about the person who died, dealing with the practicalities of your new situation and trying to think of the present as well as the past can all help you get used to the reality and get through some of the anguish you may feel.

Avoid making any important decisions while you are still in the turmoil of grief. For example, don't rush into moving home while you are still grieving. It is better to see how you feel once the initial shock of your loss has passed, instead of making a quick decision you may regret later. Accept any help and support from friends and family particularly with the practicalities of running a home, and don't be afraid to ask for help and support.

Bereavement and children

When a loved one dies it can be difficult to know how to help children, especially when you are grieving yourself. It is understandable that many adults are reluctant to talk to children for fear of causing upset and distress. Children need to know what has happened and failure to be honest with a grieving child can cause problems later on. Children often feel excluded from things and frightened to show their feelings for fear of making everything worse for any adults involved. Sometimes children can feel that the death is somehow their fault because of bad behaviour or not being good enough. Children of all ages, even when very young, need to be given the opportunity to grieve. It is only natural to be concerned about how to tell children about the death of a relative and to worry about how they will react. A child's ability to understand death and your approach will depend on their age and experiences of loss. Every child is unique but the following is a rough guide.

Explaining death to children

Be honest with children and encourage questions as this will help create an atmosphere of comfort and openness and help children realise there is no right or wrong way to feel. Encourage them to express emotions about their loss, drawing pictures, writing poems, picking flowers to take to the grave: anything that makes the child feel involved and free to show feelings.

Until five or six years of age children see things in a very literal way so it is helpful to explain things simply: "the doctors could not make Granny better and she has died; she can't come back."

Young children find it hard to understand the finality of dying and may keep on asking where the dead person is or when they are coming back. Avoid euphemisms as they will only confuse a child and be honest about where they are.

Children aged six to ten years of age start to be able to grasp the reality of death but are also highly imaginative and tend to personify death, so they might think, for example, about 'ghosts' and become frightened more easily. This age group deal best when given accurate, simple, clear and honest explanations about what has happened.

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Teenagers and Adolescents tend to have a much better understanding about the eventuality of death and are less likely to link the death with their own behaviour or wishes. They are not so easily satisfied with literal answers but more likely to question and search for the meaning of life. Teens also experience guilt and fear, particularly if one of their peers has died. Adolescence is often a difficult, passionate and emotional period and the best thing you can do is offer an open door for expression and sharing of grief. Treating them as an equal and gaining mutual comfort from one another will help. Remember also that at this stage your teenager may be able to gain comfort and support from outside the family network such as friends and not rely or confide in you which can be hard.

If you need help there are many organisations which can offer guidance but don't underestimate your efforts which will go a long way to helping your child get through bereavement and the inevitable losses life will bring in the future.

Bereavement, whether expected or sudden, can result in many different responses. Being aware of some of the reactions that you or your family may experience will hopefully reassure you that the feelings you may experience are not abnormal. Remember everyone reacts differently and copes in a unique way and that help is available should you need it. There is a list of agencies on the following pages, which offer support and counselling to help you through this difficult time.

General Critical care offers a bereavement follow up service. You should receive correspondence in approximately 6 weeks time. In the mean time if you need to contact the service the answer phone number is 024 7696 6877. Please be aware that it may take a few days for us to answer your call.

Useful contact numbers and websites

Brake

www.brake.org.uk

Tel: 08088 000401

Bereavement helpline for road traffic accidents.

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Cruse Bereavement Care

www.cruse.org.uk

Advice line	08088 081677
Coventry & North Warwickshire	024 7667 0714
Warwickshire	07730 216700
Rugby	01926 810888
Birmingham	0121 687 8010
Leicestershire	0116 2884 119

Compassionate Friends

www.tcf.org.uk

Tel: 0345 123 2304

Helpline for bereaved parents

WAY Foundation

www.wayfoundation.org.uk

Tel: 0300 012 4929

Young widowed men and women under the age of 50. Self help and support network for men, women and their children.

National Association of Widows

Tel: 0845 8382261

Relate

www.relate.org.uk

Tel: 0300 100 1234

Coventry **024 7622 5863**

Rugby **01788 565 675**

Family and relationship counselling.

Patient Information

Samaritans

www.samaritans.org.uk

National helpline: **116 123**

S.O.B.S.

www.uk-sobs.org.uk/

National helpline: 0300 111 5065

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide

Sudden

www.suddendeath.org

Supporting people after sudden death.

Terrance Higgins Trust

www.tht.org.uk

Tel: 08088 021221

Coventry 02476 229292

Help and support for anyone concerned about AIDS or HIV.

Organisations to help bereaved children

Winston's Wish

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Helpline: 08088 020 021

The charity for bereaved children.

Child Bereavement Trust

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Tel: 0800 02 888 40

Patient Information

Help for the elderly

Age UK

www.ageuk.org

Tel: 0800 6781174

Coventry 02476 231 999

Alzheimer's Society

www.alzheimers.org.uk

Tel: 0330 3330804

ElderHope

www.elderhope.com

A web forum for those caring for a bereaved relative who has dementia.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 6877 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

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