



**Independent
Age**



Coping with bereavement

Living with grief and loss



Thank you

We would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this guide was being developed, and those who reviewed it for us. With special thanks to Cruse Bereavement Support for their expert knowledge during the review.

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Contents

About this guide	2
1. How you might be feeling	3
2. Particular circumstances of bereavement	10
3. Physical effects of grief	14
4. Getting support after the funeral	17
5. Looking after yourself	21
6. Where to find help	27
7. Adjusting to living on your own	34
8. Holding on to memories	39
9. Summary	43
Bob's story	45

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We spoke to older people about their experiences. Their quotes appear throughout. We have changed the names of some of the interviewees who wished to be anonymous. Some of the images seen throughout this guide are posed by friends of Independent Age.

The PIF TICK is the UK-wide Quality Mark for Health Information.

About this guide

The death of someone you're close to can be devastating. Bereavement is an almost universal experience, but it affects everyone differently, and at times it can leave you feeling very alone.

This guide looks at how you might be feeling and thinking after the death of someone close, and where you can find sources of comfort and support.

Grief is a complex and intensely personal experience and there's no right or wrong way of coping with it. It might not seem possible now, but people usually find ways to cope with their loss and live satisfying lives despite it, and it's important to know that support is available. You're not alone.

We spoke to people about their experiences of coping with bereavement. Their quotes appear throughout this guide.



In this guide, you'll find references to our other free publications. You can order them by calling **0800 319 6789**, or by visiting **independentage.org/publications**.



1. How you might be feeling

There's no one way of grieving – everyone deals with bereavement differently. There's no expected way you should be feeling or set time it will take for you to feel more like yourself again.

1. How you might be feeling

After a death, your thoughts and feelings can be chaotic and overwhelming. It might be very difficult to pin down or put into words exactly how you're feeling. This chapter looks at some of the feelings many people go through, but your own experience may be different. It's important to allow yourself to grieve in your own way.

Spending time on your own might be part of how you come to terms with the death, but it's also good to talk to others and draw on their support. Family, friends, support groups, counsellors or GPs can all help you when you're feeling vulnerable. Bottling up your feelings may make things harder in the long run. If you're worried about anything you're thinking or feeling, or you're finding it hard to cope, seek support.

I think I'm still in shock. Nothing feels real.

These feelings are particularly common immediately after the death. Initial shock is often accompanied by a feeling of unreality and disconnection, even if the death was expected. If these feelings persist, you might benefit from talking to someone about it.

Everything's getting on top of me. I feel so panicky and my thoughts are all over the place.

Grief can produce complex and sometimes frighteningly strong emotions. It's common to feel overwhelmed by these, especially in the early weeks and months. You may also experience anxiety – you might have specific fears, like worrying that someone else may die, or your anxiety may be more general. This can often be part of the grieving process, but if anxiety continues or is hard to manage, speak to your GP.



1. How you might be feeling

My brother and I seem to quarrel all the time since my mum died.

Many people experience anger and irritation following a bereavement. You might feel anger towards yourself, others around you, the person who has died or someone you blame for the death.

Also, everyone copes with grief differently and dealing with practical matters like the estate and the funeral can be difficult for everyone. You may find yourself unexpectedly arguing with family members or others who were close to the person who died. This can be upsetting but is normal when everyone is under stress.

“ When someone passes away, it’s a stressful time. They can leave behind a lot of things that aren’t tied up.

He was such a good person. He should be alive, not me.

Guilt can take many forms. You may feel guilty that you're still alive when someone else has died. Or you may find yourself constantly going over what happened and feeling guilty that you didn't do more or prevent the death. This is a normal reaction but can leave you feeling more distressed. It might help to seek reassurance and support from those around you and to remind yourself of everything you did for the person who died.

I'm just heartbroken. I keep crying when I think about all the things we'll never do together.

Sadness is to be expected, and may be more intense after the initial shock of the bereavement has started to subside. You might find it hard to stop thinking about the person who has died and how much you miss them. Try to talk to those around you, or to a support organisation like Cruse (**0808 808 1677** in England and Wales, or **0808 802 6161** in Scotland) and don't isolate yourself.

1. How you might be feeling

Intense sadness can often ease as time goes on, although you may still miss the person years later. You may not ever stop grieving completely, but people usually find a way to adapt to it and live meaningful lives despite their loss.

I can't think about my loss; I need to be strong for others.

If you are looking after others affected by the same loss, you may feel you can't talk about it and express your emotions. While focusing on day-to-day life after a bereavement can be helpful, it will also help to find time to reflect on your emotions and accept that it is okay to feel sadness. You don't always need to put on a brave face. Supporting each other through your grief can be a great source of comfort to you all.

If you can't talk to friends or family about your grief, you could try talking to one of the support organisations listed in **chapter 6**.

I had a really difficult relationship with the person who died.

Difficult relationships can bring up complicated emotions after someone dies. You may have contradictory or unexpected feelings. For example, you may be relieved and deeply sad, or you may feel guilty if you think you should have tried harder to mend the relationship. Or the relationship may have been so painful or abusive that you don't feel any sadness that they're gone. You may have thought that one day things would change between you for the better.

Whatever you're feeling is normal and you have the right to grieve in whatever way feels right. Try not to suppress any difficult thoughts or feelings: talk about the relationship with someone you trust. If there are things left unsaid, you could try writing a letter to the person who has died.

“ When someone dies, it leaves this empty void, which is hard to fill.



2. Particular circumstances of bereavement

The circumstances of the death can affect how you feel about it – for example, the relationship you had with the person who died, or whether their death was sudden or expected.

If you were the carer of someone who died

The responsibility of caring for someone can become a large part of your life. This can make it particularly difficult to adjust to life after that person dies and you lose your role as a carer. If the person had been ill for a long time, you may feel some relief or other mixed emotions. People often do feel this way – it isn't anything to worry about or feel ashamed of. Our website has useful information on adjusting to life after caring at **independentage.org/information/support-care/support-for-carers/when-your-caring-role-ends**.

If your child has died

The death of a child of any age is a devastating loss. Mourning an adult child can bring extra challenges as the focus may be on partners and children of the person who has died rather than the parents. Make sure that you're getting the support you need, even if you're trying to support other family members. The Compassionate Friends has advice on coping with the death of a child, sibling or grandchild (**0345 123 2304**, **tcf.org.uk/ftb-grieving-for-adult-child**).

2. Particular circumstances of bereavement

When someone dies through suicide or other traumatic death

All deaths are difficult, but losing someone in a sudden and traumatic way, like in an accident or by suicide, can be particularly hard to deal with and understand.

Many of the feelings you experience will be the same as for any death, but you might be more likely to experience:

- Mixed emotions, including shock, guilt and anger
- a need to understand
- feeling alone and that others don't understand
- nightmares or other intrusive images
- social stigma making it harder to ask for support
- more difficulty grieving because of the involvement of legal and medical authorities
- a sense of injustice.

It can often help to talk to others who have had similar experiences. Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS) has support groups in various locations in the UK ([uksobs.org/we-can-help/find](https://www.uksobs.org/we-can-help/find)) and runs a national helpline (**0300 111 5065**).

Facing the Future also runs support groups for people who have been bereaved through suicide (**020 7758 0667**, **facingthefuturegroups.org**).



If you have thoughts of suicide or harming yourself, speak to your GP urgently, call NHS **111**, or call Samaritans (**116 123**).

Cruse Bereavement Support has information on coping with death through suicide, violence or crime, and other traumatic incidents. It also runs a bereavement helpline and has local support groups (**0808 808 1677**, **cruse.org.uk**). In Scotland, contact Cruse Scotland (**0808 802 6161**, **crusescotland.org.uk**).

Sudden supports anyone who has been suddenly bereaved (**sudden.org**).

Other sources of support are listed in **chapter 6**.



3. Physical effects of grief

Grief doesn't just affect you emotionally – it can also produce physical symptoms.

3. Physical effects of grief

Like other forms of stress, bereavement can weaken our immune system, making us more susceptible to illness. People often think of stress and anxiety as mental health problems, but they can also produce physical symptoms.

You might experience:

- exhaustion
- loss of appetite or comfort eating
- aches and pains, such as chest pain and headaches
- feeling sick
- shaking
- breathing problems
- disturbed sleep or nightmares.

These are common symptoms, but grief can affect you in all sorts of ways. If you have worrying symptoms or ones that persist, speak to your GP.

In the meantime, be aware that grief can make you more vulnerable to illness and try to look after yourself – see **chapter 5**.

3. Physical effects of grief

Feeling Anxious

The death of someone close to you can trigger fears about your own mortality. Bereavement can make you anxious in many ways and this is a common response, but if it is troubling you, speak to your GP or someone you trust, or see our guide **Managing anxiety**.



“ I think you do worry about it – ‘Oh, because that person died of that, am I going to get it?’ I know I’m a bit of a worrier sometimes.



4. Getting support after the funeral

When you've been bereaved, planning and practical matters, as well as initial feelings of unreality, may carry you through for a while.

4. Getting support after the funeral

You might feel you're coping well to start with, only to discover you feel worse after a few weeks.

Keeping busy

While tasks like dealing with a will or arranging a funeral can be painful, they do give you something to focus on in the period after someone has died. After this, the reality of the death may hit you.

Remember that you're still grieving – you may need to find different ways to cope with your feelings to the ones you used in the days after the death. Keeping busy can help for a while, but shouldn't be used to push away other emotions it would help to talk about.

After the funeral

You may find yourself with less support after the funeral, just when you feel you need it most. Friends and relatives may have gone back to their normal routines, leaving you with more time on your hands to dwell on things. This can be very hard, particularly if you live alone.

You might feel that others have forgotten the death, but that's unlikely to be the case. They probably want to help you, but don't know how to. Try giving them a call and explaining how you're feeling.



You can use things like Facebook, Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp to stay in touch easily. Since my sister died, my sister-in-law and I keep in touch via messages and games. We play Scrabble together through the computer and it has a messaging bit on there.

4. Getting support after the funeral

Talking to a counsellor

If you think you'd find it easier to talk to someone you don't know, your GP may be able to refer you for talking therapies, or you could look for a private counsellor – see **chapter 6**.

Difficult emotions

Certain tasks, like clearing possessions and trying to carry on with your life, might also bring feelings of guilt or other difficult emotions. It's important to reach out to friends and family and get the practical and emotional support you need to help you through this time.

Remember, everyone takes a different amount of time to grieve. Don't feel that you should be better and try to take things too quickly.



5. Looking after yourself

It's really important to be kind to yourself and do things that help you.

5. Looking after yourself

This doesn't mean ignoring your grief – allow yourself to feel sad and give yourself time to grieve and remember the person in your own way.

Secondary losses

The death of someone close can bring other big changes to your life, known as secondary losses. These will be unique to you, but may include the loss of your home, income, identity (as a spouse or parent, for example) or role as a carer. You may lose your community if you have to move, or lose people connected to the person who died. You may feel the loss of hope for the future, or of the way you and your partner lived your lives together.

These losses may unfold over weeks or months. Secondary losses are a normal part of grief and need to be mourned too. Take your time to acknowledge and adjust to them.

Talk about it

Talking to others about the person who has died, your memories of them, and how you're feeling can be very helpful.

You might want to talk to others who knew the person, or you may find it easier to talk to a GP, counsellor or helpline adviser.

Sometimes, people you know may avoid talking about the person who has died or avoid talking to you at all. This can feel heartless, but usually it is because they don't know what to say and don't want to upset you. Hopefully they will take their cues from you if you start talking, and will be happy to listen.

There is no time limit on grieving

However, many people find that their intense preoccupation with the person who died gradually lessens over time.

You may find you need to talk about them and about your grief less as time goes on. However, it's possible your grief will never go away completely and you may continue to have strong feelings and intense experiences, for example, around the time of anniversaries or birthdays.

“ I had a week off and then I went back to work and it was as if I was invisible. People feel embarrassed about talking to you. Now if I ever meet anybody who has just been widowed, I say ‘I’m sorry to hear about it – how are you surviving?’ and give them a chance to open up.

5. Looking after yourself

Books that might help

Many people find it consoling to read about other people's experiences of grief. This can help you to process your grief and feel less alone. This could be particularly valuable in the early days or weeks after a death, when you might not feel ready to talk to others. Memoirs, poetry, fiction and self-help books based on personal experiences of overcoming grief can all be helpful.

Cruse (**0808 808 1677**, [cruse.org.uk/about/blog/books-about-grief](https://www.cruse.org.uk/about/blog/books-about-grief)) and The Compassionate Friends (**0345 123 2304**, [tcf.org.uk/r-reading-list](https://www.tcf.org.uk/r-reading-list)) both have recommended reading lists you could use as a starting point, or look in your local library. The Compassionate Friends also operates a postal lending library.

Overcoming Grief is part of the Overcoming self-help series, endorsed by the Royal College of Psychiatrists ([overcoming.co.uk](https://www.overcoming.co.uk) or find it in libraries and bookshops). You may also be able to recommend self-help resources.

Practical steps

It's easy to stop caring for yourself when you're grieving, but a few simple things can help to make this period easier:

- try to get plenty of sleep
- eat healthily
- be kind to yourself and don't put pressure on yourself to feel better too quickly
- avoid numbing the pain with things like alcohol, which won't help you in the long run.

Try to keep to a routine

It might feel easier to stop doing things and seeing people, but in time this can make you feel worse. Try to give some structure and purpose to your day and keep in touch with people, even if you do a bit less than you used to.

“ I made myself go out. I might buy a newspaper or I'd sit in a café and have a coffee. That doesn't sound like much, but at the beginning it was a lot. I felt quite pleased with myself that I'd done that.

5. Looking after yourself

Little things can make a big difference

Try returning to activities you enjoyed before you were bereaved, such as going for a walk, listening to music or swimming. Find small things that help you feel better, like buying yourself flowers.

If you feel stuck

There's no set time for grieving, but if you feel like you've been grieving intensely for a long time and it's having a permanent impact on the rest of your life, you might benefit from some extra help. Speak to your GP or a bereavement support organisation like Cruse (**0808 808 1677**, cruse.org.uk) or Cruse Scotland (**0808 802 6161**, crusescotland.org.uk).

You can help yourself by remembering that it isn't a betrayal of the person who died to continue with your life. Some people find that making a relatively small change in their life helps them to turn a corner.



6. Where to find help

There's no shame in needing support to cope with a bereavement.

6. Where to find help

Talking about the person who has died can be very helpful, and speaking to others around you may be a good way to come to terms with the death. Some people find it helpful to talk to a religious minister.

Bereavement and support organisations

If you don't have friends or family you can talk to, or you'd rather talk to someone else, there are various organisations that offer support. Many of these organisations run local support groups as well as offering information and advice.

- At A Loss – an online directory of bereavement support (**ataloss.org**)
- Cruse Bereavement Support – offers support, advice and information to bereaved people (**0808 808 1677, cruse.org.uk**). In Scotland, contact Cruse Scotland (**0808 802 6161, crusescotland.org.uk**)
- Bereavement Advice Centre – runs a helpline and online information service (**0800 634 9494, bereavementadvice.org**)
- The Good Grief Trust – brings together information, support and signposting for anyone who's been bereaved (**thegoodgrieftrust.org**)

- GriefChat – free online bereavement support (**griefchat.co.uk**)
- The National Bereavement Partnership – provides a helpline, counselling referral and befriending service for anyone experiencing grief or mental ill-health as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency (**0800 448 0800**, **nationalbereavementpartnership.org**)
- Samaritans – runs a 24-hour helpline. You can talk to someone about anything that's troubling you (**116 123**, **samaritans.org**)
- The Compassionate Friends – supports people who have suffered the death of a child of any age. Their helpline is staffed by bereaved parents (**0345 123 2304**, **tcf.org.uk**)
- Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide – offers support and information to people bereaved by suicide (**0300 111 5065**, **uksobs.org**)
- Sands – supports people affected by stillbirth or the death of a newborn child, no matter how long ago their child died (**0808 164 3332**, **sands.org.uk**)
- The Silver Line – a free, confidential 24-hour helpline specifically for older people (**0800 470 8090**, **thesilverline.org.uk**)

6. Where to find help

- SSAFA – provides lifelong support to members of the armed forces and their families (**0800 731 4880**, **ssafa.org.uk**)
- Sue Ryder offers free online video counselling (**sueryder.org/online-bereavement-counselling**)
- Winston's Wish – a charity for bereaved children. They can provide support if you have grandchildren who you're trying to help after the death of a parent (**0808 802 0021**, **winstonswish.org**).



Your GP

If you feel you're not coping, or have any physical or mental health concerns, speak to your GP. Grief is a natural process, but if it goes on for a long time or makes it hard for you to lead your life, you might need some extra help.

Some common symptoms of grief can become a problem if they go on too long – for example, sleeplessness and loss of appetite, or anxiety or depression that doesn't lift. Your GP can monitor your health and provide reassurance, and they may refer you for talking therapies such as grief counselling.

“ Find a GP in the practice who you feel you can talk to about these issues and ask to see them. Remember, you don't need to disclose the reason for your consultation to any other member of the practice team if asked.

Dr Emma Poyner, GP

6. Where to find help

Private counselling

You may want to consider this option if there is a long waiting list for NHS counselling in your area, or after a short course of NHS counselling. Your GP should be able to give you a list of practitioners in your area, or you can search online at **bacp.co.uk** or **counselling-directory.org.uk**.

Make sure your therapist is accredited by a professional body, such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). Some counsellors will specialise in grief counselling.

If you're working

Give yourself time to grieve and don't try to return to work before you feel ready. Talk to your employer about when it would be appropriate for you to return to work and any adjustments you might need, such as a phased return to work.

Check if your employer offers an Employee Assistance Programme – an employee benefit to help employees with personal or work-related problems that may affect their work. You might be able to get short-term counselling through this.

If you're feeling reluctant to ask for help

Sometimes, you may feel reluctant to seek help. Here are a couple of things people tell us and the advice we give:

What's the point in getting help? It won't bring them back.

When you've been bereaved, you can feel powerless. The death may have left a hole in your life, but there are still many things for you to live for and your own life is important.

Feelings of hopelessness are common, but it's important to seek support from those around you and speak to them about how you're feeling, and to start finding other things that can become important to you again.

I should be feeling better by now.

You can't force yourself to feel better and you need to give yourself time to grieve. Everyone takes a different time to do this, but feelings should gradually become less intense. Don't let others tell you that you should be better, but if you don't think you're coping or people around you are worried about you, it might be time to seek help. Your GP is a good place to start.



7. Adjusting to living on your own

If you've lost the main person you shared your life with, you may find yourself having to adapt to living on your own as well as to life without them.

This is most common with spouses or partners, or you may have lost a friend, sibling or other relative you lived with.

It can be hard to adjust to the emotional and practical sides of living alone, particularly if you've never lived alone before. Try to stay in touch with family and friends and, when you feel ready, consider finding new opportunities to meet others so you don't become too isolated.



Our guide **If you're feeling lonely** and our factsheet **How to stay socially connected** have more information about this.

“ It's the awfulest thing when you lose a partner. It's like nothing else you've felt – just terrible. It's something you have to experience to know what it's like. Half of you is gone. You're alone again, back where you started, only 60 years on.

7. Adjusting to living on your own

Money worries

The death may have affected your income – for example, if you'd given up work to care for the person and can no longer claim Carer's Allowance, or if you no longer have money coming in from a partner's pension. Make sure you're claiming all the benefits you're entitled to.

Take a look at our online benefits calculator (independentage.org/benefit-calculator) or call us on **0800 319 6789** to arrange a benefits check.



Our guide **Moneywise** also has tips on saving money. For information on getting help with the cost of a funeral, see our factsheet **What to do after a death**.

Help with tasks that are new to you

You may now have responsibility for things you haven't had to worry about before. It will take time to learn new skills, so don't take on too much at once. Your council or local charities may run courses in basic skills, such as DIY or cooking, or ask friends and family to help you learn. Remember, you don't have to do everything yourself.



Our guide **Getting help at home** has advice on where to get help with household chores and gardening.



7. Adjusting to living on your own

Feeling secure

It's normal to worry about your safety if you're used to having someone at home with you. You could give yourself peace of mind by checking your home is secure. The police website has advice ([police.uk/crime-prevention/protect-home-crime](https://www.police.uk/crime-prevention/protect-home-crime)), or your local police may offer free security checks.



Read our guide **Home security** for more information.

“ Coming home to an empty house can be the worst thing. Some people tell us it helps to leave a light or the radio on when they go out, so the house doesn't feel so deserted when they come home.

Independent Age Advisor



8. Holding on to memories

Finding a way to remember the person you've lost can help you to cope with the death. It allows you to keep a connection to them, even as you start a life without them.

8. Holding on to memories

Everyone will do this in their own way. You might want to involve others who knew them. Some people like to do something in memory of the person who died, such as make a donation to a cause they cared about, plant a tree in their memory, or donate a memorial bench to a local park.

Keeping hold of treasured possessions or displaying their photograph could also help to keep them close to you.

They may have spoken to you about how they would like to be remembered, or a charity that helped them may provide ideas of ways you can remember them. For example, you can set up a Tribute Fund page at Independent Age to celebrate someone's life and raise funds for our work. You can find out more at independentage.org/donate-in-memory.

Learning to let go

Occasionally, the desire to hold onto someone can be unhelpful – for example, by making you feel too guilty to move on with your own life, or making it hard to throw away any of their possessions. If you're finding it very hard to let go of someone, you might benefit from bereavement counselling – see **chapter 6**.



“ Many people find it’s better to get someone to help them with clearing possessions. It can even provide an opportunity to talk about your memories of the person.
Simon, Independent Age

8. Holding on to memories

Anniversaries

Anniversaries and other special occasions may be especially difficult. If you find this, think about what you can do to make it easier.

For example, you might want to spend the birthday of the person who died with other family members, or you could decide to do something to celebrate their life.

As time goes by

Bereavement is a difficult and overwhelming experience and can alter your life substantially. However, over time your feelings of grief should become less intense and you can find hope and ways to adapt to life without the person you've lost.

Remember, this will take a different amount of time for everybody, and if you feel you need support, help is available.



9. Summary

Bereavement affects us all differently, and can leave you feeling very alone. But there are ways to cope, and feel better.

9. Summary

- It's common to feel shock, sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt and other intense emotions. You may feel overwhelmed, especially in the early weeks and months.
- It's good to talk to others about your feelings if you can. Friends, family, support groups, counsellors or your GP can all help, or you could try one of the organisations listed in **chapter 6**.
- If you were the carer of the person who died, it can be particularly difficult to adjust to life after their death. If they were ill for a long time, you may feel some relief or other mixed emotions.
- Grief can affect you physically. You may experience exhaustion, appetite changes, aches and pains, shakiness or feeling sick, for example.
- Make sure you take care of yourself. Look after your physical health, keep to a routine if you can and find small things that help you feel better.
- Find a way to remember the person you've lost. This could be by donating to a cause they cared about or displaying their photograph.
- Anniversaries and other special dates can be especially hard. Think about what might help make them easier – such as seeing family or doing something to celebrate their life.



Bob's story

Bob and Ethel were married for 65 years before Ethel died in 2017. After her death, Bob admitted that he found it difficult to come to terms with the bereavement.

“It was loneliness all the time. I missed her terribly. I had lost my best friend and did not know how to cope.”

Bob sought help from his GP, who soon realised he had been suffering from depression and put in place a set of actions to help him. This included keeping a daily diary and having daily phone calls with his children.

Bob contacted Independent Age, where he was paired with a volunteer called Vicky. Vicky visited Bob every week, and their relationship grew into a friendship that has now lasted for three years.

“I’ve found friendship and companionship and I honestly cannot thank them enough. We just sit and talk – it’s wonderful to have someone to talk to.”

About Independent Age

At Independent Age, we want more people in the UK to live a happy, connected and purposeful later life. That's why we support people aged over 65 to get involved in things they enjoy. We also campaign and give advice on the issues that matter most: health and care, money and housing.

For information or advice – we can arrange a free, impartial chat with an adviser – call us on freephone **0800 319 6789** (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 6.30pm) or email us at **advice@independentage.org**.

You can also support this work by volunteering with us, joining our campaigns to improve life for older people experiencing hardship, donating to us or remembering us in your will.

For more information, visit **[independentage.org](https://www.independentage.org)** or call us on **0800 319 6789**.



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