



SO HOW DO WE DEAL WITH BEREAVEMENT?

Bereavement is a distressing but common experience. Sooner or later most of us will suffer the death of someone we love. Yet in our everyday life we think and talk about death very little, perhaps because we encounter it less often than our grandparents did. For them, the death of a brother or sister, friend or relative, was a common experience in their childhood or teenage years. For us, these losses usually happen later in life. So, we do not have much of a chance either to learn about grieving - how it feels, what are the right things to do, what is "normal" - or come to terms with it. In spite of this we have to cope when we are finally faced with the death of someone we love.

In this leaflet you will find information about some of the ways in which people grieve after such a loss, about the ways in which bereaved people can get stuck in the grieving process, and the help available.

Grieving

Grieving takes place after any sort of loss, but most powerfully after the death of someone we love. It is not just one feeling, but a whole succession of feelings, which take a while to get through and which cannot be hurried.

Although we are all individuals, the order in which we experience these is very similar for most of us. Grief is most commonly experienced after the death of someone who we have known for some time. However, it is clear that people who have had stillbirths or miscarriages, or who have lost a very young baby suffer a similar experience of grieving and need the same sort of care and consideration.

In the few hours or days following the death of a close relative or friend, most people feel simply stunned, as though they cannot believe it has actually happened. They may feel like this even if the death has been expected. The sense of emotional numbness can be a help in getting through all the important practical arrangements that have to be made, such as getting in touch with relatives and organising the funeral. However, this feeling of unreality may become a problem if it goes on too long. Seeing the body of the dead person may, for some, be an important way of beginning to overcome this. Similarly, for many people, the funeral or memorial service is an occasion when the reality of what has

happened really starts to sink in. It may be distressing to see the body or attend the funeral, but these are ways of saying goodbye to those we love.

At the time, these things may seem too painful to go through and so are not done. However, this often leads to a sense of deep regret in future years.

Soon though this numbness disappears, and may be replaced by a dreadful sense of agitation, of pining or yearning for the dead person. This makes it difficult to relax or concentrate, and it may be difficult to sleep properly. Some people feel that they "see" their loved one everywhere they go - in the street, the park, around the house, anywhere they had spent time together.

People sometime feel very angry at this time - towards doctors and nurses who did not prevent the death, towards relatives and friends who did not do enough, or even to the person who has left them.

Another common feeling is guilt. People find themselves going over in their minds all the things they would have liked to have said or done. They may even consider what they could have done differently that might have prevented the death. Of course, death is usually beyond anyone's control and a bereaved person may need to be reminded of this.

Guilt may also arise if a sense of relief is felt when someone has passed after a particularly painful or distressing illness. This feeling of relief is natural, and extremely understandable and very common.

This state of agitation is usually strongest about two weeks after the death, but is soon followed by times of sadness or depression, withdrawal and silence.

"These sudden changes of emotion can be confusing to friends or relatives, but are just part of the normal way of passing the different stages of grief.

Although the agitation lessens, the periods of depression become more frequent and reach a peak between four and six weeks later. Spasms of grief can occur at any time, sparked off by people, places or things that bring back memories of those who have passed. Other people may find it difficult to understand or embarrassing when a bereaved person suddenly bursts into tears for no obvious reason. Avoiding others can store up trouble for

the future, and it is best to try to return to one's normal activities after a couple of weeks or so.

During this time, it may appear to others as though the bereaved person is spending a lot of time just sitting, doing nothing. This can be far from the truth, for in fact they are thinking about the person they have lost, going over again and again but the good and the bad times they had together. This a quiet but essential part of coming to terms with the loss. As time passes, the fierce pain of early bereavement begins to fade. The depression lessens, and it is possible to think about other things and even look again to the future. However, the sense of having lost a part of oneself never goes away entirely. For bereaved partners there are the constant

reminders of the new singleness. Even so, years later they may find themselves sometimes talking as though he or she were still here.

Most recover from a major bereavement within one or two years, and the final phase of grieving is the letting-go of the person who has passed and start a new sort of life.

The depression clears completely, sleep improves and energy returns to normal. Having said this, there is no "standard" way of grieving. We are all individuals and have our own particular ways of grieving.

How can friends and relatives help?

Family and friends can help by spending time with the person who has been bereaved. It is not so much words of comfort that are needed, more a willingness to be with them during their time of pain and distress. A sympathetic arm around the shoulder will express care and support when words are not enough. It is important that, if they wish, bereaved people are able to cry with somebody and talk about their feelings of pain and distress without being told to pull themselves together. In time they will get over it, but first they need to talk and cry. Others may find it hard to understand why the bereaved have to keep going over the same ground again and again, but this is part of the process of resolving grief and should be encouraged. If you do not know what to say, or don't even know whether to talk about it or not, be honest and say so. This gives the bereaved person a chance to tell you what he or she wants.

People often avoid mentioning the name of the bereaved for fear that it will be upsetting. However, to the bereaved person it may seem as though others have forgotten their loss, adding a sense of isolation to their painful feelings of grief.

It must be remembered that festive occasions and anniversaries (not only the death but also birthdays and weddings) are particularly painful times when friends and relatives should make a special effort to be around.

Practical help can ease the burden of being alone, and it must be remembered that elderly bereaved partners will need more help.

It is important to allow people enough time to grieve. Some can seem to get over the loss quickly, but others take longer. So do not expect too much too soon from a bereaved relative or friend - they need time to grieve properly, and this will help to avoid problems in the future.

Where can I get help and advice?

Compassionate Friends
53, North Street, Bristol, BSI IEN
Tel: 01 17 953 9639
Web: www.tcf.org.uk

CRUSE - Bereavement Care
126, Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR
Tel: 0181 332 7227
Web: www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

National Association of Bereaved Services
20, Norton Fulgate, London E1 6DB
Tel: 0171 247 0617

Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society
28, Portland Place, London, W1N 4DE
Tel: 0171 436 5881
Web: www.uk-sands.org

Terence Higgins Trust
52-54, Grays Inn Road, London, WC1 8JU
Tel: 0171 242 1010
Web: www.tht.org.uk

If you require further information please write to:-

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Alternatively visit our website at www.snu.org.uk