Bereavement & Loss

Different culture groups have different ways of marking the death of someone they love. Some mourn in a way which celebrates the life of the deceased; others make a great and visible show of their grief. Traditionally, we in Britain are generally very low key in our response to death, marking it with a funeral and perhaps a gathering afterwards, but with no recognised period of mourning and often no great show of feeling. This can leave people feeling very alone in dealing with the intense personal emotions they may be experiencing.

Your Own Grief

The death of someone who is significant to you is one of the hardest things you will experience in your life. Whether it is expected or a shock, the enormity of loss is something that impacts on you in a very profound way.

Grief takes a long time to work through. There are no hard and fast guidelines for this. It takes as long as it takes, but as a general rule it will take longer than you expect. It is important not to try to 'get over it' too quickly, not to adopt a 'stiff upper lip' attitude. Grief is an inevitable and human response. If suppressed, it may well surface at some later, less appropriate stage. Sometimes there seems to be an expectation that you will have recovered after a certain time has elapsed, but everyone has their own recovery time which cannot be hurried. The first anniversary of the death is an important milestone and can be particularly difficult. Subsequent birthdays and anniversaries can be poignant reminders of your loss, and you may need to find your own way of dealing with such times by either marking them as special commemorative events or by ensuring you distract yourself while time passes.

Bereavement is an entirely individual experience. No one can tell you how you will or should feel. Everyone grieves in their own special way but there are some generally accepted and recognised reactions:

- You may at first feel totally numb, as if paralysed
- You may find yourself unable to believe the person really is dead
- You may find yourself very angry at being deserted
- You may feel an enormous sense of unfairness
- You may find yourself crying uncontrollably and unable to function as normal
- You may feel guilty about surviving, about not having said goodbye; about leaving things unresolved
- You may feel an aching void, as if you have lost a limb, which you feel will never be filled again
- You may be traumatised if the death has been in any way violent such as through an accident, suicide or murder.

The Reaction of Others

You will be aware that people around you will react in very different ways to your grief.
There will be those who very much want to help in practical ways, or by giving you emotional support. It is up to you to guide them as to how they may best help you; whether you need a listening ear, or maybe need to be left alone for a while. Remember, they can't know what will help unless you tell them. Don't be afraid to take up offers of help; it is not a sign of weakness to lean on someone when you need support.

There will be others who are unable to cope with your grief, who may not be able to talk about the death or even acknowledge it. This is usually because it either raises profoundly difficult feelings in them, or because they simply don't know what to do or say. This can seem very hurtful if you don't understand what may be behind this seemingly unfeeling behaviour, but it is not uncommon.

How can you Help Yourself?

Here are some suggestions which you may find helpful.

- Recognise that mourning takes its time and you cannot hurry it along.
- Allow yourself to cry, scream or shout and forgive yourself for doing so at 'inappropriate' moments if that is what you need to do. Don't feel guilty about doing so, even if you feel others are critical of you.
- Accept whatever help you are offered from friends, relatives, religious ministers etc.
- Recognise your need to talk about the deceased, even if you need to do so over and over again, and allow yourself to do so until the need lessens.
- If you are worried about over-using friends, talk to a Student Counsellor or other professional helper.
- If and when you feel ready, consider reading some of the literature on death and loss. Some books are suggested below. You may find this useful and comforting.
- Think about concrete ways of doing something to ease your pain. Would it help to write a letter to the deceased saying what you perhaps didn't manage to say in their lifetime? Would you like to plant a tree or shrub in their memory and watch it blossom? Could you light a candle in remembrance on special days?
- Do whatever you need to do, recognising that this is a most testing and difficult time in your life.

And Afterwards...

The pain gradually lessens. It does happen even though you think it never will. But with that might come guilt and worry about forgetting or letting go of the dead person. At this stage it may become quite hard to let go of the grief because that is what links you to the deceased. It is important to allow yourself to let go. Along the years, although the pain lessens, the memories will never leave you as the death finds its place in your history and experience. The more easily you can accept the need to grieve, the more comfortably it will rest.

Coping with Loss and Bereavement at University

Most students when faced with the loss of a close friend or family member whilst studying at university will experience a range of emotions which may at times feel overwhelming and which can make studying tough.

Below are a few tips that you may find helpful if you find yourself bereaved during your studies.
1. Grieving takes time and can be stressful. Allow yourself some time off from thinking about what has happened by talking to friends, watching a feel-good movie and perhaps getting on with a practical task.

2. Routine is important to most of us and particularly when we have had a shock so even if you don’t feel like getting up and out try to stick to your usual daily timetable.

3. Concentration can be affected during the grieving process so if you are finding that this is having an impact on your studies speaking to your personal advisor about these issues before work piles up can be helpful.

4. Appetite and sleep patterns can also be affected so during bereavement try not to cut out meals or to increase your use of alcohol. If you are having persistent problems with sleeping make an appointment to talk things over with your doctor.

5. If you find that after you have tried some of the above you are still feeling overwhelmed, depressed or unsure how to cope and would like to talk things over with a counsellor we can be contacted at FW171 on 01784 443128 or counselling@rhul.ac.uk

Books


Facing Grief: Bereavement and the Young Adult - Susan Wallbank - The Lutterworth Press. Specifically written for age 18-28 and dealing with specific losses eg. Grandparent, sibling, partner, baby, friend.

A Special Scar: The Experience of People Bereaved by Suicide - Alison Wertheimer - Brunner-Routledge Press. Well-constructed, helpful and compassionate.

Through Grief - Elizabeth Collick - Darton, Longman & Todd in association with CRUSE

Further Information

The Student Counselling Service at RHUL. Tel 01784 443128, Founders West 171

The Chaplaincy at RHUL. Tel 01784 443950, Founders West 169

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, Tel 0870 443 5252 www.bacp.co.uk

CRUSE Bereavement Care, Helpline 0844 477 9400 www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

London Bereavement, www.bereavement.org.uk

Royal College of Psychiatrists

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice/problems/bereavement/bereavement.aspx

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide, Helpline 0844 561 6855 www.uk-sobs.org.uk

Mind (National Association for Mental Health) Understanding Bereavement, National Helpline 0845 766 0163 www.mind.org.uk