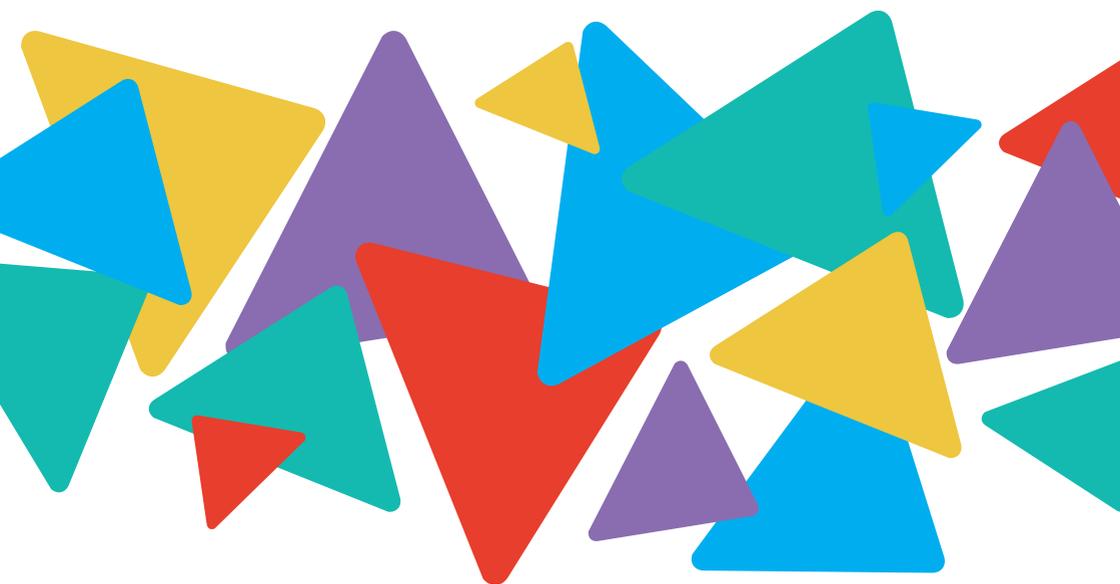


Coping with Bereavement



◀ Only people who are
capable of loving strongly can
also suffer great sorrow ▶

Leo Tolstoy

◀ Healing doesn't usually spring up instantaneously, instead it manifests itself in small yet delightful doses of "normal". ▶ Anon

▶ Introduction

Loss: We will all experience it at some point in our lives. During this challenging pandemic, it is likely that many of us will experience loss more often than usual. For those in care homes and in health and social care, people we care for will become ill and pass away.

Yes, we know that illness and caring for those in their last hours is part of our job, but we are still human. Some of the people we care for hold a place in our hearts and their passing will cause us grief.

Losing someone who is close to us, or losing many people in a short space of time, can be traumatic. This booklet looks at bereavement, coping with trauma and getting through the dark hours and days, that loss brings us.



What is Grief?

The grief process is often described as non-linear and unpredictable in this duration, and the way people cope, and adjust to their altered situation (Henderson 2004).

Understanding the process of grief allows us to have more awareness of the stages involved with it. This in turn can allow us to have more acceptance of our bereavement experience and the stages that we visit before we eventually accept our loss.

◀ **Grieving is the loneliest experience there is.**
No one can do it with you ▶ Anon.

The stages of grief were recognised by Kubler-Ross (1969). She outlines 6 stages, which you may have already heard of:

- | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Shock | 2. Denial | 3. Anger |
| 4. Bargaining | 5. Depression | 6. Acceptance |

The key to understanding the stages is not to feel like you must go through every one of them, in precise order. Instead, it's more helpful to look at them as guides in the grieving process – it helps you understand and put into context where you are.

Particularly for those working in health and social care, having the time to fully grieve the loss of each person we lose during our careers is unlikely. However during times like these, it is important to take some time, where possible, to be kind to yourself and allow your feelings to be present. Please keep in mind that everyone grieves differently. Some people will wear their emotions on their sleeve and be outwardly emotional. Others will experience their grief more internally, and may not cry.

◀ **Remember, grieving is a personal process that has no time limit, nor one "right" way to do it.** ▶



Shock & Denial

Shock

Shock is usually an initial reaction, but not for everyone. Even if the loss of someone was expected and you have previously felt prepared for the loss, you may still go through the 'shock' stage of the grieving process.

The length of time you spend in the shock phase will vary, as will your response to shock, and how you deal with it.

Linking in with denial, shock may cause us to question "is this real?"

This is the stage that you may question a lot of what is going on, trying to process the situation and try to make sense of it.

Denial

Denial is a defense mechanism. For many of us, it is our subconscious way of protecting ourselves, numbing us,

from the pain that a loss or bereavement truly causes us. It is telling us that there is only so much we can handle at once – and that 's O K .

Acknowledge this, validate this and be aware of this.

Denial is a natural part of the grieving process. People will try to remind you about the 'reality' of the situation, but you will only see that when your defense mechanism decides you are ready.

It is worth being mindful that, when you do come out of the denial stage, or 'finish' with it, the emotions you have been hiding, or keeping locked down, will probably begin to rise. Contrary to popular belief therefore, the real emotions of a loss, don't often hit us immediately.

An example:

**"this isn't happening,
they've got it wrong,
it's not true".**



Anger, Bargaining and Guilt

Anger

Anger often goes hand in hand with grief. The anger may be because of something that did, or did not happen prior to the event, that may have changed the outcome. Anger may also be present because you might feel out of control; of the event, of your emotions, and of the past situations that happened before the event. Again, anger is a natural part of bereavement and dealing with grief and loss.

It is important at this time to be mindful and aware of your anger and ensure that it does not get out of hand and cause more problems for you at this difficult time. Don't let this emotion cause you to push people away and become isolated. Use your anger as energy and strength, to bind you to reality and move forward in your healing process.

Bargaining and Guilt

When you are experiencing this part of the bereavement process, you may feel that you are struggling to find meaning and may be asking yourself "what if" or "if only". This also might be a time where you consider if your actions played a part in the loss or traumatic event which has occurred, questioning whether, if you had done things differently, the event would not have happened.

At this time, it is important to reach out and seek emotional support. Reach out and tell your story – this will help you move towards closure and acceptance. This support may be gained from family, friends, colleagues, help lines, bereavement groups, charities or anonymous helplines.

It is natural, at this time, to feel vulnerable or helpless. You are dealing with intense emotions which are uncomfortable to experience. It may be that you feel you want to take on a new project, to re-gain some control. This is OK, but do remember, that this is also another form of avoidance, and may suppress the full grief you are experiencing.

Depression & Acceptance

Depression

This is a tough part. The part that probably feels the most lonely, the most silent. You may feel stuck here, isolated and alone. Being angry, bargaining, denial are all quite 'noisy' stages of grief, but this part isn't so loud.

This stage is likely to be when your emotions are really coming out. It is often overwhelming to know what to do with them and you may experience some dark thoughts at this time. If you are becoming concerned about your ability to keep yourself safe, you should speak with a health professional.

At this point, you may want to try to use some self-help techniques, such as distraction, safe place exercises and self-care, to keep yourself from getting too stuck.

It may not feel like it right now, but this will pass.

Acceptance

So acceptance is when you have parked each of the prior stages of bereavement. It does not mean that you will never feel guilt, anger or depression about the situation again, but this is the time that you learn to move forward, but not forget.

This part may not be obvious, it won't be a light bulb moment that you realise "I've accepted what has happened", but you may notice, over time, that you are more accepting of the event, particularly in the sense that you cannot go back and change it. It also means that you are beginning to get used to how your life is, now that the event has happened, and what changes that has brought.

The key point about acceptance, is that the loss, or event, or trauma is not forgotten. Acceptance is giving yourself permission to grow and move forward.

Pinball Machine

Margaret Baier PhD, created the pinball grief model. This illustrates that the grief process does not necessarily follow a list, nor does it always flow in stages. We can bounce from one stage of grief to another and return to stages we have previously experienced, before we finally achieve acceptance. The length of time it takes for each of us to achieve acceptance will vary for each individual, which is also very important to remember.



Other Practical Ways to Cope

1. Express your feelings
2. Look after yourself
3. Join a support group
4. Volunteer
5. Take up a new hobby
6. Revisit an old hobby
7. Try to keep to a routine
8. Avoid alcohol and drugs
9. Socialise with friends / family
10. Find a token of remembrance

Further Support

If you need more support, try out some of these:

'A model to help bereaved individuals understand the grief process' by Baier & Buechsel

Samaritans – 116 123

Suffolk Mind – www.suffolkmind.org.uk

Support during COVID-19 pandemic:
www.healthysuffolk.org.uk/COVIDHub

CRUSE bereavement care:
0808 808 1677 / www.cruse.org.uk

Suffolk Wellbeing Service:
www.wellbeingnands.co.uk/suffolk

NSFT 24/7 mental health crisis line:
0808 196 3494



Staff support line:
0300 123 1335

Open seven days a week 2-5pm to those working for the NHS and care homes in Norfolk and Suffolk.

St Elizabeth Hospice:
Bereavement support
www.stelizabethhospice.org.uk/how-we-can-help/information-and-support/bereavement-support/

St Elizabeth Hospice:
Emotional wellbeing enquiry line
01473 707999
(0900-1600 7 days a week)

St Nicholas Hospice Care:
Living with Bereavement
www.stnicholashospice.org.uk/support-and-information/getting-help/counselling-and-emotional-support/living-with-bereavement/

www.healthysuffolk.org.uk/COVIDHub

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