

Caring for yourself following a bereavement



Because every day matters

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Hospiscare

Caring in the heart of Devon

Caring for yourself

Experiencing the death of someone close to you can be exhausting, both emotionally and physically. We hope the following collection of ideas on caring for yourself will prove helpful in adapting to life ahead. Remember your experience is unique to you, as will be what you find most helpful.

Happy Thought List

In the early days of a bereavement, people tell us they only have unhappy thoughts. They find it difficult to think past the recent death of a loved one. However, what seems to work is to try and replace unhappy thoughts with happy thoughts. For example, these will normally come from shared happy times during years of a relationship; holiday memories, parties with friends and growing families. So compile a list of these happy memories and when an unhappy thought enters your mind, just focus on one or two of your favourite happy memories.

How to talk about the person who has died

People often tell us that sometimes their friends don't tend to mention the name of the person who has died. This is usually because your friends are trying to protect you and don't want to upset you. However, you might be feeling the exact opposite! You might want to talk about your loved one.

So how can you change this situation? Try introducing their name into normal conversation, for example, maybe refer to a favourite holiday – ‘Can you remember our holiday in Spain when (deceased’s name) was trying to order a meal in Spanish and ended up with an octopus?’

It doesn’t really matter what you say, but you are giving your friends permission to talk about your loved one.

Looking to the future

Life will never be the same again after bereavement, but the grief and pain should lessen. There will come a time when you are able to adapt, adjust and cope with life without the person who has died.

The 8 Pillars of Strength

Adapted From Julia Samuel – Grief Works

1. Relationships with the person who has died do continue, although in an altered form. They are loved in absence rather than in presence. Being able to maintain and demonstrate that relationship can be a strength. Some people need to do this often, some around anniversaries. Things that might help to do this are:

- wearing something that connects to them, such as a watch or scarf
- visiting the grave, creating a memory box, creating a photo album, writing to them in a journal

- cooking a favourite recipe you know they loved
- posting a favourite image on line, sharing photos.

These rituals have shown to improve positive emotions and reduce negative ones

2. Relationship with yourself

Show yourself compassion, write a journal to help rationalise or express your feelings – feeling bad does not mean you are bad.

It is important to tell those closest to you how you are feeling in order to get the right level of support.

Denial in grief is natural – acceptance of what has happened in stages is okay, it would be difficult to cope with the realisation of what has happened all at once.

A new loss may bring memories of previous loss – this is normal.

3. Expressing grief

There is no right way – it is just important to do it. It may be talking to family, talking to a therapist, painting or music. Name your emotions and express them. Do what feels comfortable for you.

4. Time

Time takes on different hues. Grieving takes time, blocking it can lead to future problems, so let the feelings come.

Over time the pain will lessen, we do naturally readjust to life.

The future can look daunting, keep goals close, focus on each day and week rather than years ahead.

5. Mind and body

Grief is exhausting and can make the body feel as if it is in a heightened state of alert. It is important to look after yourself.

Exercise is important, such as walking, running or any sport you can manage.

Relaxation and meditation can help manage anxiety.

Eat regularly and healthily – avoid too much caffeine, sugar or alcohol.

6. Limits

Set your own limitations and learn to say NO! Then when you say yes, it will feel far more positive.

7. Structure

The maintaining of good habits can help the world feel a little more normal. For example, exercise first thing, do some work or chores, take time to remember the person who has died, do something calming like listening to music, book in a massage, or cook something nice. Read if you have energy to concentrate and have a regular time for sleep.

8. Focusing

Visualisation can help centre the mind. The following is an exercise you can do for yourself:

- Close your eyes.
- Breathe deeply and slowly, in through your nose and out through your mouth, three times.
- Direct your attention internally.
- Move your attention around your body until you find the place, where there is the most sensation.
- Breathe in to that place.
- Find a word that describes that place, does it have a shape, a colour, is it soft?
- If the image could speak, what would it say?
- Then follow where the image takes you.

Some do's and don'ts of grief

- **Don't** bottle up feelings – call someone you trust if you are feeling low.
- **Do** express your emotions.
- **Don't** avoid talking about what happened.
- **Do** take every opportunity to review the experience.
- **Don't** expect the memories to go away – the feelings will stay with you for a long time to come and that's normal.
- **Do** take time out to sleep, rest, think and be with your close family and friends.

- **Do** remember to eat, and try to have foods that are healthy for you.
- **Do** accept invitations to go out.
- **Do** express your needs clearly and honestly to family, friends and work, if you think something is going to upset you, let them know you might need some support.
- **Do** remember, the process of grieving is also a process of healing. There is no time limit involved, everyone's grief is unique to them.
- **Do** talk about your loved one and open up cherished memories, it gives others permission to talk too.
- **Do** keep a journal, it can help to express your feelings.
- **Do** get some exercise daily – even gentle walking will help lift your mood and spirits, help your appetite and keep you well.
- **Do** try not to stay in bed all day – but if you do have a bad day, remember it's not a step backwards, it is just a difficult day.
- **Do** try to keep your life as normal as possible after the acute grief, a sense of structure can help with adjusting to new way of life.
- **Do** remember accidents are more common after severe stress so take extra care.
- **Don't** be afraid to form new relationships, if you find someone (or someone finds you) who would like to spend time with you and who makes you happy – it's allowed!



I
wish
I could
show
you,
When
you are
lonely
or in
darkness,
The
astonishing
light
Of your
own
being.

-Hafiz

Below is a guided relaxation exercise you might like to try.

How Long Will I Feel Like This?

Pebbles

Adrian, a bereavement support volunteer from Cruse, describes how one lady asked how she could tell when her grieving pain was possibly reducing.

She wanted to try and recognise that she was making some progress along her own personal grief journey. But what did it feel like as the pain from one's loss reduced during the months and years following a bereavement?

She couldn't imagine a different type of feeling.

The following may be a helpful suggestion.

Take a smooth stone or beach pebble about the size of an egg in one hand, and then in the other hand, a rough-edged stone of about the same size.

Now close your hands and squeeze both of them tightly in the palm of each hand.

Try and feel what each hand is feeling like – the hand with the rough edged stone in it will be more uncomfortable than the one with the smooth stone. It will hurt a bit more if you are squeezing your hand quite tightly. The grief you experience in the early stages also tends to hurt more, it's very raw following your loss.

Your other hand holding the smooth stone won't be so uncomfortable because it doesn't have rough edges – so this hand hurts less than the other.

So, as the months and then years pass by, the pain will gradually reduce and will become less raw. It just doesn't hurt quite so much as you 'get on with your life' and keep busy, take a holiday, join a club, etc.

Hopefully, this description and your own imagination will help you to realise that as time passes the hurt from your loss will gradually reduce as you just get more used to the fact that your loved one has, in fact, died. It's a feeling of more acceptance and that your life has changed.

But never forget your memories...

References

www.cruse.org.uk

Grief Works by Julia Samuel

Helpful Contacts

Hospiscare – Supportive Care Team

Tel: 01392 688008

FORCE

Tel: 01392 406151

www.forcecancercharity.co.uk

Cruse – a national bereavement volunteer counselling service

Tel: 0300 330 5466 – Devon Branch

Tel: 0808 808 1677 – National help line

www.cruse.org.uk

Samaritans

Tel: 116 123

www.samaritans.org

Balloons – local children's bereavement support

Tel: 01392 826065

www.balloonscharity.co.uk

Winston's Wish – national support for grieving children and young people

Tel: 08088 020 021

www.winstonswish.org

Your GP

Your doctor is there to co-ordinate your overall physical and emotional health, and they may also refer you for specialist bereavement support.

Hospiscare is a charity

If you live in Exeter, Mid or East Devon, Hospiscare is your local adult hospice charity. Should you or a loved one need care for any type of terminal illness, our professional team of doctors and nurses are here to help. If you would like to make a contribution towards the charity, please visit the website to donate www.hospiscare.co.uk or contact us on 01392 688020. A gift to Hospiscare in your Will helps to ensure the future of the charity in Devon for years to come.

Tell us about your experience of Hospiscare

Hospiscare welcomes feedback, compliments and complaints and we use them to develop our staff and services.

We know the majority of people have a positive experience, but encourage all your feedback, positive or negative. We investigate complaints thoroughly and treat them as an opportunity to learn and improve our practice.

To tell us about your experience of Hospiscare, please contact:

Director of Care

Hospiscare, Searle House, Dryden Road, Exeter EX2 5JJ

Phone: 01392 688000

Should you make a complaint, we will send you a letter or email with details of any investigation with an expected timescale where possible. If you wish to see a copy of Hospiscare's Complaints Policy, please ask. If you are dissatisfied with our response you can contact:

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman

Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4QP

Email: phso.enquiries@ombudsman.org.uk

Customer Helpline Tel: 0345 015 4033

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