

Bereavement and grief

The death of someone you love can be extremely difficult to deal with and the mix of feelings that accompany such loss can feel overwhelming. Even if the person was unwell for a while, it can still be a shock.

If you are the person who is dying, you are likely to grieve, too, for the loss of your life. We have separate information about what you might experience towards the **end of life**.

We all have our own ways of grieving. While nobody can take away the pain, there is support available to help you cope.

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What is grief?

Grief describes intense sadness and loss. It's a natural reaction to the death of a loved one. You might also experience it in anticipation of a loved one's death. For some people, grief comes at the point of diagnosis, be this their own or that of a loved one. Grief isn't really just a single feeling; it can be a whole range of feelings.

You might have heard of 'stages of grief'. This refers to the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss psychiatrist. Based on her conversations with over 200 people, Kübler-Ross outlined some of the feelings people often experience towards the end of their life. These have since been applied to people who are going through a bereavement. You can read more about Kübler-Ross's work in her book, first published in 1969:

[On death and dying: what the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy and their own families.](#)

Feelings you might experience when someone you love dies

We describe some of the feelings you might have when someone close to you dies. You might also experience these before they die (anticipatory grief). These feelings are in line with those Kübler-Ross noted. As she states, however, not everyone experiences all of these feelings nor do they necessarily come in a particular order. You might have just some of them, or go back and forth between them, and there's no set time limit in which to experience them. Many people therefore prefer not to think in terms of 'stages' of grief.

Shock and disbelief

When someone you love dies, it can be a huge shock, even if you have known for a while that they were unwell. You might feel in shock or disbelieve that someone you care about could one day be with you and not the next.

Some people describe a sense of numbness at first, as though the person hasn't really died. Often, this lasts for around a few hours to a few days after learning that the person has died, although it can go on for longer.

Longing for the person

It's very common to yearn for or long to be with the person who has died, perhaps wishing for just one more day together.

You might think you see or hear them, for example, when you're walking down the street. A stranger with the same colour hair or someone who seems to walk in the same way might remind you of them.

You might dream about the person or think of things you'd like to tell them, only to 're-remember' that they are no longer here. Although this can be distressing, it can be part of the natural process of grieving as your brain tries to process that the person has died.

Anger

You might feel angry about your loss. Anger can be felt in various directions, for example towards the lymphoma itself or the health professionals who were looking after your loved one. Perhaps you feel angry towards a god or at life in general and the unfairness of the situation. Some people feel angry with the people around them for seeming to quickly move on with their lives.

Some people feel angry with themselves. They think of things they wish they had or hadn't said or done before the person died. Although it can be hard to acknowledge, it's also quite common to feel angry at the person who has died for leaving you. This is natural when you feel in such emotional pain.

Guilt

You might go over things you feel you should or shouldn't have said or done. Some people go through 'bargaining', thinking in 'if only' terms or 'deal-making'. For example, 'if you let the person come back, I'll lead a healthier or more selfless life'.

You might feel as though you didn't do enough for the person who's died. Consider, 'what would have been enough?' Very often, the reality is that, however much you did, you could not have changed the outcome. You might still give yourself a difficult time by thinking that you could somehow have done more. This is human nature, but try to think about all the things you did for the person, both on a practical and an emotional level. If possible, reassure yourself that you did enough.

Some people feel relieved that the person has died, often because their loved one is no longer having to cope with their lymphoma. It can also be a relief to have a break from your caring duties. Some people experience guilt for feeling this relief. These are natural, human emotions. Although painful, it can be helpful in the long-run to allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling.

Depression

Feelings of low mood and depression are common following a bereavement. Some of the symptoms you might experience are:

- low mood and feeling close to tears
- lack of energy and motivation
- loss of interest and pleasure in the things you usually find them in
- feeling anxious and worried
- agitation and inability to focus
- difficulty making decisions
- loss of appetite
- difficulty sleeping.

What if depression continues?

For many people, depression following the death of a loved one fades over time. For some people, however, it continues. If it goes on for longer than a couple of years, your grief might be described as 'unresolved' or 'complicated'. This type of grief can stop you from moving forward with your life.

Symptoms of unresolved grief can include:

- an ongoing sense of numbness or disbelief that the person has died
- spending a lot of time thinking about how the person died
- ongoing low mood
- going out of your way to avoid reminders of the person
- feeling that life has no meaning or purpose
- thoughts of ending your life, perhaps to be with the person.

As part of unresolved grief, you might have ideas about your future which include the person who has died, and are therefore impossible. For example, you might plan wedding anniversary celebrations with a husband or wife who has died.

Let someone know if you think you might be experiencing depression or unresolved grief. Your GP is often a good person to approach and can suggest [sources of support](#) to help you cope and to come to terms with your loss.

Interactions with other people

Many people feel uncomfortable talking about death and don't know how to support someone who is bereaved.

Friends and acquaintances sometimes say or do unhelpful things. For example, they might pretend not to see you in the supermarket, or avoid talking to you about the person. They might say clichéd things such as 'time is a healer'.

Although it's likely that people are just uncertain how to help and feel worried they'll upset you, their words and behaviours can feel hurtful and isolating. Some people describe intense loneliness and feeling 'cut off' from those around them. You might be very sensitive to the words and actions of others, feeling that they don't really care about what you're going through.

You might find it helps to let people know how you're feeling. You could tell them that it's OK to ask how you're feeling and to talk about your loved one. Explain that you're going through a very difficult time: if you become emotional, it's not because of something they've said or done but because the emotions are already there.

There might be times when you don't really know what you want or need from family and friends. At times, you might want someone to just listen to you. At other times, just their company and simply being with you might be what you feel you need.

People have their own, individual ways of grieving - there is no defined set of feelings people go through. Other people might seem not to understand your grief if it is different to theirs.

It might seem that people expect you to 'move on' or 'get over' your loss quickly. Grief is not to be rushed through and some people believe that we don't ever really 'get over' a loss but instead come to a point of acceptance. In time, we feel able to live life more fully once again.

FAQs about bereavement, loss and grief

Bereavement is a deeply personal experience. Each person has their own thoughts and beliefs in relation to death. When someone you love dies, it can bring a great sense of uncertainty and questioning. It can also prompt thoughts about your own mortality. In this section, we address some of the questions people often ask about bereavement, grief and loss.

How long will I feel such grief?

Grief is a painful yet natural response to loss. There's no set timeframe for how long it lasts. Each person goes at their own pace and just because you feel OK on one day, it doesn't mean that you'll feel OK the next.

For most people, however, the sense of loss starts to lift gradually, often after a few months. Despite still loving and thinking about the person who has died, many people start to recover from a major bereavement within a year or two.

Over time, feelings of deep sadness often start to come together with the warmth of fond memories of the good times you shared.

Is how I feel normal?

The range of powerful emotions you go through when someone close to you dies can be very intense. Such intensity can feel unfamiliar and overwhelming but is a natural part of grief.

Many people think they **'see' or 'hear' the person** who's died. People often wonder whether they are 'going mad' or 'losing their mind'. In fact, the experience is very common and can happen as your brain starts to process that the person has died.

Why did they have to die?

You might wonder whether there was anything you or the person with lymphoma did or didn't do to cause their illness. It's human nature to look for reasons; however, in most cases, there is no known **cause of lymphoma** and there is nothing that you could have done to have changed the outcome.

It can feel extremely unfair that the person you love has died. You might feel very **angry** and a huge sense of loss that your future plans with the person cannot become a reality. Underneath this anger there is often a great sense of loss and sorrow.

Is it OK to 'move on'?

At first, realising that you've laughed or haven't thought about the person for a while might bring **guilt**. It's very natural to go 'in and out' of grief, alternating between sadness and going about your day-to-day life. This is all part of processing your loss and is entirely natural.

As time goes on, you might experience a gradual 'letting go' of the person as you move into a new phase of your life. Although the person is no longer physically with you, some people feel that the person is with them in a mental or spiritual way. This is very personal and means different things to different people. Some people describe feelings of love and a sense of being with the person when they think about them.

How can I cope with anniversaries and birthdays?

For some people, certain dates can bring new waves of sadness and emotion. For example, the anniversary of the person's death, their birthday or your wedding anniversary. Sometimes the lead up can feel more challenging than the day itself.

Think about what would help you to get through these times, whether it's planning to be with a friend or taking time off work. Some people choose to mark the occasion, for example, with a family meal to remember a relative who has died. Others prefer to carry on with their day-to-day life without doing anything different. Some people mark anniversaries and events for the year after the person dies, while others continue to do so over the years to come.

We all have our own ways of coping; there is no right or wrong and it's important to do whatever feels right for you.

How can I talk to children about death?

It can be extremely difficult to talk to children about the death of a loved one. The way that you do so depends on several factors, including their age and their relationship with the person.

To help you talk about the death of a loved one, you might find specialist sources of bereavement support helpful, for example:

- **Child bereavement UK**, which offers a range of bereavement support services to families.
- Cruse Bereavement Care has **tips for coping with bereavement** put forward by children and young people.
- **Hope again** is the youth website of Cruse Bereavement Care. It offers a safe place to enable young people to learn from other young people about ways of coping with grief.
- **Winston's wish** offer a range of support service to help children and families who are bereaved.
- Macmillan Cancer Support's information about **making and using a memory box**.

- Your **local hospice** might offer bereavement support services such as support groups and bereavement counselling for children and young people.
 - Storybooks available at the library, in bookshops and online. One example is *Let's talk about when someone dies*, by M. Potter (written in 2018, published by Featherstone, Bloomsbury).
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How can I help myself?

Although nobody can bring the person you love back, there are things you can do to help yourself. There is **support available** to help you cope during such a difficult time.

Acknowledge your feelings

Be patient and allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling. Some people try to block their feelings out by pushing them to the back of their mind or 'numbing' them with drugs or alcohol. Some people think they don't 'deserve' to feel the loss as intensely as other people who perhaps had a closer relationship to the person who's died. Your grief is real and valid. As painful as loss is, acknowledging how you really feel generally helps in the long term.

There can be a great deal to process when someone you love dies. Some people find it helps to connect with others who have experienced a bereavement through support groups or **online forums**.

Talk honestly with someone about how you feel. This could be a family member or a friend or, if you have a religious faith, a member of your religious community. You could write in a journal or speak out aloud to the person who has died. If you prefer to speak to someone you don't know, you could get in touch with our **Information and Support Team**. A member of the team can listen to you and can help you to find **other sources of support**. You might also consider seeking the support of a **counsellor** to help you process your thoughts and feelings.

Take care of yourself

Looking after yourself sometimes takes less of a priority when you are bereaved. Hard as it can be, eating well, taking some exercise and getting some rest (even if you can't sleep very much) is important to your overall health and wellbeing.

Think, too, about what would help you emotionally. For example, consider taking time out of your work and how the people around you could support you. Remember that there are further sources of support that might help too.

Consider further sources of support

Many people find it helps to get some additional support to help them cope with their grief.

You might find the following resources helpful:

- The NHS website has an online search tool to help you **find local bereavement services**.
- **Cruse bereavement care** is a charity that offers support when someone has died. Their booklet, *Has someone died? Restoring hope*, gives suggestions on how to help yourself and where to go for advice and support.
- Marie Curie has a **directory of bereavement support**.
- **GriefChat** offers bereavement **counselling in various formats** (face-to-face, online and over the phone).
- **The Good Grief Trust** offers a range of support throughout bereavement. Their website includes information to help with practicalities, stories of others who have experienced a bereavement, and a UK map to help you find local sources of support.

You can also speak to your GP for advice about support that's available in your area.

We have separate information about the topics in **bold font**. Please get in touch if you'd like to request copies or if you would like further information about any aspect of lymphoma. Phone 0808 808 5555 or email information@lymphoma-action.org.uk.

References

The full list of references for this page is available on our website. Alternatively, email publications@lymphoma-action.org.uk or call 01296 619409 if you would like a copy.

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✓	Evidence-based
✓	Approved by experts
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