

# Facing Loss



**This booklet tries to show you that loss can be faced. It also stresses that grief may include strange, baffling and strong feelings that are perfectly normal.**

**We believe that, with a little help from others, you can achieve acceptance and take up your own living again.**

**We hope that what follows will help you to walk the road ahead knowing that others understand how it feels.**

### **No-one finds it easy**

Facing the loss of someone we love is never easy. We all know that people have to die, but we prefer not to think about it until we have to face the reality of serious illness in the family. A death may be sudden and unexpected, leaving us totally unprepared. There may, however, be a warning; there may be time to make some adjustments, but the grief which follows is no less painful. We are left feeling numb and believing that our lives have lost their direction and purpose.

Sorrow and grief are deeply painful, and no-one can really prepare us for them. We feel that no-one else can understand how much we hurt inside. But the pain and the sorrow are the price we pay for loving, and the love goes on even though death has intervened. The pain of grief is that there is no-one there any more to respond to our love.

There is no right way or wrong way to feel grief, and our own feelings of grief are as personal and individual as any other feelings.

### **Death in our society**

Most of us find the strength to manage the big things, and help may be readily available for them. We cope with the illness,

then with the letters that come, but when we write or speak to other people we cannot show how deeply we feel our loss, and may not be able to use the word 'died'. We may instead speak of having lost our love one, or of them having left us. The smaller things take us unaware, when someone rings and asks for 'him' or a letter is delivered months later addressed to 'her'.

A hundred years ago almost every family lost children, and life expectancy was short. Everyone had experience of dying and bereavement, and families, less widely-scattered than they are today, gathered at the bedside. Mourning had rules of etiquette: widows wore black, and widowers and orphans black armbands. All this has changed. Because most people live to old age we expect everyone to. We have little personal contact with the dying – and portrayals on the television are remote and idealised and have little meaning for us. Death has become something that 'it's not nice' to talk about, something to be avoided. Grand-parents tend to die in hospital, away from the family, perhaps hidden away in a side ward.

We have not learned about death or had much opportunity to explore our

own beliefs and emotions, so we share society's uncomfortable feelings about death. It remains true though that death is as natural as life, and indeed that new life – new plants, new creatures, even new planets – can only exist because others have died. Death is therefore part of our life, and sets a seal on what we are and what we have done. If we can recognise our own discomfort with a subject that we hardly ever talk about, it can both help us to see that our friends and family are also struggling. When they fail in that struggle they may avoid us, even crossing the street so as not to have to face our grief – and their discomfort. That is painful to us indeed.

## The grieving process

Grief is not a single event, a reaction on the day of the death then tears at the funeral, and its all over. It is a process which takes time to work through, during which we each find out how to adapt to our loss. The strong feelings we have had for our loved one remain and give rise to our sorrow which is therefore natural and does not need to be treated with medicines except rarely when it takes over every part of our lives. Sorrow used to be more easily expressed and shared with others who accepted the bereaved with warmth and concern, but today we may keep our feelings bottled up and this can do us harm.

Our minds are not computers, but part of our emotional being, with good and bad feelings. Grief brings these to the surface, and no-one is expected to be brave all the time or to be without fault. Crying helps us to express these emotions freely and openly, and so can be very helpful and healing.

## Feelings

The sorts of feelings people have do not follow any consistent pattern but usually include some of the following; they can appear at any time and in any order. Perhaps you began by feeling numb and walk round like someone in a dream, unable to accept the reality of the loss, wanting to cry but not being able to. Perhaps you could not believe it could happen to you. Or you may have had the opposite reaction, weeping at the slightest provocation and crying yourself to sleep at night. You may cry at the wrong moments and in the wrong places. You will almost certainly ache inside, and feel nothing can be the same again. You may feel you cannot go out on your own and be afraid of meeting people or of answering the telephone, or you may just want to sit and look at photographs and long for those arms to be around you. You may even feel as if your partner is going to walk through the door at any moment, and find yourself cooking or making plans or buying for two. All these things are normal and usual, although we don't talk about them very often. Maybe you keep asking 'why?', feeling angry about a life cut short and being denied time together, or even blaming yourself for something done or left undone.

When these feelings come over you, you may feel dreadfully alone and without help. Even if you have a strong faith, you may feel that God has deserted you. All of these feelings are not only natural, but common in grief. There is nothing wrong with you that time and interests, good friends and close relationships will not heal. Bereavement is one of the hardest things to have to cope with. That you

feel ill, off balance, unable to sleep at night and fearful of the future is hardly surprising when you are faced with what is possibly the biggest change you have ever had to deal with.

## Adjustment

Grief is not something you can 'get over' like a cold, or can 'snap out of'. True sorrow based on love remains a part of us, and this is how it should be. In time, it is possible to adjust to it, to make allowances for our feelings and to understand ourselves when we get angry over little things, or feel hurt or cheated. If you can see your bereavement as a challenge to make you a more tender, concerned and compassionate person, then you will grow into a better person because you will be able to give more to others. It is worth remembering that although no-one can shelter you or take the pain away, people nearly always do manage to cope with it in the end. If grief can make you tender and understanding, you won't be frozen with embarrassment over what to say or not to say when you are with others who are suffering as you do now. While it's hard to see your way out of the dark tunnel of grief, every tunnel has a way through to light at the other end.

## Winning through

In time, you will find new strengths, new opportunities and new courage to lift some of the burden from you and to build a new life. Some find the burden easier to bear than others, but if you can cherish good memories as well as building new interests and people into your life, it regains a purpose. Your loss cannot be replaced, but other things can help to

occupy the gap if you can find your own aims, perhaps rediscovering old talents and ambitions that had been put aside.

Nearly everyone finds that practical everyday matters and routines are essential to allow damaged self-esteem to be repaired and healing to take place. It is helpful to take charge of your own life and to make your own decisions, but selling up or trying to get away and make a new start can be disastrous. You cannot avoid memories: there will be reminders all around you, but the most poignant ones are buried deep within you and nothing can or should obliterate them. Do not 'try to forget', but remember with honesty, and with tears or joy, both the good times and the bad times. Do not worship an idealised image of your loved one – remember the ordinary and the special.

Finding ways of making sense of life may cause you to turn to religion for consolation, for answers to probing questions. This too is normal, for death raises questions about immortality and eternity – the realm where God is. Many people of all faiths find help and consolation in spiritual things, in prayer and worship, as reminders of the abiding values.

Sometimes it takes the shock of loss to waken in us our previously hidden spiritual longings and provided our faith helps us and brings comfort, it can be of enormous benefit. The aim is to regain inner peace, to accept what has happened and who we are. We cannot do that without some pain, some loneliness, some regrets, but that does not mean we can do nothing that brings us pleasure. It does enable us to keep on living until our turn comes to die.

The best advice given includes taking one day at a time, and not living the rest of your life worrying about what might (but most probably won't) happen. Keep yourself healthy by ensuring adequate diet, exercise and sleep, and make sure you still have some outings and pleasures. Beware of sudden or major changes, and do not rush into new emotional relationships just because you are lonely. Finally, and perhaps hardest, do not expect too much from other people. Family and friends may expect you to be fully recovered after six months, when in fact people may grieve for much longer and you, like everyone, can expect anniversaries, Christmas and birthdays to be difficult and times when you need more support.

## Endword

This booklet ends with a selection of problems most frequently raised by the bereaved we have met. They have been discussed by our staff and the brief answers given are offered as a reference for you to turn to from time to time. If these questions are not your own questions and you feel the need for more help, do not hesitate to contact your own doctor, local clergy, CRUSE or the staff at the Hospice.

### **I don't believe he's gone – I can still hear and see him ...**

Even when you have known for some time that someone is going to die, there is still a sense of shock when the death occurs. You may feel cold, numb, empty and unreal for a time, and have trouble in believing that they are really dead and are not coming back. This sense will start

to fade in a few days or weeks, although it may return from time to time. When it does, you might feel that you can hear or see them again, and each time there will be fresh shock and disbelief when you realise the truth of the loss. One extension of this belief is that you may dream of the one who had died; if you have lost your partner, some of these dreams may be sexual. All these feelings, while not universal, are normal and do not mean that you are going crazy.

### **I don't seem to be able to settle down to anything, yet there's so much needs doing...**

You will probably find it difficult to concentrate, feel that your thoughts are confused and that everything is an effort. You may lose your appetite, become forgetful and feel tired, yet have difficulty in sleeping. Try to eat proper food rather than snacks, and try to get adequate rest even if you cannot sleep. Most people cry many times when they remember the person who has died, or some part of the funeral; while this can leave you exhausted, it is a normal way of letting your grief out. Holding it in can be just as exhausting.

### **I think I'm going mad...**

Grief is associated with stronger emotions than most people have felt before, and you may feel that these emotions are taking over. In fact, people do not go mad with grief, but while you are going through the grieving process you may feel and act differently from usual. It may be tempting to feel that things would be easier if you moved house or disposed of possessions, but in fact this is not a good

time to make major changes in your life – what seems right now may not seem right in several months time. If you cannot avoid having to make important decisions, try to talk them over with an experienced person whom you can trust and who can help you to consider the various options. Family, friends, clergy, lawyers or the counsellor or social worker at the Hospice may all be appropriate people.

### **Why us?**

Many people have strong feelings of anger which may be difficult to express or understand. You may feel anger at the fact of the death itself, at being deprived of companionship, or at God or the world for such a painful and seemingly pointless loss. You may also feel angry with people close to you who may not seem as upset as you are, or with those who were involved during the illness or at the time of death. Sometimes there is a reasonable cause for this anger, but even if there is not the feeling will still be there. It will diminish in time, but is real and normal.

### **If only ...**

It is natural to feel at times that things would have been different if you had acted differently. There may be regrets for things said, done or not done. We are all human, and some misunderstandings and disagreements are inevitable in our relationships. We all feel at times that we could be better people, but you have lost any opportunity with the person who has died. In fact, these guilty feelings are rarely justified, and will pass in time. If they persist, it may help to talk to someone from CRUSE, a clergyman, your doctor or someone from the Hospice to

try to understand better why you continue to feel as you do.

### **I always seem to want to talk about it ...**

There is often a recurring need to talk about the dead person, their illness and death, the good times and the bad times. The best way in which family and friends can help is to listen and to share this remembering, although they may find this listening painful and embarrassing because they do not know what to say.

### **Sometimes I can't remember ...**

Life may seem flat and aimless, but you should allow memories to come and stay – whether they are good memories or bad. Just as our own faults can lead to regrets and feelings of guilt, we must remember that other people have faults. We preserve their memory more fully if we remember the whole person, faults as well as virtues. If you find your memories have gaps, try talking with someone who will help you to explore these spaces and fill them.

### **I don't think I'll ever be happy ...**

Things may feel so bad that you cannot see any prospect of them ending. In some ways, they don't end, because your memories remain, but much of the pain does become less acute. At some stage, you will find that your sadness is interrupted by pleasure about something that happens now. These feelings of pleasure don't mean that you're not caring for the dead person. You should therefore renew old interests and in time seek new ones. But being alternately sad and happy can be very confusing

and difficult to cope with, and special anniversaries, including birthdays and Christmas, can be particularly difficult. You may need extra help at such times – do ask for it.

## **No-one seems to understand how I feel – they tell me I should have got over it by now ...**

People who tell us not to get upset mean well, but perhaps do not realise that distress, which may continue for months, is natural and right when someone close to us dies. Try to go to someone who will understand your need to be upset and grieve. If your family or friends find this too hard, your clergyman, a local branch of CRUSE, or a helpline might be able to help you, or you would be welcome to contact the Hospice. You may want the privacy that comes from being alone at times, but others find loneliness a burden. If you find you are alone a lot, try to tell someone, and ask for companionship.

## **Children grieve too!**

As adults we want to protect the children in our family, which is a natural response to the circumstances. However children, like adults have feelings which they need to express, many of which will be similar to those described in this booklet, but there are differences depending on the age of the child.

No child is too young to notice that an important person is no longer around and it is important to tell all children, in simple language, that the person has died and is not coming back. If children do not understand what has happened they can become confused and anxious, so not telling the truth can be harmful.

Young children in particular find it difficult to grasp the concept of past and future, and only see the present as being real. They may therefore upset the adults around them by repeating obvious questions or seeming callous, but this is the result of their need to concentrate on the here and now. They may be distressed one minute and want to go and play the next as they continue to explore the world and enjoy it – this is quite natural.

In general children find it difficult to express their feelings in words, so their feelings often come out through changes in behaviour. However, like adults, every child will respond differently to bereavement depending on age, maturity, temperament, their closeness to the person who has died and how secure and supported they feel.

Don't hide your grief from the children in your family, seeing you grieve and hearing you talk about the person who has died may help them express their feelings and talk too. Spending extra time with children in the early part of bereavement will help them feel secure, as will keeping their routine as normal as possible and reassuring them that it is ok to have strong feelings. Talking to them over time, drawing pictures, writing stories, making albums about family events and the person who has died all helps the child keep their memories alive and work through their grief.

Please see the information at the end of the booklet about support services and resources for children.

## Pilgrims Hospices Bereavement Support and Counselling Services

**Pilgrims Hospices run Bereavement Support Groups, Children's Days and Counselling services.**

If you would like to speak to someone about what might be most helpful to you, your children or other members of your family then please contact the Hospice Counsellor.

**Hospice Counsellors can be contacted at:**  
Canterbury – 01227 812611  
Thanet - 01843 233925  
Ashford – 01233 625549

Further information about Hospice services can be found on the website [www.pilgrimshospice.org](http://www.pilgrimshospice.org)

### Other useful contacts and resources

#### **CRUSE – Bereavement care**

Day by Day Helpline – 0844 477 9400,  
[www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

#### **Local numbers:**

Canterbury and Thanet 0845 6030024  
Dover District and Shepway 01304 204123  
Ashford and District 0870 2403179

#### **Way Foundation – Support for men and women under 50 who have been widowed.**

Helpline 0870 011 3450,  
[www.wayfoundation.org.uk](http://www.wayfoundation.org.uk)

#### **National Association of Widows – Support and information.**

Helpline 024 76634848,  
[www.nawidows.org.uk](http://www.nawidows.org.uk)

#### **Compassionate Friends – An organisation for bereaved parents and families, offering support after the death of a child.**

Helpline 0845 123 2304, [www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)

#### **Lesbian and Gay Bereavement Line - 0207 403 5969 (Tues. and Thurs. 7pm-10pm)**

#### **Remembrance website – [www.missyou.org.uk](http://www.missyou.org.uk) – website to create a tribute in memory of a loved one.**

### For bereaved children and their families

#### **Child Bereavement Charity –**

Support and Information Line 01494 446648,  
[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)

#### **Winston's Wish – practical support and guidance to those supporting a bereaved child.**

Helpline – 0845 2030405,  
[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

**CRUSE young persons -**  
helpline – 0808 808 1677  
website - [www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk)  
email - [info@rd4u.org.uk](mailto:info@rd4u.org.uk)

#### **'Holding on and Letting Go' – Weekend Bereavement Programmes for children 5-16, run in Kent.**

For information Tel 01634 825144

### Literature

Kent Libraries hold a wide range of books about grief and bereavement.

Their catalogue can be seen online – [www.kent.gov.uk/libraries](http://www.kent.gov.uk/libraries) – or Tel. 01622 671411



**For further copies of this booklet, or a large print version, please contact:**

56 London Road, Canterbury  
Kent CT2 8JA

☎ 01227 812624 with voicemail  
or ☎ 01227 459700

Hythe Road, Willesborough  
Ashford, Kent TN24 ONE

☎ 01233 504115 with voicemail  
or ☎ 01233 504100

Ramsgate Road, Margate  
Kent CT9 4AD

☎ 01843 233924 with voicemail  
or ☎ 01843 233920