

Bereavement

Support after death

Health &
wellbeing



Information and advice you need to help you love later life.

We're Age UK and our goal is to enable older people to love later life.

We are passionate about affirming that your later years can be fulfilling years. Whether you're enjoying your later life or going through tough times, we're here to help you make the best of your life.

Our network includes Age Cymru, Age NI, Age Scotland, Age International and more than 160 local partners.

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Contents

What is this guide about	2
Grief	3
Your feelings	4
Your thoughts	5
Your body	6
Coping with the death	8
Difficult times and feelings	10
Memories of other losses	16
Picking up the pieces	17
Looking to the future	19
Useful organisations	20

What this guide is about

You are probably reading this guide because someone close to you has died. Although bereavement is a highly personal event, there are recognisable reactions and emotions many of us experience when someone we are close to dies.

Sometimes people are shocked and upset by their changing and powerful emotions when they are bereaved. Realising that these feelings are quite normal may help. This guide gives you some idea about the range of experiences many people go through.

If you need practical advice about the things that have to be done after a death, see our free guide *When someone dies*.

As far as possible, the information given in this guide is applicable across the UK.

Key

**what
next?**

This symbol indicates who to contact for the next steps you need to take.



This symbol indicates where information differs for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Grief

Grief may affect you emotionally, physically and mentally. It may also affect the way you relate to other people. If the death was expected, you may be telling yourself you should be able to cope, even when you feel you can't. Perhaps you think you should be over it, but you aren't. Or you think you should feel all right because you have family and friends looking out for you – but you don't, because no one can replace the person who has died.

When you're bereaved, you have to cope with a world that can feel as if it's fallen apart. In practical terms, your life may have changed dramatically. You may have less money and have to eat, sleep and live alone for the first time, or be faced with household or financial tasks that you haven't done before. Losing a close family member or old friend can mean that you don't have anyone to share childhood memories or family stories with.

The biggest changes are probably the emotional ones. It can seem that everything you took for granted has gone and you've lost your sense of identity and self-worth. You may feel that you've lost almost everything and haven't much left to fall back on or look forward to. Even if you have loving friends and family around you, you may still feel this way.

Grief can make you feel many different things. It's important to remember that these feelings are not bad or wrong. They are simply how you feel.

Your feelings

At first you may be too shocked to feel anything, even if the death was expected. Many bereaved people say that, initially, they felt a sense of numbness and disbelief.

As you get over the shock and start to grasp the reality of what's happened, you may have many powerful feelings. At times you may feel you are coping but at other moments you may have feelings of despair. You may feel that you can't control your emotions or manage to carry out simple tasks such as making a phone call or a cup of tea. It may seem as though everything you knew has gone and nothing will ever make sense again.

You may feel that you don't care whether you live or die, because you can't imagine living without the person who has died. Your loss may feel overwhelming and you're likely to be reminded of it constantly.

***Adjusting to a death
is gradual and happens
differently for everyone.***



Your thoughts

Many bereaved people find it hard to concentrate and feel confused and forgetful. Your thoughts may return constantly to the person who died, with painful questions and fears running through your mind. Alongside this, you may have a sense of relief if they died at what seemed to be the right time for them.

As you think and talk more about the person and listen to what relatives and friends say, you're likely to start building a fuller picture of them than you had before. As it grows over time, you'll probably find that this picture becomes a part of your life and a source of comfort.

what next?

For help and support with your bereavement, contact Cruse Bereavement Care (see page 21). You could also contact your local Age UK to see whether it offers a befriending service. This can provide one-to-one support for people who feel lonely or isolated.

Your body

Physical changes after bereavement can include difficulty getting to sleep, experiencing vivid dreams and long periods of wakefulness. You may lose your appetite. Some people feel tense and short of breath, or edgy and restless; others feel slow and lethargic.

You're likely to feel exhausted, especially if you were caring for the person who died or had been through an anxious time before their death. Strong emotions and dealing with all the things that need to be done after a death can also leave you feeling tired and drained.

The stress of grief can have physical effects. It can make you more susceptible to colds and other infections, or make you more accident-prone. Take extra care of yourself – try to eat well and rest even if you can't sleep. If you have any long-term health conditions, make sure you remember to take any medication and keep your regular doctor's appointments. Take gentle exercise if you can. Be kind to yourself – don't try to do too much while you're grieving.

what next?


You might find it helpful to read our guides *Healthy living* and *Healthy eating* for tips on keeping yourself in good health.

Take extra care of yourself – try to eat well and rest even if you can't sleep. Be kind to yourself – don't try to do too much while you're grieving.

Coping with the death

Adjusting to a death is gradual and happens differently for everyone.

Allowing your feelings to come out can help you cope with your loss. Talking about the death and the person who died, dealing with the practicalities of your new situation and trying to think of the present as well as the past can all help you take in the reality of the death. You will slowly begin to find a way of living without the person alongside you, but very much with the person in your thoughts and memories.

 Cruse Bereavement Care provide emotional support after someone has died. They have a network of free, confidential services across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (see page 21). Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland offers the same support in Scotland (see page 21).

The Compassionate Friends help people who have lost a child or a grandchild (see page 21). It's a self-help organisation – parents who have been bereaved themselves offer friendship and support to other bereaved parents, grandparents and their families.

Sands offers help to bereaved parents, grandparents and their families when a baby dies during pregnancy or after birth. You can call their helpline if you need support in the weeks, months or even years after the baby has died (see page 22).

SSAFA (the armed forces charity) can offer support if you are a veteran or have lost someone who previously served in the armed forces (see page 22).

If your grandchild has lost a parent, you may want to contact Winston's Wish. They provide support to bereaved children, young people and their families (see page 22).

Many support organisations also have online forums where you can get support from others in similar situations.

**what
next?**

If you were acting as a carer, see our guide *Advice for carers*, which has a section on finding help and support when the person you cared for has died.

***Allowing your feelings
to come out can help you
cope with your loss.***



Difficult times and feelings

You will probably go through a range of emotions after the death, some of which are outlined below. You may not experience them all, and they may not occur in any particular order. Getting used to a bereavement can take a long time but, with support, you will adjust.

Emptiness and depression

Feelings of depression and meaninglessness can hit you when the reality of the death begins to sink in. Just when you think you've started to move on and are feeling better, you may hit rock bottom and feel that life is bleak and empty. It may feel almost unbearable at the time but, surprisingly, this seems to be a period when some inner healing takes place. Afterwards people say they feel lighter, more in control of their lives and better able to look forward.

Sadness is a natural response to bereavement, but for some people that healthy reaction may become depression. This can be managed and you should see your doctor for help and advice. You may feel awkward talking to your GP about feelings, but your doctor is there to help you. You don't have to try to cope on your own. Our guide *Healthy living* has more information about depression and mental health.

what next?

If you start to feel you might hurt yourself in some way, it's important to tell someone about it as soon as possible – ideally your doctor. You can call Samaritans at any time of the day or night on 116 123 (see page 22).



In Northern Ireland, you can also contact Lifeline for support (see page 22).

Anger

Some people feel angry after they have been bereaved and this can be one of the hardest feelings to cope with. You may feel anger at the injustice of your loss or at the lack of understanding in others. You might be angry at yourself and at the person who died, who has left you feeling abandoned, frightened and alone.

This anger is usually a result of feeling hurt and unhappy. These feelings are normal and you can often let them out in a way that doesn't hurt you or someone else. Some people have a shouting session, others dig the garden or write their thoughts on paper and then destroy the pages. Don't bottle up your feelings; try to think about the reasons for your anger. Talking about your feelings with someone who isn't emotionally involved in your own loss can help.

Fear

Feeling fearful and anxious is natural because your familiar world has been turned upside down. You may feel that you have lost control over your life, your thoughts and emotions, and this may make you feel vulnerable and afraid. But as you get used to coping, you will become more confident.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by fearful thoughts or anxiety, it could help to talk to someone about how you are feeling. See the Useful organisations section (pages 20-22) for who to contact for further help.

Mixed feelings

Hardly anyone has feelings that are straightforward when someone dies. If the person was sick or in pain, you may have felt relief as well as sadness when they passed away. This is normal and understandable if you saw someone close to you in pain or discomfort.

If your relationship with them was difficult, this may also lead to mixed feelings about their death. You may find yourself thinking about things that you wish had been different, or ask yourself endless ‘what ifs’ about decisions you made. When a difficult relationship ends with death, any chance of mutual understanding or reconciliation is lost, which is why you may have these thoughts. They may be upsetting but if you suppress them you risk becoming angry, bitter or depressed. It can help to get a better understanding of the relationship by thinking about what was good as well as what was not, and what you each contributed to it.

Guilt

Some people experience feelings of guilt when someone dies. You may find yourself wondering if you could have done more to help, or feeling guilty about something you said or didn’t say to them when they were alive.

Guilt is a very natural feeling after bereavement but it’s important not to dwell on things in the past that you can’t change. Try not to be too hard on yourself or anyone else. No one is perfect and we can only do our best with the situation we are in. With time, you’re likely to reach some acceptance of the past and move towards a more rewarding present. It may help to talk these feelings through with someone you trust, such as a close friend or with someone from an organisation that supports bereaved people (see our Useful organisations section on pages 21-22).

Worries about practical matters

In addition to the strong emotions that you can experience after a bereavement, you may also have worries about practical issues, such as how to manage on a smaller income and handle household tasks. It's important to seek advice if you are struggling to manage, so you can get the help you need.

what next?

If you need some help and advice with practical issues, see our guides *Getting help at home* and *More money in your pocket: a guide to claiming benefits for people over pension age*. Use our benefits calculator at www.ageuk.org.uk/benefitscheck or contact your local Age UK to arrange

- ① a benefits check (see page 20). In Wales, see Age Cymru's version of *More money in your pocket*.

Talking about your feelings with someone who isn't emotionally involved in your own loss can help.



‘I started going to a day centre where I met other people, some of whom were in a similar situation to me.’

When Maria’s husband died, she found herself struggling to cope emotionally.

‘When my husband died two years ago, it was as if my whole world fell apart. We’d been married for over 50 years and I couldn’t imagine my life without him. He’d been ill for a while so, while his death wasn’t unexpected, it still came as a huge shock to me. My daughters live abroad so when they left, after a couple of weeks, I felt very alone.

‘I remembered seeing a sign in my library saying that my local Age UK offered a befriending service, and I thought it couldn’t hurt to contact them. I got in touch and they

arranged for someone to visit me once a week, just for a chat and a cup of tea.

‘It made such a difference to know someone was coming round. When I was feeling more confident, I started going to a day centre where I met other people, some of whom were in a similar situation to me. It was good to talk to them and realise that my feelings were normal.

‘Now I’m getting back on my feet, it’s my turn to help others. I’ve volunteered as a befriender and soon I’ll be going out to see people who need a bit of comfort and support at a difficult time.’





Memories of other losses

Bereavement can trigger memories of earlier losses that you thought you had dealt with. Perhaps you didn't realise at the time how deeply affected you were, or maybe it was difficult to talk about your feelings. You may find memories of these unhappy times rushing back and that can be extremely distressing.

For example, some people are only just beginning to grieve for losses that happened during the war. Others who had a stillborn baby or a miscarriage, a child who died, or a sibling who died young, may only now start to grieve openly. Fifty or so years ago we didn't tend to talk about our emotions the way we do now and children's feelings were often overlooked. You may have gone through life burdened with an unspoken sadness.

You may feel the need to mourn these losses and talk about your experiences before you can start to cope with your more recent bereavement.

what next?

If you can, talk to friends and family about how you're feeling. See your GP if you feel you want to talk to a grief counsellor. Contact Cruse Bereavement Care for more support (see page 21) or see the Useful organisations section for other sources of help (pages 20-22).

Picking up the pieces

As you rebuild your life, you may find that your beliefs, your family and friends and your memories play an important part in how you deal with life after bereavement.

Your beliefs

Over time, you have probably developed beliefs and ideals that have given meaning to your life and influenced decisions you have made. Your thinking and beliefs may be based on a particular faith, religion or philosophy, or may have been very much your own creation.

Your beliefs may comfort you and continue to give your life meaning. But you may find that they don't live up to the challenges presented by your bereavement, leaving you feeling let down and lost. This can be unnerving but it is also a chance to look at life afresh. It could lead to a strengthening of your beliefs and views, or you may decide to explore other ways of giving meaning to your life.

Family and friends

Some people will be more sensitive to your feelings than others. If the death was expected, some people may think that you will not be too affected by it. Others may worry about saying the wrong thing. Some people may not contact you for fear of disturbing you during a difficult time. If you feel isolated, try to reach out and ask for help, as people may not know you want them to be there unless you tell them.

A significant bereavement can put a strain on other relationships, as people in the family may grieve in different ways and need different things. This can cause misunderstandings and conflict so it can sometimes help to talk things through together. Some couples or families find that grief brings them closer together.

Sometimes the people who help most aren't the obvious ones. Someone you aren't particularly close to could be the one who helps you through bleak times. There are befriending and other support services in many areas – ask at your place of worship, if you have one, or your local Age UK, doctor's surgery or local library, or search online for local services.

Memories

You may worry that you will forget the person who died. That's why it can be comforting to spend time keeping their memory alive, either by yourself or with others who knew them. You could share memories, look through photos, or do something to commemorate them by visiting a place they loved, or planting a tree or flower to remember them by. Don't be afraid or feel uncomfortable to talk about the person you have lost.

Looking to the future

When you lose someone you love, you can feel that your life doesn't have much meaning or that you no longer have anything to offer. Looking back at your life and taking stock of all you have seen and done can help you to realise that a bereavement doesn't take that away. Remind yourself of all that you are; think of the people you care about and who care about you.

It's also important to look forward, however difficult this may be. Everyone has something to offer the world. It's worth making the most of every opportunity to spend time with other people; keep in touch with friends and family, have a holiday, learn something new, or help out with a good cause.

i You can volunteer for Age UK, Age Cymru, Age NI or Age Scotland in one of our shops or offices. Call Age UK Advice or visit the website to find out more (see page 20).

Sometimes people jump into major decisions when they are particularly vulnerable and emotional and this may lead to more stress. It can be helpful to take time over decisions such as moving house or changing jobs.

There are no magic answers. It takes time to regain confidence, feel less overwhelmed by your loss and start to make sense of the world again. Help and support from others, especially those who have gone through a similar loss, may help you to cope with your bereavement. With time, it may be you helping others through difficult times.

Useful organisations

Age UK

We provide advice and information for people in later life through our Age UK Advice line, publications and online.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65

Lines are open seven days a week from 8am to 7pm.

www.ageuk.org.uk

Call Age UK Advice to find out whether there is a local Age UK near you, and to order free copies of our information guides and factsheets.

In Wales, contact

Age Cymru: 0800 022 3444

www.agecymru.org.uk

In Northern Ireland, contact

Age NI: 0808 808 7575

www.ageni.org

In Scotland, contact **Age Scotland** by calling Silver Line Scotland: 0800 470 8090 (This is a partnership between The Silver Line and Age Scotland)
www.agescotland.org.uk

Compassionate Friends

National self-help organisation. Parents who have been bereaved themselves offer friendship and support to other bereaved parents, grandparents, and their families.

Tel: 0345 123 2304

Tel: 0288 77 88 016 (Northern Ireland helpline)

Email: helpline@tcf.org.uk

www.tcf.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care

Provides emotional support and information to bereaved people across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Has a network of local services offering face-to-face support and a national helpline.

Tel: 0844 477 9400

Email: helpline@cruse.org.uk

www.cruse.org.uk

In Scotland, contact **Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland**

Tel: 0845 600 2227

www.crusescotland.org.uk

Department for Work and Pensions Bereavement Service

Carries out eligibility checks on surviving relatives to see what benefits they are entitled to. Also takes claims for bereavement benefits and Funeral Payments.

Tel: 0345 606 0265

Textphone: 0345 606 0285

In Wales, call 0345 606 0275

Textphone: 0345 606 0295

In Northern Ireland, call 0800 085 2463

Lifeline

Provides support for people in distress and despair in Northern Ireland. It can also provide follow-up support, including counselling and complementary therapy.

Tel: 0808 808 8000
www.lifelinehelpline.info

Samaritans

Confidential non-judgemental support for people in distress, 24 hours a day.

Tel: 116 123
Email: jo@samaritans.org
www.samaritans.org

Sands

Offers support to parents, grandparents and their families when a baby dies during pregnancy or after birth. They can be contacted for support in the weeks, months or even years after the baby's death.

Tel: 020 7436 5881
Email: helpline@uk-sands.org
www.uk-sands.org

SSAFA – the armed forces charity

Offers support and advice to anyone who has served in the armed forces or anyone who has lost someone who served.

Tel: 0800 731 4880
www.ssfa.org.uk

Winston's Wish

Offers support, information and guidance to people caring for a bereaved child or young person.

Tel: 08452 03 04 05
www.winstonswish.org.uk

Can you help Age UK?

Please complete the donation form below with a gift of whatever you can afford and return to: Age UK, Tavis House, 1-6 Tavistock Square, LONDON WC1H 9NA. Alternatively, you can phone 0800 169 87 87 or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/donate. If you prefer, you can donate directly to one of our national or local partners. Thank you.

Personal details

Title:	Initials:	Surname:
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Address:
Postcode:

Tel:	Email:
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By providing your email address and/or mobile number you are agreeing to us contacting you in these ways. You may contact us at any time to unsubscribe from our communications.

Your gift

I would like to make a gift of: £

I enclose a cheque/postal order made payable to Age UK

Card payment

I wish to pay by (please tick) MasterCard Visa CAF CharityCard
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Signature **X**

Expiry date / Issue no. (Maestro only)

Gift aid declaration

(please tick) Yes, I want Age UK and its partner organisations* to treat all donations I have made for the four years prior to this year, and all donations I make from the date of this declaration until I notify you otherwise, as gift aid donations. I confirm I pay an amount of income tax and/or capital gains tax at least equal to the tax that the charity will reclaim on my donations in the tax year. Date: ___/___/___ (please complete). *Age Cymru, Age Scotland and Age NI



The Age UK Group may use the information you have supplied to tell you about our other charitable services or to ask you to support our work. Age UK (registered charity no 1128267) comprises the Charity, its group of companies and national partners (Age Cymru, Age Scotland & Age NI). If you would prefer not to hear from us do let us know by phoning 0800 107 8977 or by writing to us at our registered address. The registered address is Tavis House, 1-6 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9NA.

Supporting the work of Age UK

Age UK aims to enable all older people to love later life. We provide vital services, support, information and advice to thousands of older people across the UK.

In order to offer free information guides like this one, Age UK relies on the generosity of its supporters. If you would like to help us, here are a few ways you could get involved:

1 Make a donation
To make a donation to Age UK, simply complete the enclosed donation form, call us on **0800 169 8787** or visit **www.ageuk.org.uk/get-involved**

2 Donate items to our shops
By donating an unwanted item to one of our shops, you can help generate vital funds to support our work. To find your nearest Age UK shop, visit **www.ageuk.org.uk** and enter your postcode into the ‘What does Age UK do in your area?’ search function. Alternatively, call us on **0800 169 8787**

3 Leave a gift in your will
Nearly half the money we receive from supporters come from gifts left in wills. To find out more about how you could help in this way, please call the Age UK legacy team on **020 3033 1421** or email **legacies@ageuk.org.uk**

Thank you!

What should I do now?

For more information on the issues covered in this guide, or to order any of our publications, please call Age UK Advice free on **0800 169 65 65** or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/healthandwellbeing

Our publications are also available in large print and audio formats.

The following Age UK information guides may be useful:

- *Advice for carers*
- *When someone dies*
- *Wills and estate planning*

The Age UK Group offers a wide range of products and services specially designed for people in later life. For more information, please call **0800 169 18 19**.

If contact details for your local Age UK are not in the box below, call Age UK Advice free on **0800 169 65 65**.

