



## Understanding your Grief

## **Introduction:**

If you have been given this to read, it is likely that you are in the midst of that most painful experience we call grief. This leaflet has been written to help you understand something of what grief is about.

## **The Early Days:**

The death of someone close can be shattering. The way we react is unique to each and every grieving person. Even among close family who have shared the same loss, each person may well respond differently. There is no one right way of grieving.

At the same time there are some common experiences and to know others have shared these can be helpful. Many people talk of feelings of numbness, shock and being overwhelmed, making the most ordinary daily tasks a challenge. While some people may immerse themselves



more deeply in work or some other aspect of their lives, others may find it difficult to maintain any kind of routine.

Even when we can respond to the demands of our day-to-day lives there will be other times when painful emotions overtake us. We may have feelings such as longing, helplessness, sadness, anger and guilt. It is not unusual following a death for people to think about their own death; they may have thoughts of suicide as a way of escaping the pain or to be with the one who has died. We need to know that it is alright to experience - and to express - these thoughts whatever other people may say.

“Some people feel they are on a roller coaster and wonder if they are going mad.”

As our strong emotions mix with our memories, grief may become more difficult. It gets even more complicated when we realise that we



sometimes swing between the sadness of our grief and the happiness of remembering good times. Again we need to know that this is alright, and that this is our way of dealing with our grief. It is no wonder that some people say that they feel as if they are on a roller coaster and may even wonder if they are going mad. It is really difficult to struggle with the many faces of loss and continue the work of living, but it is important to know that all of this is normal.

In addition to all of this, illness and physical symptoms are common after the death of someone close. Often people find difficulties in sleeping, their appetite may change and they may experience difficulty in concentrating and feel a lack of energy. This may be a result of the body's attempt to work through and reestablish its own needs after so much physical and emotional energy has been spent in care and concern for the person who has died. It is not unusual to be more vulnerable to colds and other physical ailments at such a time.

It is also important to note that some people hold their feelings within them. Sayings such as "being heartbroken" or "having heartache" underlie the reality that emotional pain can indeed be locked within us. Others may feel as though there is a weight dragging them down, which is a way of saying how low, sad, or depressed they are feeling; still others talk about the knot in the pit of their stomach. Again, while these feelings are normal, if you are concerned about any continuing illness, physical pain or change in behaviour, it is best to have this checked out by your doctor.

“It is normal  
both to grieve and live”

## As time goes on:

With time and the support of friends, families and other groups, the pain will normally become less sharp. When this happens many people think that their grief is ending. At this stage, people may become alarmed when they find that certain sounds (such as music), smells, celebrations, or activities linked to the person who has died seem to increase or reawaken feelings that they thought they had already been through: they thought they had moved beyond these feelings, and now they are back in the middle of them again. Once more some people feel they are losing control or perhaps even going mad. Sometimes people say they thought crying or being angry were alright as a kind of “one off” but were startled when they found themselves experiencing this over and over again. When we feel this way it may seem as if we have become stuck or are grieving in the wrong way, but this is simply part of our own safety system.

We can only allow ourselves to deal with so much emotion at a time and then we have to stop. That does not mean that we have necessarily completed our grief. It is normal both to grieve and live.

Nor does this mean that the grief will remain as intense or go on for ever. It means that because of the depth of the relationship there will often, maybe always, be times and events which connect us more closely to the person who has died, and we respond accordingly. Someone once said grief is the price we pay for love. Over time, people may return to the life they had before the death, or find other interests and purposes. This is not about letting go of the person - it doesn't mean they have been forgotten - rather we find ways to take that person forward with us in our daily lives. It is not unusual to find yourself making a cup of coffee for the person who has died along with your own, or thinking you see or hear them.

## What grief needs:

An essential part of working through grief is being able to share that important relationship with others – and sometimes we will need to do that over and again. This may come through being with friends or family, or other groups that we belong to, or speaking to the family doctor or someone from a faith group or any special person in whom we can confide. Some friends avoid us because they feel they don't know the right thing to say or that they want to make it better for us and don't know how. It can help to let them know that there is nothing they can say - just being there is enough. There is no magic to make it better.

It is also important to remember that grief needs a break; it is worth repeating that we need to live as well as to grieve. Although it may be difficult to imagine, when we become tired of grieving, we need to re-connect to other people and to things that are still important to us. It



is often easy to say “no” to friends when they are actually trying to help the part of us that needs to carry on. If we are able to accept their help in this, we may find it makes our grief easier. Perhaps, if we don’t feel able to accept, at this point, we should say so, but ask the person to make the offer again another time.

Even when we do become involved again in daily life we need to think of ways to continue supporting ourselves. It is helpful to think ahead - think of things you can do, and that others can do for you, to provide support. For example, you may need to return to work out of necessity but it may also be a way of re-connecting to one important part of your life. Like other steps forward, this does not mean that your grief is over. Be honest with yourself and others: tell them what you need in order to stay at work or ask if it is possible to have additional time off. It sounds like a cliché but grief takes time - often much longer than we expect and certainly longer than many of the people around us expect.

“Grief takes time - often much longer  
than we expect and certainly  
longer than many of the people  
around us expect”

## Finally:

The purpose of this leaflet is to help you recognise that what you are experiencing is likely to be normal for someone who is grieving.

But if you are worried about yourself, or if, having read this, you feel that you are really struggling, then do find someone to speak to.

This leaflet has been produced by Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland, a national charitable organisation which can offer a variety of help including further leaflets and information. You can contact them by phone or e-mail, or visit the website.

### **Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland**

Riverview House

Friarton Road

Perth PH2 8DF

Telephone: 01738 444178

e-mail: [info@crusescotland.org.uk](mailto:info@crusescotland.org.uk)

[www.crusescotland.org.uk](http://www.crusescotland.org.uk)

National Phoneline 0845 600 22 27

CBCS relies heavily on grant aid from the Scottish Executive, but relies heavily on voluntary contributions to maintain its Service. If you would like to support the work of CBCS, please contact the address above.

This leaflet was written by Jim Kuykendall, a bereavement therapist and lecturer trained by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, and now in private practice in England.

© CBCS 2005