



Understanding Grief

A guide for family and friends when
someone has died from cancer

Coping
with cancer

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13 11 20



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A guide for family and friends when someone has died from cancer

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Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This booklet is intended as a general introduction to the topic and should not be seen as a substitute for medical, legal or financial advice. You should obtain independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate professionals, and you may wish to discuss issues raised in this book with them.

All care is taken to ensure that the information in this booklet is accurate at the time of publication. Please note that information on cancer, including the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of cancer, is constantly being updated and revised by medical professionals and the research community. Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this booklet.

Cancer Council

Cancer Council is Australia's peak non-government cancer control organisation. Through the eight state and territory Cancer Councils, we provide a broad range of programs and services to help improve the quality of life of people living with cancer, their families and friends. Cancer Councils also invest heavily in research and prevention. To make a donation and help us beat cancer, visit cancer.org.au or call your local Cancer Council.



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Introduction

This booklet has been prepared to help you understand more about your grief when someone close to you has died from cancer. Coping with grief doesn't mean getting over the person's death. It is about finding ways to live with the loss.

Everyone's experience of grief is unique, so this booklet offers a general guide only. Although it is intended to be helpful, some sections may stir up a range of feelings at this difficult time. You may like to read the parts that seem useful now and leave the rest until you're ready.

We hope this information will answer some of your questions, and provide you with suggestions as you explore ways to cope with your loss. It also includes a section on how to help someone who is grieving. If you find this booklet helpful, you may like to pass it on to your family or friends.

How this booklet was developed

This information was developed with help from a range of health professionals who provide bereavement support and people who have had someone close to them die from cancer.

If you or your family have any questions, call Cancer Council **13 11 20**. We can send you more information and connect you with support services in your area. Turn to the last page of this book for more details.



**Cancer
Council
13 11 20**

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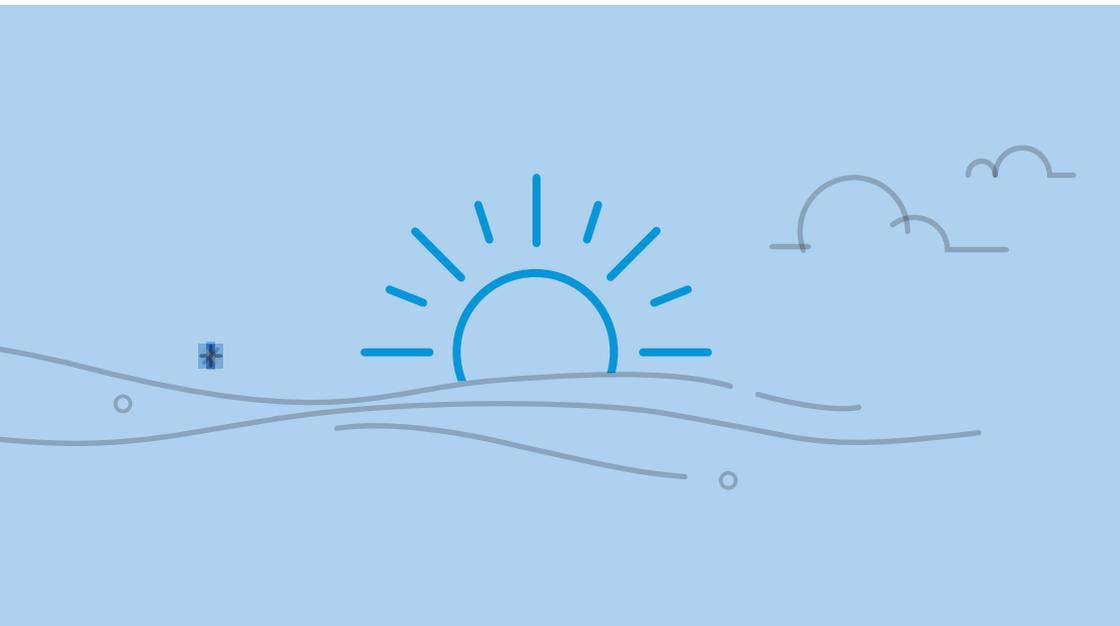
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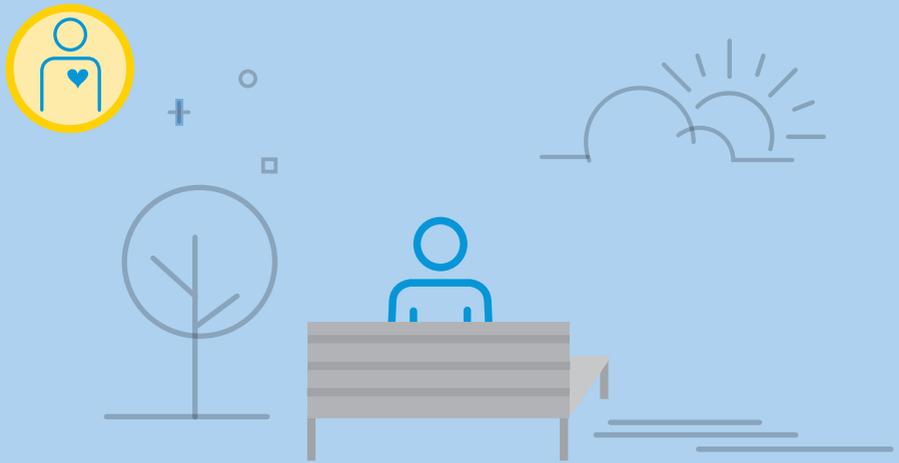
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What is grief?

Grief is a normal response to loss. The process of grieving is one of gradually adjusting to the loss and working out how to live without the person who has died. There is no set time frame, and the grief may never go away completely, but with support and understanding you will find a way forward.

Everyone grieves differently

Everyone responds to loss in their own way and in their own time. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

You may experience grief when someone close to you dies or after another significant loss, such as the loss of a relationship, a job, a pet, your good health, your way of life or treasured possessions. This booklet focuses on grief after a death from cancer, but much of the information applies to any type of grief.

Grief is not an illness and does not need to be fixed, but it can be a confusing and overwhelming experience causing strong emotional and physical reactions. You may find it helpful to learn more about common grief reactions and ways of coping (see pages 9–21).

How you experience grief depends on a number of things, such as:

- your age and gender
- your personality
- the circumstances of the death
- your relationship with the person who died
- the support you have from other people
- how much your life will change as a result of the death
- the losses you have had in the past
- your cultural background, including any rituals or customs associated with death
- your spiritual view of life and death.

Sometimes people find that a death brings back memories of other losses, and they feel they are grieving those again as well.

Bereavement, mourning and grief

The terms bereavement and mourning are closely related to grief, but they have slightly different meanings. Bereavement usually refers to the fact that you have experienced a loss. Mourning is the outward expression of sorrow for the loss, often influenced by cultural customs and rituals. Grief is the internal process of responding to the loss and it can affect all parts of your life.

Family members mourning for the same person may misunderstand each other's ways of grieving. Some people express grief through crying and talking, others prefer to keep busy or shut the world out. People may behave differently at different times. It is important to respect individual ways of grieving and not take reactions personally. This can be an opportunity to offer mutual support.

We usually grieve in the same way as we live, so people who tend to cope during tough times often find that they show this resilience after a loss. This does not mean they are not grieving, but they already have coping strategies. Thinking about what has helped you deal with stressful events in the past may help you now.

Circumstances can affect your grief

What happened in the hours and days before the death can make a big difference to how you grieve.

Sometimes knowing a loved one is dying, however difficult that is, prepares you in some way. You may have been able to spend time

with them, talking about their death and what it will mean. This is often helpful in the months that follow, even though you may feel you could never have been truly prepared for their death. If the person died peacefully, you might find you draw comfort from that peace; there is perhaps a sense of acceptance about the loss, even if you feel sad.

If the death was very sudden, or in traumatic circumstances, there may be a sense of things being left unfinished or unsaid. It is not unusual for grief to feel more complex when this happens. Grief may also be complicated if you had a difficult relationship with the person who died, but still cared about them.

Grief can begin before someone dies

When someone is ill for some time, their family and friends often begin to grieve their death before it happens. This is known as anticipatory grief.

While a lot of attention may be taken up with caring for a sick person in the family, it is common to think: “How will it be when they are not here? How will I cope on my own?”

Even when a death is expected, it may still feel like a great shock. This can be especially hard if the person has rallied again and again in the past, and you may have thought that they would always ‘pull through’ somehow. Sometimes the experience of anticipating the death actually makes you become closer to the person, and you feel intense grief when they die.

On the other hand, sometimes people are surprised by how little they feel (or by feeling a sense of relief) when the person actually dies, and say that they have done much of their grieving already. This is also a normal response, and doesn't mean they are denying their loss or that they did not really care for the person.

In some cases, people are not greatly affected by their loss at the time of the death, but find it harder as time passes, and they experience their loss in a delayed way. Again, this is quite common.

Cancer Council produces a number of resources, including *Living with Advanced Cancer*, *Understanding Palliative Care* and *Facing End of Life*, which may help prior to the death of a loved one. Call Cancer Council 13 11 20 to obtain copies, or visit your local Cancer Council website to read them online.



The person who is dying may also experience anticipatory grief as they process the fact that their life will end soon. They may find it worthwhile to talk about how they are feeling with someone on their palliative care team, to call Cancer Council **13 11 20**, or to read Cancer Council's *Facing End of Life* booklet.



The experience of grief

Grief is not just sadness. It can involve a whole range of reactions and may affect every part of your life – emotions, thoughts, physical wellbeing, behaviour, beliefs and relationships. All these effects can interact with each other and make the experience of grief seem overwhelming at times. The tips in this chapter may be useful as you come to terms with different aspects of your loss.

“ I knew he was going to die, but nothing prepared me for the depth of my sadness when he did. Even though I was surrounded by family, I felt so very alone. ” Vanessa

Emotions

Sometimes people are overwhelmed by the intensity of their feelings or find that their mood changes quickly and often. These are natural reactions to the experience of loss and may take some months to settle. Explaining how you are feeling can help family and friends be more understanding of your behaviour at this time.

Numbness – When someone dies, you may feel nothing at first. This may be because you can't believe it's true. It may feel like the person who died will suddenly walk through the door again.

This numbness can be helpful during the first days and weeks after a loss, when you may be making practical arrangements, such as planning and attending the funeral. Don't feel you have to push yourself past this. The sense of numbness will start to fade in a few days or weeks, although it may return from time to time. The reality of your loss will become clearer as time passes.

Sadness – Sometimes you might feel like you will never stop crying. You may long to see the person so much you don't know what to do with yourself and find that the tears are simply beyond your control, sometimes coming when you least expect them. This could mean you avoid going out because you can't predict or control the crying. You might also feel unable to cry, even though

you are terribly sad. Both reactions are common. Often the sadness is ongoing, and it can be hard to work out if this is simply the natural course of your grief, or a sign of more complex grief or depression (see page 28).

Anger – Many people feel very angry when they are grieving. You may feel angry with your god, the person who has died, the fact of death, yourself, those involved in caring for the person who died, even the person behind you in the supermarket queue, or for no reason at all.

Anger that comes and goes is a natural part of grief. Some people find it helpful to express their anger in a safe environment, such as with a trusted friend or counsellor. Others find that physical activities such as gardening or exercise provide an outlet for their anger.

Relief – You may feel relief that the person has died, especially if they have been unwell for a long time.

Sometimes it's a relief that it has happened at last, that the death you have been worrying about for months is finally a reality you can deal with. You may also feel glad that their suffering is over.

Not everything experienced after a death is negative. While grief can certainly be painful and disruptive, there are often small joys and connections with others. Many people experience positive growth and discover that they have a natural resilience.



If your relationship with the person was challenging or complicated, you may experience a mix of emotions at their loss. Along with sadness, you may feel relief that you are free of the stress. It's hard not to feel guilty about this. We often are expected to idolise or 'put someone up on a pedestal' when they have died – but a cancer journey will inevitably show all sides of the people involved in it. The person who died was human, with good traits and bad ones, and you are too.

Guilt and regret – You may feel guilty about the things you did or didn't do. You may wish you had behaved differently towards the person in the recent or distant past or made different decisions



Tips for coping with your emotions

- Accept that your feelings are normal and natural given the loss you have experienced. You might sense pressure from yourself or others to feel a certain way, but everyone has their own style of coping.
- Be patient with grief. You may feel that after a certain time you should be coping differently to how you are, but your adjustment to the loss is likely to be gradual and may take longer than you expect. (See page 28 for when to seek professional help.)
- Remember that it's normal to feel angry. Find safe ways to show emotions such as anger – play vigorous sport, scream in your car with the windows up, paint or draw, or hit a pillow. You may feel silly, but action often helps.
- Try reflecting on your caring role – you may feel you are

about their care, or you might feel that there are things you left unsaid. When someone dies, we lose the opportunity to change things. Try to remember that no-one is perfect. Often, talking it over with someone else helps.

Sometimes people feel guilty when they find themselves joking and laughing, feeling happy at times, or getting on with life. But it is normal to experience a range of emotions as you learn to live with the loss – it doesn't mean that you didn't care about the person or that your grief is not genuine. Emphasising light-hearted or joyful moments can help to counter the lack of control that grief can bring.

stronger than you realised and proud of how you have supported someone as they were dying.

- Forgive yourself for the things you didn't say or do. Some people find it helps to write a letter to the person and then burn it.
- Read a book, play a round of cards with a friend or watch a movie that may take your mind off your grief for a little while.
- Consider whether you would like to try complementary therapies, such as meditation or art therapy, to help you manage any feelings of anxiety or depression.
- Try to develop a sense of your personal coping style (the things that work best for you). Remembering how you have coped in difficult situations in the past may help you feel more able to cope now.

Fear and anxiety – People often become very fearful when they have a major loss in their life. You may be afraid of what the future holds and how you will cope, or you may feel terribly worried about other people you love, or fear for your own health.

Little things that were no trouble to you before can unsettle you, and you may feel very anxious even if you can't put your finger on any particular worry. Shock and stress can release chemicals such as adrenaline that make it hard to switch off anxiety. Even day-to-day activities such as leaving the house to go for walk or doing the shopping can fill some people with fear. If anxiety or fear is making it hard for you to cope with daily life, talk to your GP or call Cancer Council 13 11 20.

Depression and despair – When the reality of the loss sinks in, you may find your sadness overwhelming and even feel like your life has lost its meaning.

A loss of enjoyment in life and a lack of direction or purpose are common, especially for people who take a long time to come to terms with the loss. However, if these feelings persist for what you consider an extended period of time, it may be a sign of depression. For more information, see *If you feel 'stuck' or desperate* on page 28.

For some people, the grief feels so unbearable that they feel that they can't go on. If this happens to you, it is important to seek help. Lifeline provides 24-hour crisis support on 13 11 14. The services listed on page 37 also offer support.

Thoughts

Because of the intensity or unpredictable nature of your grief, you may find it hard to get your thoughts in order and may even wonder if you are losing your mind. However, grief often affects the ability to think clearly for a time.

Many people find they become confused and forgetful, and even getting a simple task done seems like a big hurdle. You may feel very indecisive, or you might make rash decisions. If you can, it is best to put off any major decisions for a few months after a bereavement until you can think more clearly.



Tips for managing jumbled thoughts

- Try not to make any significant changes for a while and take your time with decisions that do need to be made. People may hurry you to sort out clothes and personal items, or decide where you will live long-term. Don't be rushed – you are already having to adjust to a huge change.
- Ask a family member or friend to help you sort out paperwork. If you have school-age children, a fellow parent could help you keep up with school activities. Writing lists can also help you keep track of things.
- If you are working, talk to your employer about how much time off you need or negotiate a temporary reduction of hours. Ask them to ensure that your job will be there for you – this will give you peace of mind.
- Keep a journal. Putting your thoughts on paper can help you process the experience.

Physical wellbeing

Grief is experienced in your body too. The shock of the loss, even if you were expecting it, can trigger the release of adrenaline and other chemicals that can make you feel anxious and lead to a range of other symptoms. Feeling tense, experiencing headaches, feeling sick, unexplained aches and pains, and a tight feeling in the chest and stomach are all common physical responses to grief.

Physical reactions caused by the emotional strain of grief can, in turn, affect your ability to manage your emotions and think clearly. It is a good idea to talk to your doctor about any physical issues that are worrying you or making it harder to cope.



Tips for looking after your physical wellbeing

- Get some exercise every day. A walk in the morning can shift your mood, clear your head, raise your energy levels for the day and make it easier to sleep at night. You might also like to try swimming, dancing or playing a team sport. Even giving the house a vacuum or mowing the lawn can help if you're feeling tense.
- Try to maintain regular sleeping hours, going to bed and getting up at set times. Oversleeping can leave you feeling even more exhausted.
- Don't panic if it is hard to sleep. Get out of bed and do something relaxing, such as reading a book or having a bath, and then try going to bed again. Check with your doctor before trying sleeping tablets or natural sleep remedies.
- Talk to your doctor about seeing a psychologist for

Sleep issues – Many people who are bereaved find that their sleep patterns change. Some people find it hard to get up in the morning and end up oversleeping, while others struggle to fall asleep and/or stay asleep.

Exhaustion – Don't be surprised if you have no energy and feel constantly tired. Adjusting to any major change is exhausting, and too little or too much sleep can make you feel even more tired.

Changed appetite – Having little appetite or an increased appetite are both common responses. Some people may also experience an upset stomach.

some simple strategies (such as tracking and adjusting your night-time routines) if your lack of sleep is ongoing.

- Encourage yourself to eat a healthy, balanced diet. If you have lost your appetite, snack frequently on nourishing, easily digested foods.
- You may find you are eating unhealthy foods or large amounts for comfort. A poor diet can affect your mood, so

explore other ways to help yourself feel better, such as getting fresh air and exercise in a park, listening to music, or having a bath or massage.

- Consider learning meditation or relaxation to help with the anxiety that may trigger sleep issues and stomach upsets. Call **13 11 20** to ask if Cancer Council's meditation and relaxation recordings are available in your area.

Behaviours

You may behave differently while you are grieving. Some people make themselves extremely busy, while others may sleep a lot or find it hard to make an effort. Many people avoid reminders of the person who died because of the intense emotions. This can make it difficult to get back into your usual routines.

Some people use alcohol or other non-prescribed drugs to dull the pain. Risk-taking behaviours, including uncharacteristic sexual behaviour, can also be part of grief. While these behaviours may give short-term relief, they can lead to more serious problems.



Tips for establishing helpful behaviours

- Balance rest and activity. Set small goals and congratulate yourself when you reach them. get easier with time, but you might like to ask someone to go with you at first.
- Decide on a daily routine that includes getting up and dressed by a certain time. 'Going through the motions' can help you maintain healthy habits and self-esteem.
- If you or others around you are concerned about your use of alcohol or other drugs, recognise that it is a sign you need more support and ask your GP for help.
- Recognise that the first time you return to an activity, such as going to the shops, club, school or work, is likely to be the hardest. It tends to Pamper yourself in some way every day: a hot bath, a bunch of flowers, a massage, a special magazine, listening to music, or whatever helps.

Beliefs

Your beliefs may be challenged as you question the meaning of the loss. Some people find comfort and strength in their spiritual beliefs, but others feel abandoned at a time of great need. If your faith has been important to you, this can be one of the most unsettling aspects of grief. However, you may find that your search for answers eventually leads to spiritual growth. Whatever your beliefs, even if you are agnostic or atheist, it can be helpful to explore questions about life and death with someone you trust. This process of ‘meaning-making’ can allow you to work the loss into the story of your life and find a new way of being.



Tips for exploring the spiritual impact

- Draw on your spiritual resources in whatever way is best for you. For some, this will mean praying or going to a place of worship. For others, it will be a walk on the beach or in the bush, or listening to inspirational music – whatever reminds you of a different perspective on life, and a larger way of seeing your situation.
- Talk about your feelings with a spiritual care practitioner (pastoral carer, chaplain or religious leader). There will usually be one on the palliative care team. You can also ask the hospital social worker if there is someone you can talk to. Accept that having doubts or concerns may be part of a process leading to a stronger sense of your own spirituality.
- If it feels right to you, follow the mourning customs of your religion. Some people find these provide a reassuring structure for their grief.

Relationships

Grief affects how you interact with the world, your sense of identity and the roles you have within your family or social circle. You may find that your friendships and family relationships change.

A sense of presence – People often report that they see, sense or dream about the person who died, especially in the first few weeks. This can be deeply comforting, or frightening and unexpected. Either way it is a typical experience.

Loneliness – Loneliness is very common and can be intense. After some time has passed, you may still feel your loss very



Tips for managing the social impact

- Even after death, we continue to have connection to people in our lives who have died. Read some ideas for ways to remember on pages 26–27.
- Know that you are not alone. Loss is part of being human. Find someone you can talk to who will listen, or ask your GP about accessing bereavement counselling.
- Read firsthand accounts of other people who have experienced grief. Find stories online, through bereavement support groups, or through your local library.
- Join a support or grief group if there is one available, or consider an online group. Call Cancer Council **13 11 20** to find a support group.
- Talk with the friends, family and staff who provided support while the person was dying. Often it can be helpful

strongly, but everyone around you may seem to have moved on. This can make you feel alone even when you are surrounded by people, and you may withdraw from those around you.

Abandonment – You might feel abandoned and rejected by the person who died, or neglected by the friends you thought would be there for you. You may be surprised by who offers the best support – often it's someone who has experienced a major loss themselves.

Conflict – Because everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time, it is easy to have disagreements with family members and friends after someone dies.

to reminisce with the people who were there with you.

make the initial steps feel less daunting.

- Ask others for assistance – it will make them feel valued and useful.
 - Take small steps to re-enter your social circle. Even if you are just sitting listening, you are connecting to others.
 - When you feel ready, try to join a social group or take up a new activity. Asking someone to come along with you can
- Aim to be gentle and forgiving – with others and yourself. Family members and friends who are also grieving may seem very angry or irrational, but it is part of their reaction to loss. Try not to take it personally, but keep in mind that you are vulnerable too and have the right to protect yourself. You can let someone else support them for a time.



How long will it last?

People often expect to be back to normal after just a few weeks or months, and others might expect this of you too. Try to be patient with yourself. Many people are hard on themselves, thinking things like: “I should be over this by now.” Grief is very individual, however, and there is no set time frame. Giving yourself time to mourn is the best way to heal.

After the funeral

The period after the funeral can be challenging. Between the death and the funeral, you may have been busy making arrangements and felt surrounded by family and friends. It may not be until after the funeral that you feel the full intensity of your grief. Everyone else may seem to have returned to normal, but your life is forever changed. It will take time to create a new normal for yourself.

Friends and family sometimes make comments such as: “Life has to go on. It’s time to pick yourself up and get on with living.” Such messages may feel like criticism, as if you are being told not to grieve anymore. Often the person making the comments feels uncomfortable themselves about grief or may have particular ideas about the right way to grieve.

“ I think time does heal, but the pain is still there and you just learn to cope with it. Sometimes I still cry out ‘Why?’ Darren was so full of life and never complained about anything; I’m still amazed at how he coped with it all. ” *Troy*

If you feel like you are being told to rush your grief, try to connect with people who are more understanding. Those who were there alongside you when the person was dying may have particular insight into your experience. You can also consider joining an online or face-to-face support group. Talk to the social worker on your palliative care team or at the hospital, or call Cancer Council 13 11 20 to find out what support is available.

Triggers for your grief

Many people talk about the first year – all the ‘firsts’ without your loved one – as being especially difficult. As all of these events pass, most people learn to cope a little more, and with time they find it does get easier. However, milestones might always trigger some sadness and anxiety, and you may continue to feel a deep sense of loss for the experiences that the person didn’t get to have and that you didn’t get to share.

Other losses could trigger your grief again. This might happen when someone else you know dies or when a pet dies, when a relationship ends, or when you lose a job or special possessions.

You might find there is a time of day when you miss the person most. Or it might be a song, a smell, an anniversary or doing something you used to do together that reminds you of them, and you may feel upset again. *The experience of grief* chapter includes ideas on how to help yourself through these times (see pages 9–21).

The ‘up and down’ nature of grief

People sometimes speak of ‘stages’ of grief. This doesn’t mean that grief is something you begin one day, move through step by step, and emerge unchanged from at the other end. Rather, the stages reflect a range of emotions that you may move between.

For most people, grief involves ups and downs, moving between the traditional idea of grieving (crying, missing the person, feeling pain) and what they might describe as moving forward (returning

to activities, learning new skills, forming new relationships). This can feel chaotic, but both the ups and downs are part of grief.

Most people find they gradually learn to cope better with their loss, but don't despair if it seems like two steps forward and one step back, with feelings of intense grief again and again – this is common. The experience is often described as like being on a roller-coaster, but it can also be thought of as a series of cycles.

“ At times the sadness and pain I feel is all consuming and hard to bear, while at other times these feelings are just in the background of my day-to-day activities. ” Anne

Will it always be this hard?

When people find grief particularly difficult, they sometimes worry they will be this unhappy for the rest of their life, but for most people it isn't like that. After a while, the grief usually becomes less overwhelming, and they find that they start to enjoy things and feel enthusiastic about life again. If your grief doesn't seem to be getting more manageable over time, read *If you feel 'stuck' or desperate* on page 28.

Many people say that coping with grief doesn't mean getting over the death of a loved one. It's about finding ways to live with the change and adapting to life without them. It's not that your feelings about the person lessen, so much as a new way of living grows around the loss.

Ways to remember

You may find that doing something special to remember the person helps you cope with the loss. Here are some ideas that other people have found helpful.



Plant a tree

or garden, or place a memorial plaque in a favourite place.

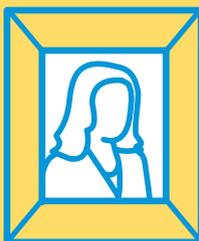


Make a memory box

filled with keepsakes such as: photos; a favourite item of clothing, such as a cap or scarf; a bottle of perfume or aftershave; letters or cards; a special recipe; and a list of shared memories.

Create an artwork

in their memory, or use some of their clothing to create a quilt, cushion covers or memory bears.



Frame a photo

of the person. This can be especially important for children.



Share memories

by setting up an online memorial page.



Create special rituals

such as lighting a candle, listening to special music or visiting a certain place. Rituals can be particularly helpful at challenging times such as anniversaries.

Establish an award

or scholarship in memory of the person, or make a donation to charity in their name.



Be prepared

for birthdays, anniversaries and holidays by planning how you want to handle the events.



Get involved in a cause

that was special to the person. Many people have found an energy in their grief that motivates them to make a difference.



Talk about the person

you have lost. You may feel uncomfortable at first but sharing your memories can help you cope.



Remember goals

you shared and continue working towards them.

If you feel ‘stuck’ or desperate

Most people have times after a major loss when they feel they just can't go on any longer. The pain of grief is too hard, or just doesn't seem to be getting any better. Be kind to yourself and know that it is okay to have some down days. In a week or two, things will usually change and you will realise there is a pattern of good days and bad days, with the good days gradually increasing.

Sometimes a person may begin to feel ‘stuck’ in their grief and become very depressed or anxious. Or worse, begin to feel suicidal, as though not going on is a real option. If this is the case for you or someone you care about, it is important to seek help.

You may need to seek professional help if you:

- find it difficult to function on a daily basis
- begin to rely on alcohol or drugs
- stop eating regularly
- are sleeping too much or having a lot of trouble sleeping
- are worried you might hurt someone because your feelings of anger or aggression do not settle
- think about self-harm or taking your own life.

There is no need to face this experience alone. To find out about the options for professional support, read page 37 and talk to your GP, or call Cancer Council 13 11 20.



If you are having suicidal thoughts, call Lifeline **13 11 14** immediately. The service operates 24 hours a day.



How to help someone who is grieving

It can be hard to know how to help someone who is grieving. You may become lost for words, or feel hesitant about offering practical assistance. However, simply making the offer can let the person know they are not alone. If you need to support grieving children, it can help to understand that they may react to loss in a different way to adults.

How can I ease their pain?

If you know someone who is grieving, it is important to accept that you cannot and do not need to fix their grief. Grieving is the way we adjust to loss.

It is understandable that the person may be easily upset, so try to be sensitive to this. Their feelings may change often and seem unpredictable. One day the person may feel hopeful, the next day all they may feel is sadness and despair. These ups and downs are a normal part of grief.

It is important to be patient. Don't expect a bereaved person to feel or behave in a certain way by a certain time. Allow them to do things in their own time.

While practical assistance can ease someone's burden, especially in the days and weeks after the death, follow the person's lead about how much help they want. Sometimes getting back into everyday routines is how a person manages their grief.

See *Ways to help someone after a loss* on page 32 for more tips.

Will I say the wrong thing?

You may want to help, but fear saying or doing the wrong thing. Be honest right from the start. You may need to say, "I want to help, but I'm not sure what to do." Or "I don't know what to say, but I want you to know I do care and I am here if you need a shoulder to cry on." Your honesty will be appreciated.

However, it is not helpful to say, “I know how you feel.” Each person grieves in their own way. You cannot know exactly how the bereaved person feels, even if you have been through a similar experience or if you are also grieving. This doesn’t mean that your experiences won’t give you a better understanding of the person’s situation, but remember that they may not react in the same way as you would or did.

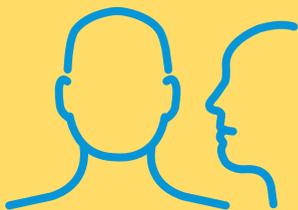
Give reassurance where you can but don’t try to find something positive in the death. To empathise without suggesting you know exactly how they feel, you could say things like, “Loss can be very difficult to cope with”, or “I imagine you feel very uncertain about what to do next.”

When to suggest professional help

It is normal for a person’s grief and sadness to go on for some months or longer. Sometimes, however, a person experiencing grief can become overwhelmed and may develop depression or suicidal thoughts. You could suggest that they seek professional help if they are having trouble completing the tasks of daily living, or show any of the other behaviours listed on page 28.

If you are concerned that the person may become suicidal, ask them if they think they are doing okay and encourage them to seek professional support. You may need to ask directly, “Have you felt suicidal?” This can indicate that you can offer help and take some of the power out of the feelings the person is having. Keep in touch if you are concerned about their wellbeing or safety.

Ways to help someone after a loss



Listen

Be a good listener and don't force someone to talk. Just being by their side may be enough. They will talk when they are ready.



Remember

Let the person know you are thinking of them on significant dates like birthdays and anniversaries.

Step in

If needed, help with practical chores such as shopping, laundry, gardening, picking the kids up from school, caring for elderly parents, paying bills, cooking and driving.



Reminisce

Talk about the person who died. Don't be afraid to use their name or fear that it will be upsetting. The person you are supporting won't have forgotten about their loss.



Stick around

Don't withdraw your support once you feel the person is coping better. Grief from a major loss can take a long time. Your support may be more helpful months or even years down the track than right after the death.



Helping children in your family

Children and teenagers have a different way of expressing their grief. Do not underestimate the impact of a bereavement, even if a child is very young or does not seem sad. They may express their grief through play, in outbursts of anger, or by becoming clingy or very withdrawn. Some children will complain more of stomach upsets or have trouble sleeping.

Children often worry that something they said or did caused the death, so let them know that the death is no-one's fault and that there is nothing anyone could have done to prevent it. After the death of a parent, children need to be reassured that they will be looked after – explain to them who will be involved in their care.

Like adults, children and young people need:

- space to grieve – you do not have to fix their sorrow
- acknowledgement of their loss, ongoing support, and the opportunity to understand and express their feelings
- to be told the truth and to be included
- for the adults around them to show them that it's okay to cry and express their sadness, and that it's also fine to be angry as long as they don't hurt themselves or others
- help to put words to their feelings of loss
- to keep up school, activities and regular routines
- encouragement to cherish their memories, talk about the person, and know that they were and are loved.

The ways children understand death and experience grief changes with their age and development. They might seem to be deeply

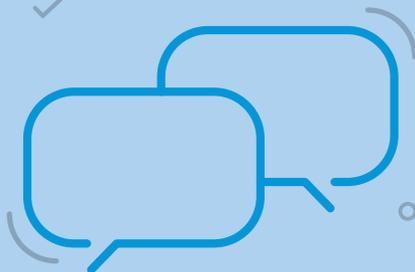
distressed one moment and playing happily the next. This does not mean that their grief is superficial – they often work through their feelings in bits and pieces, facing them in bearable doses. Allow children to talk about their emotions in a safe environment without judgement and give them tools that suit their way of grieving, such as drawing or kicking a ball to help manage emotions.

It's especially hard to be there for your children when you are grieving. Sometimes people feel they just don't have any emotional energy left for their children. It is not uncommon for children and teenagers to start to express their grief more strongly just as the adults supporting them feel like they are starting to cope with their own grief. At this time, it is important to allow others to help. Reach out to extended family, friends and school to make sure your children are well supported.

Find out more about children and grief

Cancer Council has more information about helping grieving children. *Talking to Kids About Cancer* explains how children of different ages understand cancer, illness and death, and answers some of the common questions kids ask. *Cancer in the School Community* includes

information for school staff when a student, a student's family member or a staff member has died from cancer. Call **13 11 20** or visit your local Cancer Council website to find out more. CanTeen, Redkite and Good Grief offer support tailored for young people (see page 38 for website details).



Seeking support

Although grief is an intensely personal experience, most people find they do need some support from other people. You may draw support from your family, friends or others in your social circle, particularly those who supported you while the person was dying, but sometimes it helps to talk to people who aren't directly involved in your life.

“ I wanted a place where I could really talk about how I felt and I didn't have to worry about hurting someone or protecting them. ” Lee

Peer support services

Sometimes you may feel that your family and friends don't really understand your grief or aren't interested in hearing about it anymore, or you might feel that you can't be entirely honest about your feelings with them.

Meeting other people who have had similar experiences to you can be worthwhile. You may feel supported and relieved to know that others understand what you are going through and that you are not alone. There are many ways for you and your family to connect with others for mutual support and to share information. These include:

- **face-to-face support groups** – often held in community centres or hospitals
- **online discussion forums** – where people can connect with each other at any time – you can find the Cancer Council Online Community at cancercouncil.com.au/OC
- **telephone support groups** – for bereavement, facilitated by trained health professionals.

In these support settings, people often feel they can speak openly and share tips. You may find that you are comfortable talking about your experiences, your relationships with friends and family, and your hopes and fears for the future.

Ask your nurse or social worker or call Cancer Council 13 11 20 to find out about suitable support groups and peer support programs in your area.

Getting professional help

Most people cope with grief through the support of family and friends and sometimes a support group. However, you may want to seek professional help if you are finding your pain unbearable, if you are struggling to function after a time, or if you feel stuck and unable to move forward.

Bereavement counselling can help you learn to understand your reactions as part of the natural course of grief. During the sessions, you can explore a range of strategies for adjusting to the changes in your life. The counselling is usually provided by a professional counsellor, therapist or psychologist with experience in supporting people who are grieving.

Counselling may not be appropriate immediately or very soon after the death, so if you feel unable to function at that time, talk to your doctor first.

You can call Cancer Council **13 11 20** or ask your palliative care team for help accessing bereavement counselling. GriefLine offers confidential telephone and online grief counselling every day between midday and 3 am – call **1300 845 745** or visit griefline.org.au. If you need crisis support or are feeling suicidal, contact Lifeline **13 11 14**.





Useful websites

The internet has many useful resources, although not all websites are reliable. The websites listed below are good sources of support and information.

Australian

Cancer Council Australia.....	cancer.org.au
Cancer Council Online Community.....	cancercouncil.com.au/OC
Palliative Care Australia.....	palliativecare.org.au
CanTeen Australia.....	canteen.org.au
Carers Australia.....	carersaustralia.com.au
CaringBridge.....	caringbridge.org
Department of Health.....	health.gov.au
Healthdirect Australia.....	healthdirect.gov.au
Lifeline Australia.....	lifeline.org.au
Kids Helpline.....	kidshelpline.com.au
MensLine Australia.....	mensline.org.au
Redkite.....	redkite.org.au

Grief-specific websites

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement.....	www.grief.org.au
Bereavement Care Centre.....	bereavementcare.com.au
beyondblue.....	beyondblue.org.au
Good Grief.....	goodgrief.org.au
GriefLine.....	griefline.org.au

International

American Cancer Society.....	cancer.org
Macmillan Cancer Support (UK).....	macmillan.org.uk
National Cancer Institute (US).....	cancer.gov



Glossary

adrenaline

A hormone produced by the adrenal glands in response to physical or emotional stress.

advanced cancer

Cancer that is unlikely to be cured. It may be limited to its original site (primary cancer) or may have spread to other parts of the body (secondary or metastatic cancer).

anticipatory grief

Grief that occurs before an impending loss. It can affect the person who is dying as well as their family members and friends.

bereavement

The state of having experienced the loss of someone important to you.

carer/caregiver

A person who provides physical and/or emotional support to someone who is ill or living with a disability or disease such as cancer.

complementary therapies

Supportive treatments that are used alongside conventional treatment. They improve general health, wellbeing and quality of life, and help people cope with side effects of cancer.

complicated grief

When a person feels 'stuck' in grief for a prolonged period. They may find it hard to manage the tasks of daily living, seem unable to accept the loss, or struggle with anger about the loss for a long time. Sometimes occurs after a traumatic death or when the

relationship with the person who died was challenging.

depression

Very low mood and loss of interest, lasting for more than two weeks. Depression can cause physical and emotional changes.

diagnosis

The identification and naming of a person's disease.

grief

The internal process of reacting to loss. Grief can affect all parts of your life.

mourning

The outward expression of sorrow for a loss, often influenced by cultural customs and rituals (e.g. wearing black, lowering flags at half-mast).

palliative care

The holistic care of people who have a life-limiting illness, their families and carers. It aims to maintain quality of life by addressing physical, practical, emotional, spiritual and social needs.

resilience

The ability to bounce back from unexpected changes and challenges.

spiritual care practitioner

A professional who offers emotional and spiritual care to patients and their families. Often part of the palliative care team and sometimes called a pastoral carer or chaplain.



How you can help

At Cancer Council, we're dedicated to improving cancer control. As well as funding millions of dollars in cancer research every year, we advocate for the highest quality care for cancer patients and their families. We create cancer-smart communities by educating people about cancer, its prevention and early detection. We offer a range of practical and support services for people and families affected by cancer. All these programs would not be possible without community support, great and small.

Join a Cancer Council event: Join one of our community fundraising events such as Daffodil Day, Australia's Biggest Morning Tea, Relay For Life, Girls' Night In and Pink Ribbon Day, or hold your own fundraiser or become a volunteer.

Make a donation: Any gift, large or small, makes a meaningful contribution to our work in supporting people with cancer and their families now and in the future.

Buy Cancer Council sun protection products: Every purchase helps you prevent cancer and contribute financially to our goals.

Help us speak out for a cancer-smart community: We are a leading advocate for cancer prevention and improved patient services. You can help us speak out on important cancer issues and help us improve cancer awareness by living and promoting a cancer-smart lifestyle.

Join a research study: Cancer Council funds and carries out research investigating the causes, management, outcomes and impacts of different cancers. You may be able to join a study.

To find out more about how you, your family and friends can help, please call your local Cancer Council.



Cancer Council 13 11 20

Being diagnosed with cancer can be overwhelming. At Cancer Council, we understand it isn't just about the treatment or prognosis. Having cancer affects the way you live, work and think. It can also affect our most important relationships.

When disruption and change happen in our lives, talking to someone who understands can make a big difference. Cancer Council has been providing information and support to people affected by cancer for over 50 years.

Calling 13 11 20 gives you access to trustworthy information that is relevant to you. Our cancer nurses are available to answer your questions and link you to services in your area, such as transport, accommodation and home help. We can also help with other matters, such as legal and financial advice.

If you are finding it hard to navigate through the health care system, or just need someone to listen to your immediate concerns, call 13 11 20 and find out how we can support you, your family and friends.

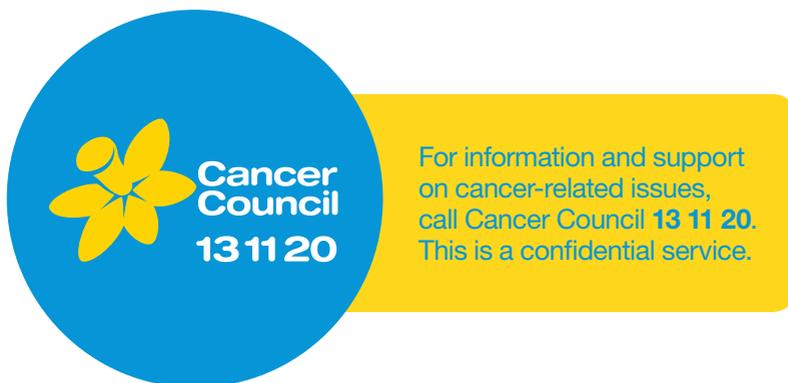
Cancer Council services and programs vary in each area.
13 11 20 is charged at a local call rate throughout Australia (except from mobiles).



If you need information in a language other than English, an interpreting service is available. Call 13 14 50.



If you are deaf, or have a hearing or speech impairment, contact us through the National Relay Service.
www.relayservice.gov.au



Produced in collaboration with:



Visit your local Cancer Council website

Cancer Council ACT
actcancer.org

Cancer Council NSW
cancercouncil.com.au

Cancer Council NT
nt.cancer.org.au

Cancer Council Queensland
cancerqld.org.au

Cancer Council SA
cancersa.org.au

Cancer Council Tasmania
cancertas.org.au

Cancer Council Victoria
cancervic.org.au

Cancer Council WA
cancerwa.asn.au

Cancer Council Australia
cancer.org.au

*This booklet is funded through the generosity of the people of Australia.
To support Cancer Council, call your local Cancer Council or visit your local website.*