

Grief & Bereavement

A guide for students at the University of Cambridge in response to Covid-19 (Coronavirus).

The loss of someone close can be devastating and a bereavement caused by Covid-19 is a very challenging kind of bereavement for many reasons. This leaflet is to offer support and guidance if you have lost someone due to Covid-19 or if you are supporting someone who has been bereaved in this way.

We all grieve differently and the way you grieve will be unique to you and will depend on many factors including the relationship you had with the person who has died, your cultural and religious beliefs and your support networks such as family and friends.

Our response to loss can change from hour to hour, day to day. Some days will be better than others and it is important to take things one step at a time. Our response to loss may contain a range of emotions, such as sadness, anger, guilt, frustration, emptiness and anxiety. Everyone experiences grief differently and there is no 'normal' or 'right' way to grieve.

Are you caring for someone who is bereaved?

If you are caring for someone who has been bereaved, whether you are a family member, friend, neighbour, charity volunteer or a professional, you are undertaking an important role. Simple gestures of kindness and caring acts at this time can be a great comfort to bereaved people.

Covid-19 and Bereavement

The Covid-19 global pandemic has and will continue to result in the substantial loss of life across many countries including the UK and the community of the Collegiate University of Cambridge will also experience loss of life. Preparing for and knowing how to manage grief and what to expect can be of help at such a difficult time.

A death from Covid-19 may mean that there has been or will be:

- little time to prepare for a loved one's death following a period of illness
- no time spent in person with a loved one before they died, due to the risk of infection and social distancing rules
- an inability to say goodbye in the usual manner after death due to restrictions around attending funerals, public gatherings and travel
- isolation issues as people may be grieving while separated from family or friends, who may also be grieving but in distant locations

- practical challenges, for example if the person bereaved was previously receiving care from someone who has died and/or has responsibilities to care for others or has ongoing work or family responsibilities
- issues around coping with a shocking bereavement at a time when the bereaved person, or others in their circle of family and friends, may also be unwell with Covid-19

It is important that people bereaved by Covid-19 are well supported early on in their grief.

Understanding your emotions

Shock and disbelief

Initially you may feel shock or numbness and confusion. Sometimes you may find yourself carrying on with your life as if nothing has happened. These are all normal reactions and will lessen over time.

Loss

Coping with the loss of the person's love, friendship, companionship or intimacy can bring profound sadness. At other times, people feel sad for the loss of a relationship that they were never able to have with the deceased. Allow yourself other comforts that are helpful for you - huddling under a warm duvet, cuddling a pet, having a warm bath, or sitting in some sunshine for a while.

Inability to cope

Simple tasks become more difficult when we are grieving. Furthermore, ways of coping that would usually be helpful are compromised due to current restrictions. It is not possible to see people to receive comfort and support in managing loss in the way it would be under usual circumstances. You may really miss the experience of being hugged or held, due to social distancing or self-isolation at home. If possible, do try to have regular online support from friends/family.

Fatigue, loss of appetite and sleep disturbance

Listen to how your body is feeling. Grieving is exhausting and you may well feel more tired than usual, but also have difficulty sleeping and poor appetite. **Sleep when you can**, even if only for a few hours at a time. **Try to eat a little and often** to preserve energy. Remember to stay hydrated, drink plenty of water. Avoid too much caffeine and other stimulants such as excessive alcohol or illegal drugs.

Restlessness, heightened anxiety and tearfulness.

You may long for relief from emotional pain and fear losing others that you care about. If you are experiencing heightened symptoms of anxiety you could try some

gentle breathing exercises and yoga while listening to some calming music, even for just a few moments a day. Crying can bring relief as it is an outlet for the emotions, tension and strain that have built up.

If you have **physical symptoms** at this time be aware that some of these may be due to your bereavement. However, if you are concerned that you may be poorly for another reason, including Covid-19, contact a medical practitioner. College nurses are contactable (check your college website for the latest information). If your academic work is affected, speak with your tutor or Director of Studies.

Get some exercise

This might be the last thing you feel like doing, but it can help. Exercise uses up excess energy and is a way of releasing some of the frustration you might be feeling. Exercise also releases endorphins, which can help you to feel better and lift your mood.

Take things slowly

If you are confined to your home in order to limit the spread of Covid-19, try to make it a **place of comfort** to you at this important time of grieving. Take things slowly if you are able to and do things carefully to stay safe, as you may feel preoccupied and have less concentration. Do one thing at a time.

Delay doing any difficult or dangerous tasks that require full concentration, it is easy to make mistakes and injure yourself at a time of high stress.

Let out your feelings

Try not to bottle up or push away your painful feelings, allow some quiet/reflective time each day for them to surface. Listening to favourite music can help, as can simple stretching and breathing exercises.

Express yourself in some other way

Many people find writing or drawing their feelings really helps clarify the overwhelming mix of emotions. Choose a form you feel comfortable with - a diary, letter, prose, poetry, song. If you can't find the words to describe what you're feeling try 'speaking' about your experience through dance, song, painting or with textiles. Let shape, form, texture, colour, rhythm be your words.

Over time the emotional swings associated with loss of a significant person lessen in intensity as you learn to adapt to your changed circumstances, but to begin with it can feel overwhelming.

These are all normal reactions to loss and a natural part of the grieving process. Given time, support and understanding they will lessen and you will gradually begin

to feel better able to cope.

Ask for help

It is not always easy to ask for help and it takes courage. Start by accepting that you need help. Ask someone you feel you can trust - a friend, a tutor, a college nurse or chaplain, a parent. A phone conversation, audio or video call with someone you trust can help a lot.

Support from the University Counselling Service

You may want to contact the University Counselling Service. Talking to a counsellor can help you find your way through the painful and otherwise lonely process of grieving and help you to make sense of your feelings.

Please see our website for our current opening hours, counselling and online self-help provision, and to make an appointment.

Further resources

'Sudden' offers helpful information and advice to people who have been bereaved by Covid 19 and to people caring for others who have been bereaved due to Covid 19:

www.suddendeath.org

Cruse Bereavement Care have helpful information on their website and a helpline number and email:

www.cruse.org.uk

0808 808 1677

helpline@cruse.org.uk

The Samaritans offer a free 24/7 helpline and email support:

www.samaritans.org

116 123

jo@samaritans.org

Help2makesense offers guidance and support to young people and children who have been bereaved:

www.help2makesense.org

Other External Online Support Groups

The Mix offer free information and support to people under 25 years based in the UK and have an online chat forum for young people:

www.themix.org.uk
info@themix.org.uk

WAY (Widowed and Young) is a national charity in the UK for people aged 50 or under when their partner has died. It is a peer-to-peer support group and costs £25 to join:

www.widowedandyoung.org.uk

Other Online Resources

NHS Choices 'Grief after bereavement or loss' has information about how to cope and mental health and wellbeing.

www.nhs.uk

What's Your Grief offers an online supportive community, resources and discussion about grief:

<https://whatsyourgrief.com>

The Good Grief Trust offers support and resources by others who have been bereaved:

www.thegoodgrieftrust.org

The LOSS Foundation offers online support group for anyone who has lost a loved one to coronavirus (and a separate online group for anyone who has lost a loved one to cancer) and has a short video describing the stages of grief - *Phases of Grief*

<https://thelossfoundation.org>

Apps

Child Bereavement UK offer an app for 11-25-year-olds who have been bereaved of someone important to them. It can also be used by friends, teachers, parents, and professionals who would like to know how to support bereaved young people.

Calm offer an app to help you manage your mood in the grief process with meditation.

Book references:

On Grief and Grieving - Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss - Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler (2014) ISBN-10: 1471139883

Meaning Reconstruction and the experience of loss - R. Neimeger, 2001 ISBN-10:1557987424

Continuing Bonds, New Understandings of Grief - D. Klass, 1996 ISBN-10:1560323396

The [Compassionate Friends](#) have also compiled a suggested reading list with books categorised for ease of reference.

'Grief never ends,

But it changes

It's a passage, not a place to stay.

Grief is not a sign of weakness, nor a lack of Faith, it is the price of Love'

(unknown)