



**University of
Nottingham**
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

University Counselling Service

Coping with Loss and Bereavement

What is grief?

During our lifetimes, we will all have to face experiences of change and loss. Sometimes this involves a great deal of emotional pain, when it can feel difficult to make sense of what is happening. Sometimes the experience of loss can affect our sense of who we are.

The death of someone close may be the most severe form of loss, but other losses can also affect us deeply. Divorce, separation, exam failure, leaving home or university, injury or ill health, the breakdown of a friendship or of a relationship, or the death of a pet might hold deep significance.

Coping with bereavement, or a major loss, can be particularly difficult when you are at university. Being away from home, at a time when you most need the support of family and friends, can leave you feeling isolated. You might feel that you do not know your new friends at university sufficiently well to share your emotions. You might think the people around you have not had similar experiences and will not be able to understand. In addition, the pressure of exams and deadlines can seem relentless.

How does grief affect people?

Grief is not a one-off event, but a natural and healthy process required in adjusting to loss. It is rather like going on a journey that you do not want to take. You may want to get it over and done with and get back to normal as quickly as possible, but it takes time. Loss can evoke all kinds of emotions and sometimes people worry that they are not feeling what they should be feeling. It is normal to experience a range of emotions, which can be unpredictable.

Shock

Sudden or unexpected loss may produce a state of shock as a person tries to manage an experience that might otherwise feel overwhelming:

- Physical and emotional pain
- Shivering, sweating and dizziness
- Palpitations, panic
- Sleep and appetite disturbance
- Fatigue
- Feeling dazed

Numbness

- Feeling disconnected from emotions
- Becoming withdrawn
- Feeling isolated
- Feeling unable to think, concentrate or make decisions

- Behaving in an apparently irrational way
- Using alcohol or drugs to cope

Denial

Denial is a normal response to loss, and it may pass quickly, or last for a long time.

The person may:

- Feel that “It can’t be true” and “This is not happening to me”
- Expect the person who has been lost to return
- Continue to behave as if nothing has happened
- Keep busy even to the point of exhaustion
- Feel that they can see or talk with the person who has gone

Alternatively, they may think constantly about the loss or the person they have lost.

Sometimes a grieving process is delayed, or pushed aside by other life events, or has happened at a time when the person is too young to process what has happened. Grief might then need to be worked through at a later stage, possibly years after the actual loss, and can feel bewildering - difficult to understand and articulate.

Anger

A common response to loss or death is anger. “Why didn’t someone do more?” “How could they leave me alone?” “Why me?” This can be very difficult for the grieving person who is feeling angry, and for others who might also be grieving but not feeling as angry. It is not unhealthy to feel anger and it can be helpful to talk about these feelings.

Guilt

A person may feel guilty and may be troubled by the thoughts of “If only...” These are common feelings for people who are dealing with loss and might need to be talked through with someone who has not been directly affected and has a more objective view of the situation.

Moving on

At the time, the person may feel, as if they will never get over it. Gradually, they will become less preoccupied with the loss. This can feel difficult – as if they are betraying the person who has died.

As time passes, anniversaries and milestones in the year become less acutely painful. Eventually they may find a place in their emotions for the loss that allows them to move on with their life. A significant loss or bereavement can produce profound changes in the self, in relationships with others, and with the world.

If you have experienced a loss or bereavement

- You may feel vulnerable and preoccupied, which can make it difficult to concentrate on tasks that you can usually do easily. It can be a relief to have support from family and friends and let them take care of you.
- There are many people in the university to whom you can turn for support. These may include your personal tutor or the Support and Wellbeing Officer in your school, or other support staff including the chaplains, the Residential Support Team and the Counselling Service.
- Funerals, rituals or finding ways to say goodbye, may help you accept the reality of the loss and can provide a comforting way of experiencing painful feelings.
- Allow yourself to feel sad, to talk about how you feel, to cry, and to dream. These are all natural ways of making sense of your loss.
- If you are having trouble sleeping, rather than lie in bed fretful and awake, try making a hot drink, reading, or listening to a podcast or some soothing music.
- Ask friends and family for what you want. This may be company, a meal, to be left alone, to talk, to listen, or to just be there. Sometimes others do not know what to say or do and they may be glad to have some guidance.
- Accept that you will be in emotional turmoil. Try not to make any major decisions about moving away, giving up on your course, or ending a relationship while you are in the early stages of grief.
- Let your personal tutor, the Support and Wellbeing Officer or another member of staff in your department or school know if your difficulties are affecting your academic work, so they can help you with arrangements for course work or exams.
- The Support and Wellbeing Team can also help with extenuating circumstances applications and provide practical support.
- There are various organisations providing advice, information, and support and there is some useful information on the internet and in self-help books.

How can you help someone else?

- Listening, without interrupting and without trying to offer solutions is often of value to the person who is grieving.
- Allow the person to express themselves. They may want to cry or to be angry. This may feel very uncomfortable for you, but try not to feel you must distract them or cheer them up.
- Ask the person what they find helpful and respect their wishes, if this is possible.
- The person may initially reject your offer of help and may seem to be coping well. It often takes time for the effects of loss to affect someone, so do not be put off from offering your support again later.
- Loss can take a long time to come to terms with and the immediate support and attention will subside, which might leave the person feeling abandoned. Small acts of support, sustained over a longer period, are of value.
- If the person seems to be struggling or stuck with their grief, or if you are concerned about them, you may want to encourage them to seek help.

If the person is talking about suicide, either directly or in vague terms, take it seriously and encourage them to see their doctor. If this is not possible, speak to someone who can intervene. This may be a member of staff in your hall or department or school. Cripps Health Centre can provide same day mental health support if necessary. You can also talk to the Support and Wellbeing Officers who will advise if your friend needs specialist support.

When is specialist help appropriate?

Grief is a natural process and people have tremendous inner resources, which help them to cope with loss and death even in traumatic circumstances. Most people get through with the support of friends and family. Support staff at the university may also be able to help.

However, you may be away from home or not want to worry people you know, or you may feel they will not understand. Perhaps you would simply prefer to talk with someone who is impartial and not part of your life.

Occasionally, people feel stuck in their experience of grief. Maybe the loss rekindles past hurt. You may continue to be intensely distressed after the event, or continue to have problems with sleeping, with work or relationships, with alcohol and drugs. You

might find that you are thinking of suicide as a way out. In these situations, you may need to find some professional help to work with these difficult feelings.

There are resources at the university and in Nottingham, where you will find information, advice, support, and treatment. The resources listed in this guide will help you to consider what approach might best suit you and assist you in contacting the appropriate service.