



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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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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About this booklet

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's about finding ways to live with the loss.

Everyone's experience of grief is unique, so this booklet offers a general guide only. Although intended to be helpful, some sections may stir up a range of feelings. 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 suggest some 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. You can also visit your local Cancer Council website (see back cover).



**Cancer
Council
13 11 20**

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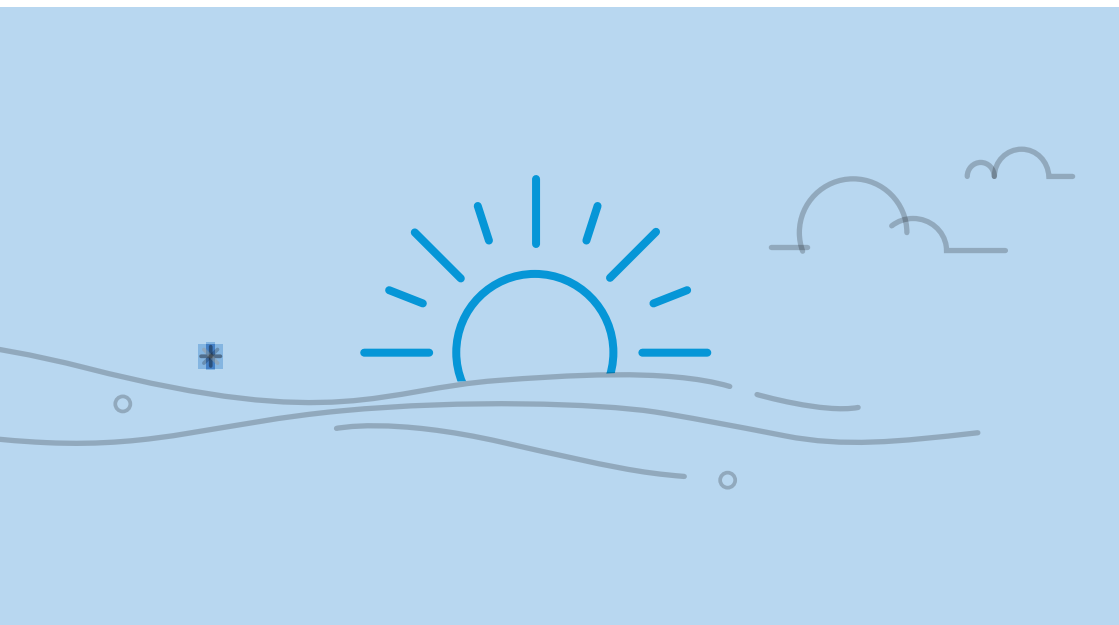
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What is grief?

Grief is a normal response to any loss. The process of grieving is one of adjusting to life without the person who has died. There is no set time frame and the grief may never go away completely. 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 after any loss in your life. Sometimes this is when someone close to you dies. Other times it may be 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. It can, however, be a confusing and overwhelming experience that causes 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
- your gender
- your personality
- your relationship with the person who died
- the circumstances of the death (see page 7)
- 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.

Bereavement, grief and mourning

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

Sometimes people find that a death brings back memories of other losses. They may feel they are grieving those losses all over again.

Family members grieving for the same person may not mourn in the same way. This is normal. Some people express grief through crying and talking, outbursts of anger or keeping busy. Other people prefer to be quiet or shut the world out.

People may behave differently at different times – and their behaviour may be unpredictable. It is important to respect individual ways of grieving and not take reactions personally. This can be an opportunity to offer support to each other and understand other ways of grieving.

People who tend to cope well during tough times often find that they show this resilience after a loss. This does not mean they are not grieving, but that they already have coping strategies. Thinking about what has helped you deal with stressful events in the past may help you now. Or you may find that your usual coping mechanisms are not enough to help you cope with your current loss, and you need to find new coping strategies (see pages 13–21 for some suggestions).

Circumstances can affect your grief

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

An expected death – Although it is difficult to know that a loved one is dying, you may have been able to spend time with them, talking about their death and what it will mean. This is often helpful, even though once the person dies you may feel you could never have been truly prepared for their death. If the person died at peace, having said and done what they wanted to, you might find you draw comfort from that peace. You may find you can accept the loss, even if you feel sad.

An unexpected death – If the death was very sudden, or in traumatic circumstances, you may feel that things were left unfinished or unsaid. You may not have been able to be with the person when they died, or things may not have gone as you wished. You may also be managing symptoms of shock and disbelief.

Your relationship – Grief may be more challenging if you had a difficult relationship with the person who died, but still cared about them. If other people didn't know about or understand your relationship with the person who died, you may feel very alone in your grief.

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 time and 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 without them?” It is natural to try to picture the future without your loved one. This doesn’t mean you are a bad or uncaring person.

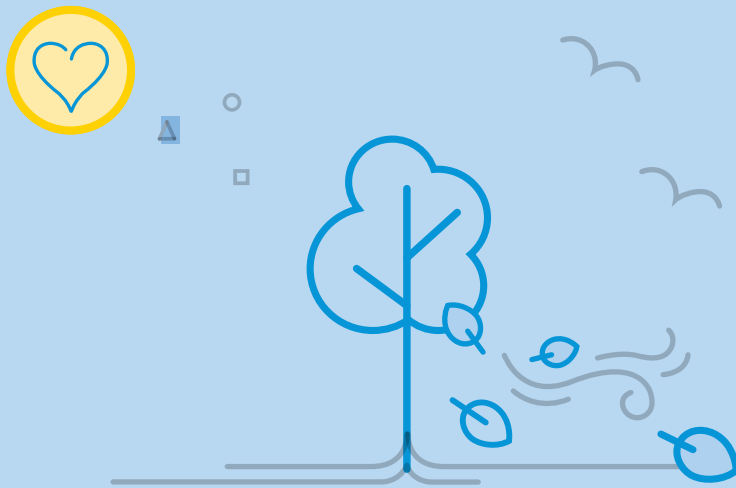
Even when a death is expected, it may still feel like a great shock. This can be especially hard if the person has rallied again and again in the past, and you may have thought that they would always “pull through” somehow. Sometimes the experience of anticipating the death makes you become closer to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

Some people are surprised by how little they feel or by having 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 the loss or did not really care for the person. Other people don’t feel greatly affected by their loss at the time of the death, but find it harder as time passes. Again, this is quite common.

► You may also find our *Living with Advanced Cancer*, *Understanding Palliative Care* and *Facing End of Life* booklets helpful.

Preparatory grief

The person who is dying may experience preparatory grief as they process the fact that their life will end soon. They may grieve the loss of their health, as well as the things they may miss out on, such as an upcoming family wedding or grandchild. They might feel anger about what is happening to them, or they could become very motivated to organise and plan things ahead of their death. They may find it worthwhile to talk with someone on their palliative care team, call Cancer Council **13 11 20** or read our *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 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

You may feel a range of strong emotions, such as sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety and depression. 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. Physical reactions to grief can also affect your emotions (see page 16).

Try to develop a sense of your personal coping style (the things that work best for you). Remembering how you have coped with difficult situations in the past may help you feel more able to cope now with your emotions. Explaining how you are feeling to family and friends can help them understand 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 or you've had a shock. 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 emotional numbness. It 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 the sadness will never go away. You may long to see the person so much you don't know what to do with yourself. You may find it hard to control the crying, with tears 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.

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 obvious reason.

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 and help clear their mind.



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 or develop greater compassion for others.

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.

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. When a person dies, we are often expected to focus on their good points and not criticise them – but a cancer journey is bound to show all sides of people. 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 about their care, or you might feel that there are things you left unsaid. Try to remember that no-one is perfect. Often, talking about your feelings 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. Light-hearted or joyful moments can help to counter the lack of control that grief can bring and help you release some of the physical tension that often comes with grief.



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 behave in 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 better, but your adjustment to the loss is likely to be gradual and may take longer than you and others expect. (See page 28 for when to seek professional help.)
- If you feel angry, find safe ways to show your anger – do some exercise, write, paint or draw. Think about the ways you've coped with anger in the past. What worked? Once you have released some anger, do something relaxing to help calm yourself.
- Research has shown that regular physical activity can help with feelings of anger, stress, anxiety and depression.
- Try reflecting on your caring role – you may feel you are stronger than you realised and proud of how you have supported someone as they were dying. Even the small things you did showed how much you cared.
- Forgive yourself for the things you didn't say or do. Some people find it helps to write a letter to the person who died and then tear it up or burn it. Other people want to keep the letter as a reminder of the things they loved about the person who died.
- Forgive yourself for any wrongs you feel you did to the person who died. People often feel that they should not have become frustrated or "snapped" that one time when they were tired. Understand that becoming tired and short is fairly common when caring for someone.
- Take your mind off your grief for a little while – read a book, play a game online with a friend or watch a movie.
- Try complementary therapies, such as meditation or art therapy, to help you manage your feelings.

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, 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 worried even if you can't put your finger on any particular worry. Even day-to-day activities such as leaving the house to go for a walk, doing the shopping or going back to work can fill some people with fear.

Depression and despair

When the reality of the loss sinks in, you may find your sadness overwhelming or feel like your life has lost meaning. A loss of enjoyment in life and a lack of direction are common, especially for people who take a long time to come to terms with the loss.

Managing your emotions

If any of the feelings described in this section continue for what you consider an extended period of time, it may be a sign of depression. If these feelings are making it hard for you to cope with daily life, talk to your general practitioner (GP), a grief counsellor or Cancer Council 13 11 20.

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 professional help from a specialist grief counsellor. Lifeline provides 24-hour crisis support on 13 11 14. The services listed on page 37 also offer support.

Thoughts

Grief often affects the ability to think clearly. Because of the intensity or unpredictable nature of your grief, you may find it hard to get your thoughts in order or focus for long periods. You may even wonder if you are losing your mind.

Many people find they become confused and forgetful. Even getting a simple task done seems like a big hurdle. You may feel very indecisive or you might make impulsive decisions. If you can, it is better 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 or using a calendar 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 or less demanding tasks. 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 in your body. This can make you feel anxious or make it hard to switch off anxiety. Other physical responses to grief include headaches, nausea, unexplained aches and pains, and a tight feeling in the chest and stomach. Grief can also affect your immune system and you may be more likely to catch infections.

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.

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, which can leave them feeling even more exhausted. Others struggle to fall asleep and/or stay asleep, or have long periods of being awake during the night.

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 – It is common to have either little appetite or an increased appetite after the death of a loved one. Some people also experience an upset stomach, which may last for some time or come and go. Changes to your appetite or weight can make you feel distressed.



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, playing a team sport or even dancing. Housework such as vacuuming or mowing the lawn can help if you're feeling tense.
- Try to maintain regular sleeping hours by going to bed and getting up at set times.
- Don't panic if it is hard to sleep. Get out of bed and do something relaxing, such as reading a book, listening to music or a podcast, or having a bath, and then try going to bed again. Practise slow, deep breathing while in bed – this will slow down the mind and allow the body to relax.
- Check with your doctor before trying sleeping tablets or natural sleep remedies.
- Talk to your doctor about seeing a counsellor or psychologist for some simple strategies (such as relaxation exercises or tracking and adjusting your night-time routines) if your lack of sleep is ongoing.
- Limit caffeine and alcohol. This will help you sleep better and improve your general wellbeing.
- Encourage yourself to eat a healthy, balanced diet. If you have lost your appetite and are barely eating, try to snack frequently on nourishing, easily digested foods.
- You may find you are eating unhealthy foods or eating large amounts of food 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.
- Try meditation or relaxation to help with the anxiety. There are many recordings, videos and smartphone apps to guide you through different exercises. Listen to Cancer Council's online relaxation and meditation recordings or call **13 11 20** to request copies.

Behaviours

You may behave differently while you are grieving. Some people keep themselves extremely busy, while others may sleep a lot or find it hard to complete even simple tasks. Many people avoid reminders of the person who died because of the intense emotions. These different behaviours are normal, but can make it difficult to settle into a routine.

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



Tips for establishing helpful behaviours

- Try to live day to day rather than looking too far ahead or looking backwards.
- Balance rest and activity. Set small goals and congratulate yourself when you reach them.
- Have an alternative plan ready in case you're not up for a planned activity.
- Try not to judge yourself too harshly. Your usual expectations for yourself may be unrealistic while you are grieving.
- 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 are concerned about your use of alcohol or other drugs, ask your GP for help and support.
- Have regular treats, e.g. a bunch of flowers, a massage, listening to music, or visiting a barber or coffee shop.

Beliefs

Your beliefs may be challenged as you question the meaning of the loss. Some people find comfort and strength in their spiritual beliefs and in connecting with other members of their faith. Other people feel abandoned or betrayed 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.

You may find that your search for answers eventually leads to spiritual growth. Whatever your beliefs, it can be helpful to explore questions about life and death with someone you trust, such as a family member, friend or counsellor.



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 or culture. 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 – It is common to feel a sense of closeness to the person who died. People often report that they see, sense or dream about the person who died, especially in the first few weeks. Some people find this deeply comforting; others find it frightening and unexpected.

Loneliness – People often feel intensely lonely. If your caring role was a major part of your life, you may feel lost without it. It can take time to settle into a new routine. After some time has passed, you may still feel your loss very strongly, but everyone around you may seem to have moved on. This can be hurtful and 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 you may feel 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 – Strong family feelings and difficulties often arise at the time of death and afterwards. 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. There may also be conflicts over the person's will and who gets their treasured possessions.



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 and be understanding, or ask your GP about bereavement counselling.
- Read firsthand accounts of other people who have experienced grief. Find stories online, through bereavement support groups or at your local library.
- Join a support or grief group if there is one available or consider an online group. See page 36 for more information or 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 to talk about that time with the people who were there with you.
- Ask others for assistance – it will make them feel valued and useful.
- Take small steps to re-enter your social circle. At first, mix with people you feel comfortable with and who understand you well. Even if you are just sitting and listening, you are connecting to others.
- When you feel ready, try to rejoin a social group or take up a new activity. 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 get easier with time, but asking someone to come along with you can make the initial steps feel less daunting.
- Aim to be gentle and forgiving with others and yourself. Grieving family members and friends may seem angry or irrational. Try not to take it personally. Keep in mind that you are vulnerable too and have the right to protect yourself. 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 – there is no set time frame. Giving yourself time to grieve 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 surrounded by family and friends, and kept busy making arrangements. 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.

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 could share this booklet with them so that they develop a better understanding of grief and how to support you. 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.

“ 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*

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. With time, they find it does get easier, although milestones and anniversaries might always trigger some sadness and worry.

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. Some people find comfort in visiting the burial site or another significant location, or in gathering with family in remembrance of their loved one.

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. Sometimes you may forget that the person has died, and when you suddenly remember, you may be shocked all over again.

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. See *The experience of grief* on pages 9–21 for ideas on how to help yourself through these times.

“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

The up-and-down nature of grief

People sometimes speak of stages of grief, but grief isn't something you begin one day, move through step by step, and come out from unchanged. Rather, the stages reflect a range of emotions that you may move between. For most people, grief involves ups and downs. They may move between focusing on the loss (crying, missing the person, feeling pain) and going 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 slowly learn to cope better with their loss. Don't worry if it seems like two steps forward and one step back. It is common to have feelings of intense grief again and again. The experience is often described as like being on a roller-coaster, but it can also be thought of as a series of cycles or waves.

Will it always be this hard?

When people find grief particularly difficult, they sometimes worry they will be unhappy for the rest of their life. 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.



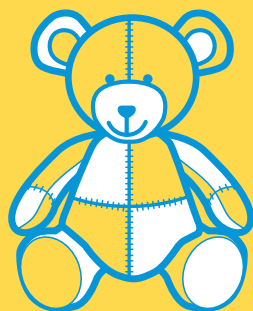
Plant a tree

or flowerbed, or put a memorial plaque in a place that mattered to the person or in your garden.



Create an artwork

in their memory, or use some of their clothing to create a quilt, cushion cover or memory bear.



Frame a photo

of the person and display it.



Make a memory box

filled with keepsakes. You could include 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.



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.



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

who has died. You may feel uncomfortable at first but sharing your memories with other people can help you cope.

Establish an award

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



Remember goals

you shared and consider if you want to 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 – it is normal that some days are much harder than others. After a few weeks, you will usually start to notice 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, they may 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 other 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
- are thinking 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 harmful or 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. 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 death 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 and it is a natural process. Be patient and give them time to grieve. 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.

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 sad and full of despair. These ups and downs are a natural part of grief.

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, such as shopping and cooking, is how a person manages their grief.

Respond in the way you think is right for the relationship you have with the person. Sometimes this might be with a caring smile or offering a hug, other times it might be taking the time to listen. 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.

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. Your experiences may 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. Avoid saying things like “It was for the best” or “Their suffering is now over”. To empathise without suggesting you know exactly how they feel, you could say, “You’re in my thoughts, how are you feeling today?” Or you could share a story about the person who died.

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. Follow their lead in how they want to express their feelings.

Share memories

Talk about the person who died. Don't be afraid that it will be upsetting. The person you are supporting won't have forgotten about their loss. Friends and family members may use different names for the person who died – ask what name they would like you to use.



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.



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, rather 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 and headaches 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. Young children in particular will often have lots of questions about “who will do what now” and “how will things work” that will emerge as time goes on.

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 (as much as they want to)
- 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, but don't be surprised if they don't want to talk when you do, and don't push if they prefer not to talk
- to keep up school, activities and regular routines
- encouragement to cherish their memories and talk about the person
- to know that they were and are loved.

The ways children understand death and experience grief change 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 thoughts and feelings as much as they want to. Teenagers may find it hard to talk to you or show how they feel. Provide 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 you provide support. Reach out to extended family, friends, the school community and grief counsellors to make sure your children are well supported.

Find out more about children and grief

Cancer Council's *Talking to Kids About Cancer* booklet explains how children of different ages understand cancer, illness and death, and answers some of the common questions kids ask. Our *Cancer in the School Community* booklet includes information for

school staff when a member of the school community has died from cancer. For copies, call **13 11 20** or visit your local Cancer Council website. 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. This may be from your family, friends or others in your social circle, particularly those who supported you while the person was dying. 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 experiences similar to yours 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, even if you don’t feel like opening up right away, feel shy, or worry that you don’t have anything worthwhile to say. Over time, most people get used to peer support and find it helpful.

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, which often meet 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

Many people cope with grief with the support of family and friends and sometimes a support group. 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 to the natural course of grief. You can also 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.

Finding help

- Call Cancer Council **13 11 20** or ask your palliative care team for help accessing bereavement counselling.
- For confidential phone counselling, call GriefLine on **1300 845 745**, Beyond Blue on **1300 22 4636**, or MensLine Australia on **1300 78 99 78**. Children and young adults can call the Kids Helpline on **1800 55 1800**. See the next page for web addresses.
- If you need crisis support or are feeling suicidal, contact Lifeline **13 11 14**.

Useful websites

You can find many useful resources online, but not all websites are reliable. These websites are good sources of support and information.

Australian

Cancer Council Australia	cancer.org.au
Cancer Council Online Community	cancercouncil.com.au/OC
CanTeen Australia	canteen.org.au
Carer Gateway	carergateway.gov.au
Carers Australia	carersaustralia.com.au
Department of Health	health.gov.au
Palliative Care Australia	palliativecare.org.au
Redkite	redkite.org.au

Grief-specific websites

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement	grief.org.au
Bereavement Care Centre	bereavementcare.com.au
Good Grief	goodgrief.org.au
GriefLink	grieflink.org.au

Telephone and online counselling services

Beyond Blue	beyondblue.org.au
GriefLine	griefline.org.au
Kids Helpline	kidshelpline.com.au
Lifeline Australia	lifeline.org.au
MensLine Australia	mensline.org.au

International

American Cancer Society	cancer.org
Macmillan Cancer Support (UK)	macmillan.org.uk
National Cancer Institute (US)	cancer.gov
What's Your Grief (US)	whatsyourgrief.com



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. In most cases the cancer has spread to other parts of the body (secondary or metastatic cancer).

anticipatory grief

Grief that occurs before an impending loss. It affects the family members and friends of the person who is dying.

anxiety

Strong feelings of fear, dread, worry or unease. Physical symptoms can include racing heart, shallow/fast breathing, shaking, nausea and agitation.

bereavement

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

carer/caregiver

A person providing unpaid care to someone who needs this assistance because of a disease such as cancer, a disability, mental illness or ageing.

complementary therapy

Any of a range of therapies used alongside conventional treatment to improve general health, wellbeing and quality of life.

depression

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

diagnosis

The identification and naming of a person's disease.

distress

Emotional, mental, social or spiritual suffering. Distress may range from feelings of vulnerability and sadness to stronger feelings of depression, anxiety, panic and isolation.

grief

The way we process and adjust 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 to 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, emotional, cultural, spiritual and social needs.

preparatory grief

Grief that occurs when someone knows that they are dying.

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 other Pink events, 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.

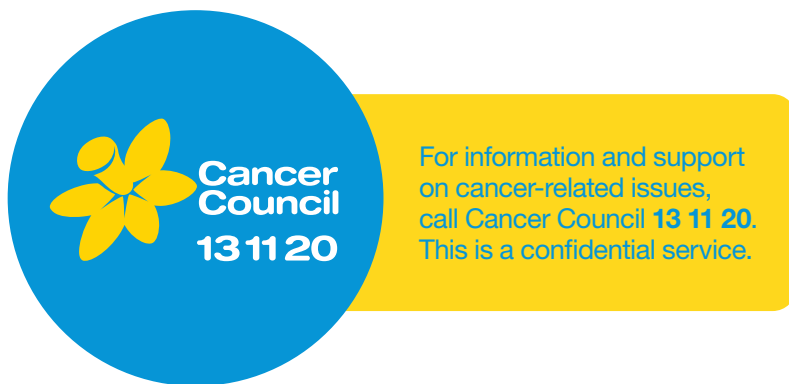
Cancer Council services and programs vary in each area.

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, you can 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

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cancer.org.au

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To support Cancer Council, call your local Cancer Council or visit your local website.*