

# A guide for supporting yourself and others with grief



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"There was a youth worker, she was around my age, and she knew exactly what I was going through. Really helpful. My family as well, they were very supportive when I lost my grandfather. It was the people who weren't necessarily trained to fix you, but the people who were always there, who understand me."

**Together Through Tough Times**  
research 2021 (co-operative.coop/  
campaigning/mental-wellbeing)

## Introduction

Bereavement will affect us all in some way during our lifetime and many of us have been affected during the pandemic. It can make you feel isolated, confused, and like nobody understands. Even supporting someone who is grieving is a task many of us feel unprepared to do. We don't know what to say, we worry about upsetting them, and sometimes we might avoid speaking to them or bringing up the loss.

The way we process grief can differ from person to person. For me, it really helped to talk and be around people, while I appreciate that others prefer to spend time alone. Most of us choose support from friends and family to deal with our grief. Of course if you're struggling and need more help, don't be afraid to reach out to charities like Cruse Bereavement Support (cruse.org.uk) and Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland (crusescotland.org.uk) for support services, such as counselling and expert advice.

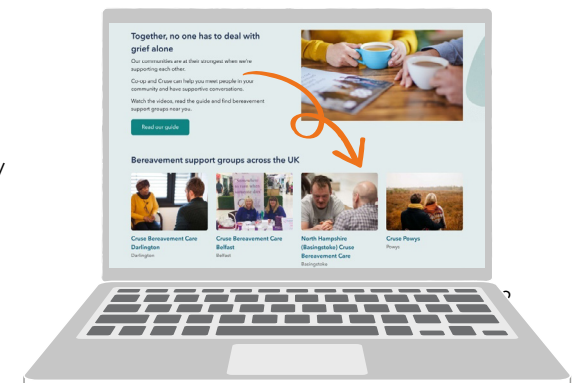
Friends and family were my first port of call when faced with bereavement. Then it was broader community support through groups and activities that really helped me in learning to support myself again and reconnect with the world around me. Co-operate is a fantastic resource to discover what's happening in your area (coop.co.uk/griefsupport). From groups you can join to make new connections and find new routines to ones that specifically support people with grief, it has something for everyone.

Co-op has partnered with the UK's largest bereavement charity Cruse

Bereavement Support (cruse.org.uk) and Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland (crusescotland.org.uk) to mobilise communities to support the bereaved. This guide brings together expert advice from Cruse and draws on the experiences of people from the community on the things they have learnt about grief. It includes advice on what grief is and what it may look like, how you can support yourself and others through a bereavement, and where you can get further support.

The advice is here to help you have conversations about grief with more confidence, and help you understand a bit more about what is happening to you or the person you want to support. The main thing I hope you take from this guide is that there is no 'right' way to grieve. I hope it will help you and your community support one another at one of the most difficult times in our lives. Bereavement will affect us all in ses.

**Ruth Crane,**  
**Co-op Member Pioneer Co-ordinator**

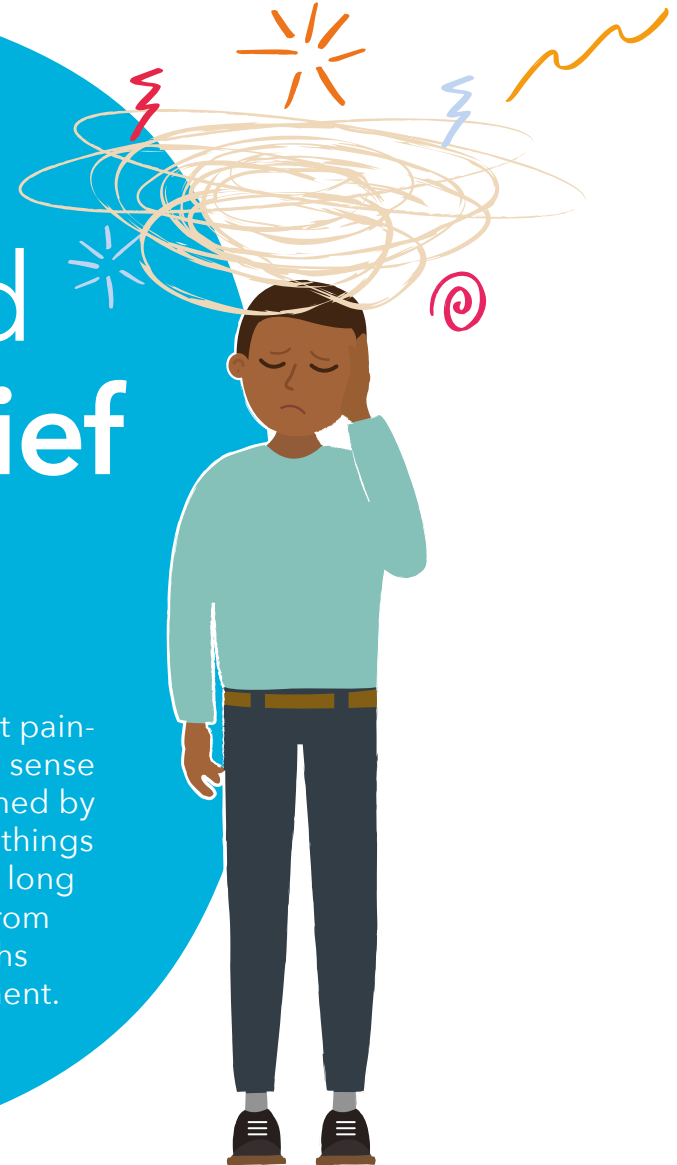




# Debunking the myths and normalising grief



When someone close to you dies, it can be the most painful thing you will experience. It can be hard to make sense of what has happened, and you may feel overwhelmed by a range of emotions and thoughts. We hear a lot of things about grief, what we're supposed to feel, and how long it's supposed to last, but the truth is, it can vary from person to person. Here are some common myths you'll likely encounter when faced with bereavement.



# Debunking the myths and normalising grief

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## ❌ MYTH

Grief passes after a certain time period

## ✅ FACT

There is no set timeline for grief

You may wonder, 'How long will I be grieving?' and friends may ask if things are 'getting back to normal' after a while. There is no set timeline for how long someone will grieve - and again, that is normal and will depend on your individual circumstances. In general, it is probably longer than you think.

## ❌ MYTH

The stages of grief are the same for everyone

## ✅ FACT

Grief is a journey that varies from person to person

The stages in which you experience grief are normal for you, even if it's different to other friends or family who are also affected by the loss. When someone close to you dies, it can be like falling over the edge of a cliff or waterfall - where suddenly there is nothing firm beneath your feet. Feelings can change from moment to moment, like you are caught in a whirlpool of emotions.

## ❌ MYTH

Talking about it makes it worse

## ✅ FACT

Talking helps to process your grief

Some people will want to talk about their grief, and others may need time alone. It is common to go over and over events, and you may see the person or feel their presence. Talking, whether it's to a counsellor or someone close to you, can help you come to terms with your loss. It can help you grieve in a healthy way.

## ❌ MYTH

You have to cry to grieve properly

## ✅ FACT

There are no right and wrong ways to grieve

There is no 'right way' to grieve. Sometimes grief manifests as crying and sometimes it doesn't. A death can bring up a range of emotions, and none of them should be seen as a sign of weakness. The way you grieve will depend on a range of circumstances, such as who died, your relationship to them, how they died, and what support you have.

## ❌ MYTH

Life goes back to normal after a bereavement

## ✅ FACT

Grief can revisit you at any time

Certain aspects of normality will return with time, but grief can reappear at any time. It may be an anniversary, a piece of music, finding an object that belongs to your loved one, or another bereavement that reminds you, and you may feel a wave of grief come over you again.

## ❌ MYTH

You shouldn't feel relieved or angry after a death

## ✅ FACT

It's OK to feel these emotions

It's normal to experience different emotions - sadness, anxiety, fear, guilt, and regret are common - although not everyone will show them in the same way. Some emotions are harder to talk about than others. When someone has been ill, or you have been their carer, you may feel relief when they die, as they are no longer in pain. But this sometimes gets mixed with guilt; it may not feel OK to say you are relieved. Anger is very common - anger at yourself, or at the person who died.

## ❌ MYTH

You need a counsellor to help deal with grief

## ✅ FACT

You have a huge support network waiting to help

Getting formal support from a counsellor is highly valuable when processing grief, but it isn't the only form of support available. You have a wide range of support options around you. Talking and spending time with friends and family is a good place to begin. Reaching out and getting involved in the wider community can also help you find calmer water again. Visit Co-operate ([coop.co.uk/griefsupport](http://coop.co.uk/griefsupport)) to find out what is happening in your area. If more formal support is what you're looking for, Cruse Bereavement Support ([cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)) and Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland ([crusescotland.org.uk](http://crusescotland.org.uk)) can offer professional advice, support groups and signposting for those struggling.





# Self care: remembering to take care of yourself

After a bereavement, looking after yourself can be the last thing on your mind. When someone close to you dies, it's very common to feel overwhelmed. I remember experiencing a range of emotions after a loss. One moment it was sadness, the next it was anger that turned into guilt and regret – it's important to understand that all of those are normal.

You may find it difficult to think straight or do even simple tasks that you managed easily before. For me, sometimes getting out of bed, getting dressed and having breakfast felt like a huge task. When you're grieving, it's more important than ever to find ways to look after yourself.

*Ruth Crane, Co-op Member Pioneer Co-ordinator*

# Self care: remembering to take care of yourself

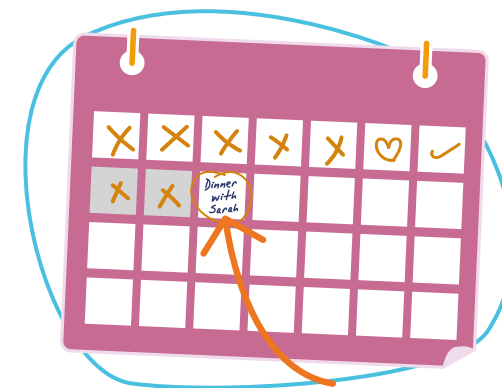
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It's normal to have days where you need more help and support, so remember to treat yourself more kindly on these days. Some ways you can support yourself can be short, 'in the moment' things like taking a minute to focus on your breathing. Others work best when you build them into your daily routine, like eating, sleeping and staying connected to people.



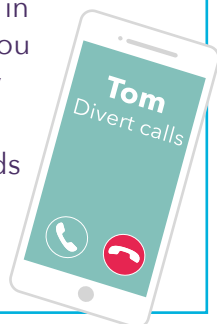
## Know your normal



The key to self-care is knowing what is normal for you and noticing changes.

### Things to look out for are:

- sleeping pattern changes
- mood changes: irritability, low mood or anxiety
- increased stress levels
- physical tiredness
- loss of interest in doing things you normally enjoy
- isolation: avoiding friends and family



### Talk to someone

- **Stay connected** and share your feelings and concerns with friends and family, even over the phone, internet, or social media.
- **Share memories and stories** of times you spent together. This can be comforting.
- **Spend time with people** in your local community, preferred faith or a spiritual leader.

### Connect to others

- **Join a group or activity** that isn't bereavement-related, such as a local gardening group, book club or coffee morning, for a feeling of routine and normality.
- **Learn a new skill** to keep your mind focussed, or become part of a group project, such as cooking or carpentry, to gain a sense of purpose.

### Develop a helpful mindset

- **Give yourself permission to grieve**

in your own way. Accept that grieving can be tiring, and it's OK to take time.

- **Focus on what you can manage** and accept that you are doing your best. Some days you will have more energy than others, and that's normal, so take one day at a time.
- **Write down your thoughts and feelings** in a journal to help you process what you're experiencing.

### Keep up a routine

- **Focus on the basics** of sleeping, eating and exercising and staying connected to others.
- **Do small things regularly** rather than setting yourself huge goals. Even simple tasks can help you feel a sense of achievement.

### Try to keep energy levels up

- **Eat when you can.** Your body and your mind need fuel, so even when you don't feel like eating, try to keep your

energy levels up.

- **Try to get some sleep.** It's harder to think straight when you are tired.

### Add exercise to your day

- **Get moving.** Even gentle movement like a short walk in the fresh air can improve your sleep and your physical wellbeing.
- **Do regular exercise** to help you relax and improve your mood.

### Reach out for help

- **Do not isolate.** Remember you do not have to be alone with your grief.
- **Join community support groups or speak to an expert.** Organisations such as Cruse Bereavement Support ([cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)) and Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland ([crusescotland.org.uk](http://crusescotland.org.uk)) are there to listen, help you understand and come to terms with your grief.

# Support for others



How are you? xx



Dinner  
with  
Sarah

It can be difficult to know the best way to support a grieving friend or relative. In the past, I've worried about saying the wrong thing and upsetting them more. On the other hand, if you don't say anything, they may feel quite isolated. From my own experience of bereavement, I've felt better knowing someone is there. They don't have to say much, but simply asking about my day or having a conversation made me feel less alone. It's normal to feel awkward, but don't let your worries and fears stop you from being there for someone close to you.

*Ruth Crane, Co-op Member Pioneer Co-ordinator*



# Support for others: how you can help

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## Listen

One of the most helpful things you can do for someone who is bereaved is to listen. Give them space to go over what has happened or recall memories of the person. Give them time to speak, and don't rush to offer solutions or share your own experiences. Just being there is valuable to them.

## Find the right words

Something as simple as, 'I'm sorry to hear that your dad died' can help reassure people. Being genuine and kind can help

you find the right words. If you knew the person who died, share your memories or bring up their name. It can be heart-breaking for someone who is bereaved when people stop mentioning the person who died.

## Avoid clichés

Clichés can sound a bit impersonal; things like 'stay strong' and 'he's in a better place' are best avoided. They can come across as dismissive of someone's feelings, or show a lack of understanding of the person's beliefs if they are different from your own.

## Accept that they are upset

However hard you try, someone dealing with a bereavement may be upset by something you have said. You probably didn't say anything 'wrong', it just wasn't what they wanted to hear at that time. Remind yourself that they are grieving, and accept that this can happen.

## Remember important dates

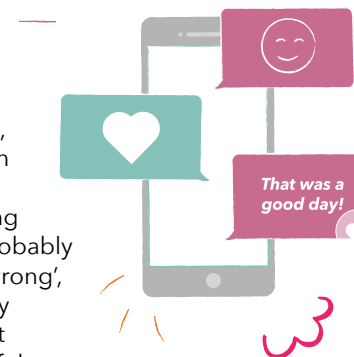
Anniversaries, birthdays, and special days like Mother's Day or Valentine's Day can be particularly painful. Make a note of these dates, and be aware that they may need a little extra support around these times.

## Offer practical help

When people are grieving, they may find it difficult to make decisions. If you say, 'Let me know if I can do anything', this adds to their list of decisions, which can be overwhelming. Instead try to make specific suggestions, e.g. 'How about if I pick the children up from school today?'

## Consider their situation

Many factors impact how someone deals with and processes grief. A difficult relationship with the person who died could make their feelings confusing. Health, disability, gender and sexuality may affect how they grieve. Also take into account that different cultures have different traditions, so find out how best to support them.



## Look after yourself

It can be very emotional and tiring to support someone at such a difficult time. Remember that you can help most if you keep yourself strong, so talk about how you feel and ask for help if you need it.

## Suggest reaching out to their support network

Remind your grieving loved one of the support network of family and friends they have around them. Getting involved in the community through groups, lunch meet-ups and workshops can provide a sense of connection and routine, as well as help them meet new people. Co-operate (coop.co.uk/griefsupport) can help you find things in your area.

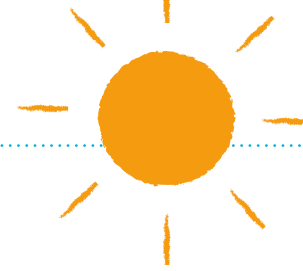
## Find out if they need more support

Sometimes a professional ear can help. **Cruse Bereavement Support** (cruse.org.uk) and **Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland** (crusescotland.org.uk) offers one-to-one grief support with trained volunteers, peer support groups, and advice for specific circumstances your loved one may be going through. If you are concerned about suicidal thoughts, you can also contact the **Samaritans** (samaritans.org or call 116 123 for free).





# Supporting children who are bereaved



**It's natural to want to protect children as much as possible when it comes to bereavement. We often have a fear that being honest or talking frankly about death will upset them more, but it is important that they know what has happened.**

## What to say to children

Use simple, age-appropriate language but also use correct terms like dead or died. Avoid using euphemisms, like 'lost' or 'gone to sleep'. Children can be very literal, and euphemisms can be confusing.

You may need to explain what death is to a child: 'When someone dies, their body stops working,' or 'It's not like sleeping. This time they will never come back.' Reassure them that it is a normal part of life, and answer their questions.

## Age-related understanding

Children's reactions to a bereavement will vary depending on their age and, in part, to their understanding of death.

Under the age of six, children do not see death as permanent, so they may still expect the person who died to come back.

Magical thinking is common. They may think that something they have said or done, or not said or done, is directly responsible for their loved one's death. It is important to reassure them that this is not the case, and that they are safe.

## Help them express their feelings

Children may not always have the language to tell you how they are feeling. Be

aware that they may express their emotions in their behaviour rather than with words.

They may find it easier to open up while doing something else, e.g. walking or playing a game. Children are often good at expressing themselves creatively. Drawing or making things, such as creating a memory jar or box, can be ways of helping them express thoughts and feelings.

## Share what you are feeling

We often try to mask our feelings and 'put on a brave face' in front of children. However, children can be very intuitive, and will pick up on things like tension and anxiety. It is better to share how you are feeling, which 'gives them permission' to share how they feel with you.

## Funerals

You may worry about whether it's OK for a child to go to a funeral or cremation. The best solution is to ask what they want to do. Attending can help them understand the finality of death.

If they go, prepare them beforehand for what will happen, and assure them that it's OK if they and others are upset. Let them know they can change their mind about going, right up to the last minute. Make plans for someone to look after them or take them outside if they get upset, as you will be grieving yourself.

If they don't go, there are other ways to include them. You can tell them about what happened and, when it feels right, suggest that they visit the grave or a specific memorial place.



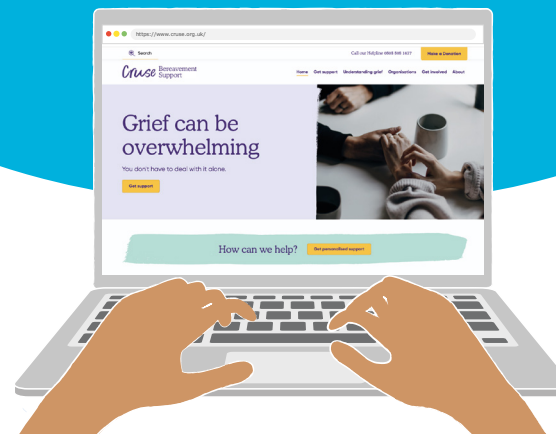
Co-op Funeralcare's Amy and Tom books can help children understand grief. You can pick one up for free from your local funeral home.

# Where to go for more help



Prolonged grief can lead to both physical and mental health problems, loneliness and isolation. If you recognise that you're struggling, or see that someone else could do with some extra help, support is available from organisations such as Cruse Bereavement Support ([cruse.org.uk](https://www.cruse.org.uk)) and Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland ([crusescotland.org.uk](https://crusescotland.org.uk)). Don't be afraid to reach out for support. Once you've made that first step, you may find it easier than you think.

***Andy Langford, Clinical Director, Cruse Bereavement Support***



# Where to go for more help



## Know the signs

Grief can leave you feeling stuck and unable to lead your life. Here are some signs that you may need more help:

- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability, anger, worry, fear or sadness
- Avoiding friends and social activities 
- Losing interest in what you used to love
- Feeling tired and low energy, changes in sleeping habits
- Being less interested in your appearance or personal care
- Struggling to carry out normal daily activities or handle daily problems and stress
- Changes in work performance 

**Grieving is a normal experience, and time plays an important part in the healing process. For many of us, it never truly goes away; but when it becomes much longer-term and starts to impact how you are able to lead your life, it can be time to seek further support.**

**Sometimes, those closest to us are struggling themselves following a bereavement. If you or someone you know is finding it hard to cope, there is a lot of support available.**

### Support in your community

Many of us face loneliness or isolation following a bereavement, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sometimes we just need to reconnect with those around us. Co-op's online community centre, Co-operate ([coop.co.uk/griefsupport](https://coop.co.uk/griefsupport)), Co-op's online community centre, can help you find local

groups, places to go or ways to connect online. Join a coffee morning, gardening group or walking club.

### Seeking further help

Many of us are reluctant to ask for help, but often it's the best thing we can do. Once you have made the initial contact, it is usually easier than you think. Cruse Bereavement Support ([cruse.org.uk](https://cruse.org.uk)) offers a signposting resource to help you find support tailored to your age group, experiences and particular issues.

Bereavement support can take many forms. Cruse Bereavement Support ([cruse.org.uk](https://cruse.org.uk)) and Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland ([crusescotland.org.uk](https://crusescotland.org.uk)) provide support to thousands of grieving people each year, through a national Helpline, peer support groups, ongoing face-to-face support and outreach in communities.

Peer support groups can connect you

with people who have experienced a similar death, e.g. a child, partner or parent; suicide, death through drugs, or particular medical conditions such as cancer or heart problems.

Sharing experiences with others who are also experiencing the pain of grief can help you feel less alone. Hearing from people who have been in a similar situation can show that there is a way forward.

Visit **Cruse Bereavement Support** ([cruse.org.uk](https://cruse.org.uk)) and **Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland** ([crusescotland.org.uk](https://crusescotland.org.uk)) for further support and advice.

# Together, no one has to deal with grief alone

- For additional help with a bereavement, visit **Cruse Bereavement Support** ([cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)) or, if you're in Scotland, **Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland** ([crusescotland.org.uk](http://crusescotland.org.uk))
- If you need support with your mental wellbeing, **Mind**, **SAMH (Scottish Association for Mental Health)** and **Inspire** can help; visit [coop.co.uk/charitypartnership](http://coop.co.uk/charitypartnership)
- If you know someone having suicidal thoughts, visit **Samaritans** [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org) or call **116 123**
- If you need information on finances, housing, care or other issues after a bereavement, find out more through the **Citizen's Advice Bureau** ([citizensadvice.org.uk](http://citizensadvice.org.uk))
- **Co-op Funeralcare** ([coop.co.uk/funeralcare](http://coop.co.uk/funeralcare)) offers 24/7 advice on funerals, what to do when someone dies, and guidance every step of the way when making arrangements
- For legal advice, **Co-op Legal Services** ([co-oplegalservices.co.uk](http://co-oplegalservices.co.uk)) offers legal aid with fixed solicitor fees and flexible pricing
- To find out what is going on in your local community visit **Co-operate** at [coop.co.uk/co-operate](http://coop.co.uk/co-operate)

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