

Coping with grief: Feelings and emotions

I can't believe it has happened

It is common to feel as if it has not really happened – to expect a person who has died to walk through the door or call on the phone. It is common to find yourself talking about a person as if they are still alive.

It can be particularly hard to bear each morning when waking up and realising it is true. It may seem so unfair. 'Why has this happened to me?' is a common thought.

I feel helpless

It is common to feel helpless, bewildered, powerless and overwhelmed.

This can be upsetting and debilitating. It may be hard to get up and get on with normal activities. You may also find yourself making simple mistakes when doing the simplest things.

It is wise to avoid high risk activities such as driving or using dangerous machinery, or be extra careful if you feel you have to do these things.

I feel scared

You may feel anxious and fearful. It is normal to worry more than usual that other people, or you, will die too. It is common to be scared to go out. It is common to suffer feelings of panic, anxiety and confusion if in a busy environment such as a shopping centre or a train station. You may feel jumpy and nervous in such situations.

Think about how you will plan and get through each day.

Frightening thoughts, dreams or flashbacks

Vivid thoughts and dreams about the death, the person who has died, or a fear, are common. Flashbacks to the time when the death happened may be experienced. This means it feels like it is happening again. Not everyone suffers flashbacks, but if you do, they may happen at any time and be frightening.

Many people find it helps to talk about thoughts, dreams or flashbacks. You may want to consider talking to others about this.

If only...

It is common to keep mulling over the circumstances leading up to the death and wondering if anything could have been done to stop it happening. 'If only...' is a common and particularly painful thought. Often people wish they had told a person who has died how much they love them, or told them this more often. Thoughts like these may lead to strong feelings of guilt that can be hard to explain to others.

Crying may help – many people find it is better to express feelings than to hold back the tears.

I forget things and am disorganised

Because of the enormous stress you are suffering, it may be hard to take in information you are told, or recall important facts, remember to do things, or do things as well as you would at other times. This can be particularly challenging if you are involved in procedures such as organising a funeral or the processing of someone's will. It can also be challenging if you have to work, or have domestic responsibilities such as caring for dependents. If anyone else can help you, let them share the work.

Bereaved people are often scared they will forget things about the person who has died. They are scared they will forget their voice, things they said, or how they smelt. There are things you can do to keep someone's memory alive for you.

I feel angry

It is common to feel angry after a death. There may be someone or something to blame. Or you may even feel angry towards the person who has died for leaving you. It is also common to get worked up over minor everyday things that normally you take in your stride, but now seem unbearable. For people who do not normally get angry, these feelings may be particularly distressing.

It may help to remember your anger is a temporary symptom of your bereavement, and not your true nature.

Nobody understands

People might say inappropriate, hurtful things to you such as 'these things happen', or 'you'll get over it'. They may talk about their own bereavements that happened in circumstances you consider less devastating and of no relevance to your situation. Some people may even behave as if nothing has happened.

These people may want to help, but not know how.