

9. Bereavement and Loss

Death and Dying Matters

These information sheets have been created to demystify some beliefs and misconceptions around dying, death and funerals. They are designed to inform and empower individuals as well as communities, by providing practical information to help make better decisions and more considered choices in relation to end of life matters. This is not anything new, rather a return to a traditional approach, where families and friends are involved at every stage. Choices may be influenced by culture, beliefs, community, finances or sustainability issues.

These sheets may assist you to:

- better understand what is involved in the process of dying, death and bereavement
- participate more fully in any of the stages
- complete the relevant and important legal paperwork
- talk to others about your or their wishes and needs
- clarify your or their instructions around dying and after death
- create a more meaningful funeral to honour and celebrate a life
- have an easier and healthier bereavement

The response to loss and bereavement are a unique experience for everyone. Your response to each situation will depend on many factors, for example, your relationship to the person, the circumstances involved, familiarity with death, and the gender and the age of the person and the bereaved. Emotional responses may range anywhere from sadness or grief, to relief or joy.

Emotions and feelings often change. You can find yourselves shifting between tears and laughter, despair and acceptance, and anger and gratitude. Emotion is an important part of the process for those left behind. Many people describe the sensations as coming in unexpected waves. Just try to be with what arises, and not expect to feel normal, or function as if nothing has happened. Those left behind need understanding, time to adjust, and support.

Sadness is the most common response to death. From there feelings can move through disbelief, distress, despair, anguish, grief, intense grief, or not wanting to live. People may also respond to loss with acceptance, gratitude, relief, or joy or liberation for the person and themselves. Some people will find the experience traumatic, while others may grow from it.

Resilience also has an impact, as do religious, spiritual or scientific beliefs. Previous unresolved feelings around the person, family or death may also surface and complicate the response to death.

Some of the physical reactions to death are lack of appetite, nausea, restlessness, agitation, disorientation, anxiety, and sleeplessness. Crying can be helpful and important as it is the body releasing distress. These are often initial responses that settle over time. Slow things down so that things have time to sink in and shock can subside; there is no hurry.

If you want to help someone, imagine yourself in their position. Listen with compassion, and be mindful of what you say, avoid hindering their process and responses. If you don't know what to say, sometimes it is best to just say 'I don't know what to say'. Actions are sometimes easier than words, and giving flowers and cakes, cooking meals, getting the shopping, and mowing the grass, can all be helpful.

Don't expect or behave in a way that forces the bereaved person to have to make you feel better.

Usually the intensity diminishes as time passes, but in some cases it doesn't. This may be understandable, but if, after a long period of time, you or someone else seems stuck, consult a health care professional.

Likewise, if you or someone else shows no response or emotion, and carries on like nothing has happened, this too may be a time to consult a health care professional.

Sometimes intense feelings may come back after three, six, twelve months or more, which may often be the time we expect to feel better. Response to loss is an individual and very personal process. Check in as often as you feel is appropriate, regularly, occasionally, but often on, a big monthly, first or second year anniversary.

Community, cultural or religious beliefs, gender and age, may all affect bereavement.

Men and women often deal with loss differently: many women want to talk and cry together, and many men want to be alone or get on with things or do something. Intimacy and sex can also be very different experiences at this time for men and women.

Children should be included in bereavement, and treated with kindness and care. They will feel, process and behave within their own capacity. Telling children the truth is usually advised, as they will know that something is happening, and may be confused if they are deceived. Children will have their own individual response, they may continue to play and laugh, may be quiet at times, may be extra snuggly, or may be distant. Treat each child as the unique individual they are, and seek professional help if you feel it is necessary.



Natural Death
Care Centre



The Natural Death Care Centre and Tender Funerals are both not-for-profit organisations based in NSW, committed to informing, educating and empowering individuals, communities, and medical and health professionals. We have a natural, holistic and respectful approach to dying, death, disposal, ceremony and bereavement.

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