

# LIVINGGRIEF

Let's talk about grief...

## Grieving during the coronavirus pandemic

We are living in exceptional times and we are having to adapt the ways we normally do things in all sorts of ways.

Becoming bereaved during a pandemic brings additional challenges and may well lead to greater intensity of thoughts and feelings.

We hope this information will be helpful to you in your bereavement.



## Grieving and isolation

Being bereaved can be an extremely lonely time. Talking with friends and family can be one of the most helpful ways to cope after someone close to us dies. Under normal circumstances, we would be advising you to avoid isolating yourself but we are in a situation where increasing numbers of people are being told to self-isolate and cut all but essential physical contact with others.

Being alone can make feelings of loneliness and grief more intense. You may be bereaved and having to stay by yourself in the same house you shared with the person who has died, bringing up painful reminders at every turn. You may be part of a bereaved family, self-isolating together, and although this at times may be a support, at other times tensions and resentments could be magnified. If you are a carer for children or young people, it may be difficult to keep them occupied and deal with your own emotions and worries.

Isolation can also make it harder to process grief. At times like this when there is a constant stream of new and distressing information, you may find yourself distracted from dealing with your grief. You may be worrying about the situation as a whole, or worrying about yourself or others.

Friends and relatives who might otherwise have been able to provide practical support, for example helping with meals and shopping, may also be isolating or preoccupied with their own family's situation.

It is very common to see, hear or feel the presence of someone who has died. This is more often the case if bereavements are traumatic and if someone is isolated in a location where they saw the person die or where they are constantly reminded of their illness.

## What might help?

Although you may not be able to see people in person, you can **keep in regular contact** with others using the phone, text or internet if it is available to you.

**Look after yourself and get rest.** Try to get some fresh air or sunlight each day - even opening a window can help. You may find it helps to do some exercise around the house if you are able. Try to keep to a regular routine of getting up and dressed and eating meals at the usual time, whether you are on your own or part of a family group.

At times when you have more energy, you might want to find some jobs to do around the house or garden (if you have one). It is normal to move between intense grieving and looking to the future after someone dies, and there may be some things you can achieve even if you cannot go out.

**Don't feel guilty if you are struggling.** Reach out to others who might be finding it difficult too - you may be able to help each other. **Seek practical help from friends, family or neighbours.**

## Manage feelings

Feelings of sadness, anger, guilt and blame are common after any bereavement. When someone has died under sudden or traumatic circumstances, or not in the way you have been expecting, it can make these feelings stronger.

Feeling angry is an understandable response to feeling out of control, powerless and abandoned. When someone has died due to coronavirus or because of changes to care and treatments during the pandemic, there may be additional reasons to feel angry. You may feel angry and helpless that this situation arose at all. You may feel angry that your friend or relative did not receive the care they should have, for example if hospitals become overwhelmed and medical staff are forced to make difficult decisions.

You may feel angry with the government if you think there should have been more protection and stronger controls. Or you could be angry with people who took risks leading to infection. You may feel angry with the person who died for not protecting themselves.

Feeling guilty is also very common when someone is bereaved. The need to blame someone after a traumatic or untimely death can be very strong - sometimes blaming ourselves can be easier than blaming the person who died or others. If someone has died of coronavirus, or under circumstances affected by the pandemic, this can make things worse. A bereaved person might blame themselves for infecting the person who died or for not being able to protect them. You may feel very guilty if you were not able to be with the person and pass on any last messages, even if this was not your fault.

### What might help?

Coming to terms with guilt and anger will take time and may be a difficult emotional balancing act. Talking about your feelings with someone you trust may help. Remind yourself that these are exceptional times and you, like most people, have been trying to do your best without the usual rules to help. If your anger has led to impulsive outbursts or you have said or done things to hurt others, it can help to apologise.

In some circumstances, anger can be a force for good leading to changes. But that may have to be put on hold if you are isolating and while the current exceptional circumstances continue.

### Feeling your bereavement is not a priority

There can be a strong spoken or unspoken feeling that certain deaths are more tragic than others.

At times of national crisis like these, people may feel that others consider some losses less worthy of sympathy. The media can exacerbate this by constantly mentioning that people who died had underlying health conditions or were over a certain age. Even if it was not the intention, it can feel as if people are saying older and vulnerable people are worth less.

You may also feel that your own troubles are less worthy of attention and feel guilty about asking for help and support. This can apply if you have been recently bereaved from a cause unrelated to coronavirus and it can feel hurtful if everyone becomes too preoccupied with their own situation to offer as much practical or emotional support as they might at other times.

Try to remember that while many people are struggling, it is OK to ask for help. Your own feelings are valid even if others are facing their own tragic circumstances. Talking about how you feel can help, as can remembering someone who has died and sharing memories.

If you are upset by media coverage, it can help to take regular breaks from the news and social media.

### Coping with talk of death and dying

At times like these, it can be impossible to escape from constant discussion of the crisis going on around us. All news, social media and conversations are about the current situation. The activities which people usually use to relax or distract themselves are cancelled and an increasing number of people are in isolation.

In a pandemic situation, there is inevitably lots of discussion of death and dying and this can bring up difficult feelings for all of us, particularly if you struggle with anxiety or mental health issues. It can bring up difficult feelings and memories of past bereavements. It may also bring up feelings of fear about dying yourself.

### Drop in group

This is an open group for all bereaved friends and family and is held at the hospice on the second Tuesday of every month. Referral is via the emotional and spiritual wellbeing team. This is an informal way to access support and most find it helpful over six to nine months.

It can help to take regular breaks from the news and social media. You may want to limit yourself to a few trusted news sources and check only at certain times of the day. You may also like to take regular breaks from social media. It is helpful to keep to a regular daily routine which also includes some time to relax.

Think about what activities are the best distraction for you – this could be watching old films or TV series, reading, arts and crafts or getting on with some jobs around the house.

If friends or relatives are talking constantly about the situation, try asking them if you can talk about other things for a while. They might appreciate it too.

## Funerals

There are currently restrictions on attendance at funerals. It is possible you may not be able to attend yourself or have the support of people around you during the service and afterwards. Restrictions will be in place whether or not the person died of coronavirus. Funeral services are likely to be delayed and much shorter than usual and this may be very distressing.

In normal times, funerals serve a number of important purposes after someone dies.

- They can help to make the death seem real.
- They offer people a chance to share thoughts and feelings about the person who has died and to say goodbye.
- They bring families and friends together to support one another.
- They give people a focus at a time when so many things seem out of a person's control.
- They can be an important part of our grieving and healing process, to be together with and support others, to give thanks, pay our respects, do what we feel is right.

All of these functions may be disrupted if the funeral is delayed, shortened and if friends and family, even close relatives, cannot attend.

## What might help?

Whilst many people will be unable to be at funerals which, in other circumstances, they would have been able to attend, it may be possible to still feel part of the event to an extent. You may be able to write or record a message to be read out or played at the funeral. The funeral director or person leading the service should be able to give advice.

You could set aside the time while the funeral is taking place (or later) to hold your own act of memorial at home. You could look at pictures, play some of the person's favourite music, write a message to them, light a candle or follow any of your own cultural rituals. A number of resources are available online to give you ideas of readings, poems or prayers you may want to use.

If other people were able to attend, ask them to call you afterwards so you can hear their account of the event and take the time to share your memories of the person.

If the funeral is delayed or reduced to a very short service, you could still set some time aside to have your own private goodbye including any of the ideas above.

We will not be under these restrictions forever and, at some future point, you may be able to hold a formal or informal memorial to those who have died.

If you have been bereaved by the virus Cruse have set up a National helpline which may be of use to you – 0808 808 1677.

The helpline is open Monday-Friday 9.30am -5pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings until 8pm.

# How much **does it cost?**

All emotional and spiritual wellbeing services at St Elizabeth Hospice are free. St Elizabeth Hospice is a registered charity and relies on gifts and donations to carry out its work. Because of people's generosity we are able to offer bereavement support free of charge to the relatives and friends of hospice patients.

## **Tell us** what you think

Hearing about your experience of St Elizabeth Hospice can help us to improve our services and provide better care and support for those who need it.

To make a comment or complaint, or to compliment us on something we've done well, please write to us or visit [stelizabethhospice.org.uk](http://stelizabethhospice.org.uk)

## Contact **us**

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