Information for Young People on Grief and Loss

For more information please contact
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Dear Student,

This is a brochure to assist in equipping you with information, tools and strategies for managing grief and loss. The information has come from various sources. Much of the literature has come from The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement [www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au). We hope you find this information useful.

**What is Grief?**

Grief is the term used to describe the feelings we have after a loss. It is natural to feel overwhelmed with emotions like pain, anger and sadness. Sometimes you can even feel numb. This information is about dealing with the grief after the loss of someone or something really important to you. It looks at doing things in your own style, your own time and in a healthy way.

**Loss**

Loss can come into our lives in lots of different ways, and it affects each of us differently. One of the biggest and most difficult losses is the death of someone really important to you.

There are many types of loss where you might experience sadness, confusion and anger.

- the death of a friend or someone you love
- the death of a pet
- your parents or other important people splitting up or getting divorced
- separation from a parent, both parents and your family
- separation from friends or your community
- moving away from home or leaving your country
- splitting up with your girlfriend/boyfriend
- being forced to give up something you want to keep (like your old job or home)
- losing your job
- leaving school or university
- losing the ability to do something because of a disability
- becoming very sick or seeing someone else become very sick

Even when something happens that appears positive, such as leaving school and starting work, we can experience some feelings of grief for what we've left behind, as well as fears for the unknown future.

When somebody close to us dies, we go through reactions of grief. These reactions and feelings are different for everyone. We always feel loss in our own unique way. You might experience intense feelings such as anger, anxiety, disbelief, panic, relief or even numbness. It can also affect our thinking. We may think we will never get over this, or we may think we are going crazy. We may think this is all too hard and wish we were the person who had died. This does not usually mean we will take active steps to end life, but can simply be an expression of our pain and sadness.
When you grieve you might notice some of the following feelings. You might not feel all of them, and you might not feel them in the same order. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

- **Denial, shock or disbelief** – “It hasn’t really happened”, “This isn’t real”, “I must be dreaming”, “He will be back”. This is like a temporary relief and helps you to avoid getting completely taken over by grief.

- **Guilt** - Might be related to feelings of “Why didn’t I?”, “If only I had…”, “I should have…”

- **Confusion** – “What’s going on?”, “I don’t understand”, “What happened?”.

- **Anxiety** – Loss can be frightening – You might think about your future. “What will I do?”, “How will I cope?”, - or fear losing control – ”I’m going to lose it…”, ”I can’t stop it…”, ”What else might I lose without me being able to stop it?”

- **Anger** – Anger comes from other feelings, like feeling abandoned, hurt or scared. You might express anger in lots of ways. You might direct your anger at people you think caused the loss. “Why did you do…?”, ”You always…”, ”You never cared” – or

- **Hopelessness** – “I couldn’t stop it”, ”I can’t change anything”, ”I can’t cope”.

- **Crying, sobbing, depression** – Sadness might feel like a black cloud over your whole world. You might long for what you have lost. You might lose interest in life – you don’t want to go out, or see or do things you usually do. You might feel lonely, or feel you have no one to turn to.

- **Acceptance of reality and adjusting to new life patterns** – You realise what has happened and the pain does not hurt so much. Everything is different but the struggle is not so huge. Life goes on with the memories and experience of knowing what you once had. You start looking toward the future.

- **Physical Symptoms** like headaches, feeling sick in the stomach, aching muscles, feeling run down, trouble sleeping, feeling tired, having no energy. You might find you get sick more easily. If these symptoms persist, check with your doctor to exclude other causes.

These feelings can happen at any time and for any length of time. You might have more than one at once. You might feel really good one day and awful the next. Special times like
Christmas, birthdays or anniversaries can be difficult. You may return to a feeling and go through it again. Sometimes it can feel worse in the morning, or as you are about to go to sleep. Sometimes you might wonder if you will ever feel ‘normal’ again.

You will – gradually the pain is with you less often and life finds a new sense of meaning.

If you find you are stuck in one of these feelings and not gradually moving on over time, it would be a good idea to talk to a counsellor about it.

**Helping yourself to get by**

Grief is like a journey with many pathways and turnings. Here are some suggestions about how to get through some of the difficult times.

### Privately and Personally

You may sometimes prefer to keep your thoughts and feelings to yourself.

- Keep a diary or journal
- Create a memorial – do or make something to honour your loved one or friend
- Develop your own rituals – light a candle, listen to special music, say a prayer, make a special place to think
- Allowing yourself to express your thoughts and feelings privately can help. Write a letter or poem, draw, collect photos, cry…
- Exercise – do something to use pent up energy: walk, swim, cycle, run
- Draw on religious and spiritual beliefs
- Read about other people’s experiences
- Do things that are relaxing and soothing (e.g meditation, distractions, relaxation, breathing exercises etc)

### With other people

Sharing with other people can reduce the sense of aloneness that comes with grief.

- Allow people to help you. Don’t be embarrassed to accept their help
- Talk to family and friends; sharing memories and stories, thoughts and feelings can be comforting and strengthen our connection with our loved one
• Take opportunities to join in public ceremonies where you can be private, yet part of a larger group

• Use rituals and customs that are meaningful to you

• Talk to a counsellor to seek support and other ways to manage in your unique situation.

Dealing with loss in harmful ways

Grief affects you in lots of ways. Not only do you have a rush of emotions that can be hard to cope with, but you might also do things that can be harmful.

• You might use drugs and alcohol to try to cover up the pain or make it go away. Many people think using drugs or alcohol is the only way or a good way to deal with the pain but this is likely to just prolong the process of grief and may be harmful in the process.

• You might hurt other people. It’s natural to feel angry when you grieve. Anger is sometimes the emotion you show when there are a whole heap of other emotions happening underneath. If you think you’ve no safe place to express yourself or you don’t understand what’s going on, you might turn your anger on other people. Anger is a natural emotion, violence is a chosen behaviour. Anger can be expressed in a safe way without hurting others.

• You might hurt yourself. Choosing to hurt yourself is only one choice to express the pain that is happening to you. There are lots of safe alternatives to hurting yourself. Letting others know that you are feeling like hurting yourself can allow you to keep safe and feel supported during a time of much sadness and hurt.

If you have chosen any of these things, it can be useful to talk to someone you trust to find other ways to express yourself. Some people express themselves through art or music, others like to write down what they are feeling. This can also be a stepping stone to explaining how you feel to other people.
Useful numbers and websites

Lifeline Telephone Counselling 13 11 14
Beyond Blue Info Line 1300 22 4636
Headspace Hobart (03) 6231 2927
Bereavement Information & Referral Service 1300 664 786
www.youthbeyondblue.com
www.beyondblue.com
www.reachout.com
www.headspace.org.au
www.grief.org.au

People who might be helpful to talk to:

Mum or Dad or another family member who will listen
General Practitioner (GP) / Family Doctor
Parish Priest or Church Leader
A counsellor, social worker or psychologist

Helping a Grieving Friend

Be a listener....

Grieving people often find they need to talk about what’s happened and how they feel about it. You don’t have to fix their grief or cheer them up, but you can share the load just by being there to listen. It is not helpful to use statements such as “This will only make you stronger” or “She had a good life”. Allowing your friend to express their thoughts and feelings without you putting a positive spin on things can be most effective.
It’s alright to cry....

Crying is a natural reaction to grief that everyone can experience. Crying can help release emotions and is a healthy expression of grief. Do not discourage your friend from crying or expressing healthy, non harmful emotion.

Stay Close....

Friends are important to each other at times of loss. Grief does not go away in a few short weeks. Even one year may not be long enough for your friend to adjust to the changes in their life. Don’t be afraid to ask how your friend is going 3, 6 or 12 months after their loss. Special days like birthdays or anniversaries may be just the time to make contact and say “I was thinking of you today”.

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a College Counsellor

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