

GRIEF IS LIKE THE OCEAN;
IT COMES ON WAVES
EBBING AND FLOWING.
SOMETIMES THE WATER
IS CALM, AND
SOMETIMES IT IS
OVERWHELMING. ALL WE
CAN DO IS LEARN TO
SWIM.

Coping with Bereavement

A self-help information booklet

Clondalkin Community cares

As we continue through this COVID19 era, the community agencies based in Clondalkin continue to coordinate their efforts, so no-one gets left behind. This booklet is one such initiative that has come from this collaboration.

Self Help for Bereavement

Are you finding it difficult to cope following a bereavement?

Have you lost a loved one and find that you think about them all the time?

Does a past loss still cause you significant emotional distress?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', you may be experiencing symptoms of grief, and you may find this workbook helpful.

This workbook aims to help you to:

- Recognise whether you may be experiencing symptoms of grief.
- Understand what grief is, what complicates it and what keeps it going.
- Find ways to understand, manage or overcome your grief.

Contents of this self help guide

- Strategies that you could use to overcome your grief:
- Understand more about loss, separation and bereavement
- Learning strategies to help you stay active and make good use of your time.
- Consider making positive changes to your lifestyle.

When going through this booklet it might be helpful to try out each strategy one at a time, rather than trying to learn them all at once. However, simply take things at your own pace.

Areas covered in this booklet	Page
Coping with bereavement and grief	1
Grief	2
What are the signs of Grief	4
The things that affect you	5
How to Cope	6
What makes Grief harder to cope with?	7
Understanding your experience	8
How have you been coping so far?	9
Making good use of your time	10
Activity Diary	11
Looking after yourself	12
How can other people help?	14
Other ways of dealing with your feelings	15
Local & National Information and Support	16

Coping with bereavement and grief

"My sister died last year, and my brother died the year before. Now it's only me left, and I feel so alone. I just want to talk to them sometimes..."

"My mum died just before Christmas, after a long illness. She wanted to die, she was ready, but now I feel angry that somehow she gave up on life and I also regret that I didn't manage to get her to keep going. Christmas is such a bad time ... my dad died just before Christmas too."

"Our son died. He was only a baby. Now my wife and I are both troubled by how it's affected our other children, and yet we can't talk about it. I think we both feel responsible but know we have to try and look forward and be strong for the children."

"When my wife died I thought I would never be able to carry on with everything; nobody seemed to understand. They said 'you're young, you'll find someone else' but I didn't want to. I wanted her back so that she – we – could live the life we'd hoped for. It took me three years to come to terms with that loss and to be able to move forward – job, socialising, that sort of thing. I still feel that sense of loss, but it's getting better."

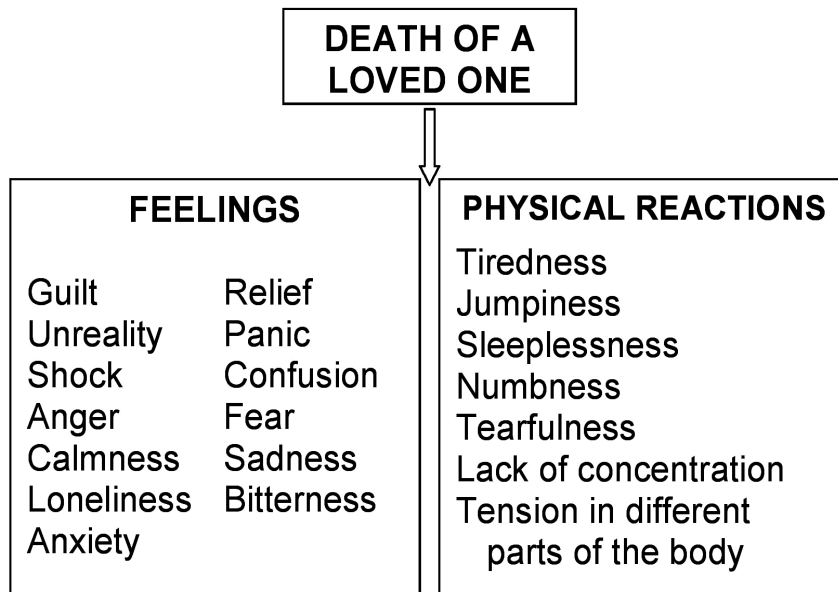
"My gran died of Covid, I couldn't get to see her because of the restrictions and I could only watch the funeral on a webcam. I couldn't mourn with my family and they couldn't even mourn properly. I feel guilty that I wasn't there with her or with my family. I feel as if part of me has died too. It's hard ..."

These are experiences of people who have suffered bereavement.

As you can see, people can have quite different experience when they lose someone close to them. This booklet gives some practical suggestion which may help you get through this difficult time. At the back of the booklet there are some information and contact for local and national organisations which may be helpful to you.

Grief

There is no one way to cope with the feelings any of us has after the death of someone close to us. **We all feel differently and we all cope in different ways.** You might feel quite isolated. You could possibly think nobody else has felt the same way as you do. These are some of the feelings or physical reactions you might be experiencing:



These feelings and physical reactions are very common. You may not experience some of them at all. Others may stay with you for a long time. You are likely to go through different emotions at different stages after the death of a loved one.

To begin with, you may experience shock and disbelief. It is also common to feel emotionally numb for some time after. Everyone copes with grief in different ways. Some people talk to friends, others will deal with things quietly, by themselves. A person may cope well with their experience of grief, or find it difficult to manage. It might only take a short while for your mood to settle. Then again, it might take a lot longer than that to get back on track. The strongest emotions will gradually reduce in intensity and frequency over time.

You might come across obstacles to the grieving process. This can make it more difficult to process and deal with. You might not realise at the time, but you might be coping with your loss in a normal way. That is, the same way as someone else would, if faced with a similar situation.

Sometimes, if a person is very ill for some time before they die, people can experience some of these emotions while the person is still alive. This is a normal reaction and is a sign of anticipating the loss.

How long does grief tend to last?

There is no time limit on grief and this varies hugely person to person. The time spent in a period of bereavement will be different for everybody and depends on factors such as the type of relationship, the strength of attachment or intimacy to the person who died, the situation surrounding their death, and the amount of time spent anticipating the death.

At first you might:

- feel everything is unreal
- feel more alert than usual
- not be able to believe the person is dead
- worry about how life will be from now on
- not be able to sleep properly
- feel calm
- be forgetful
- need to cry
- need to shout
- not sleep well
- feel jumpy
- lose your appetite
- eat more than usual
- think you keep seeing the person who has died
- be anxious

Later, you might be:

- continually thinking about your loved one
- low in mood
- angry
- not wanting to socialise
- tired
- feeling a sense of loss
- relieved
- resenting other people who are getting on with their lives
- guilty
- panicky

Everyone is different and feels differently about the loss of a loved one.

It is not the type of relationship – such as brother, wife or grandparent – but how you felt about the person that is most important.

What the loss means to you will affect you the most.

Children

If children are affected by the death, that should be acknowledged. Even very young children experience grief, and they need to be given the chance to talk about it. They might not yet have the words to express themselves or the ability to think things through.

Key points:

- Loss affects everyone differently
- People cope with grief and loss in their own unique way
- There is no correct way to act or feel when you experience loss – *you feel the way you feel !*

What are the signs of grief?

If you experience a bereavement then it is likely that you will recognise many of the feelings, physical sensations, thoughts and behaviour patterns described below.

Please tick the boxes which regularly apply to you.

Feelings

- Loss/Grief
- Emotionally numb
- Sad / Tearful
- Overwhelmed / Helplessness/Worried

Physical Sensations

- Tired / Exhausted
- Loss of appetite
- Lacking energy
- Poor concentration
- Disturbed sleep pattern

Thoughts

- I wish I had them back with me
- I will miss them terribly
- What am I going to do now?
- If only I had a bit more time

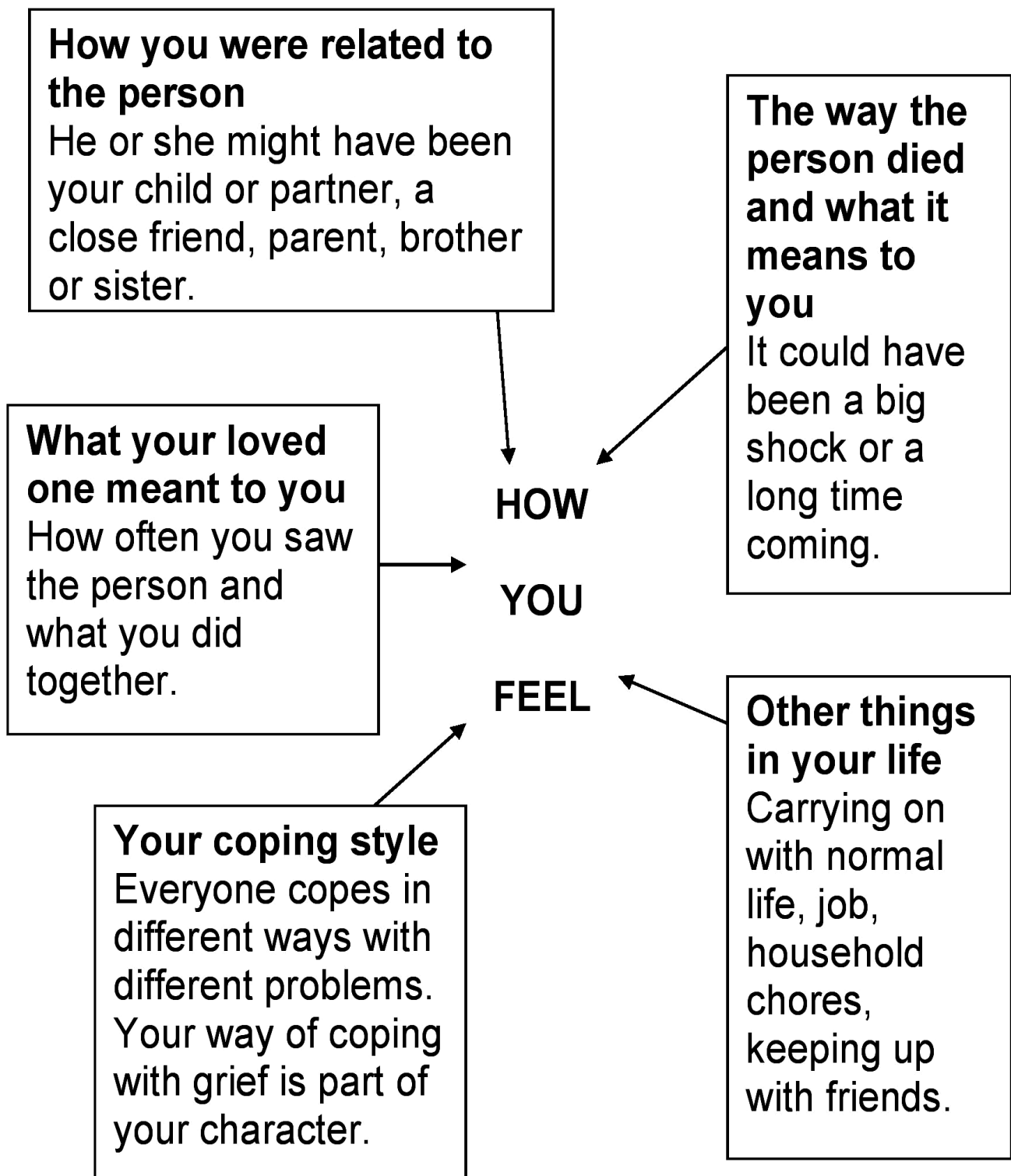
Behaviour Patterns

- Withdrawing from social contact
- Talking about the loss a long time after
- Repeatedly putting off practical arrangements
- Not talking about the loss to anyone
- Avoiding things relating to the loss

If you have ticked a number of these boxes it is possible that you are experiencing grief. However don't be alarmed, this is a common issue that can be overcome in time. By following the steps in this workbook, you may be able to learn how to improve your situation.

The things that affect you

These are a few things that may influence how you feel after the death of a loved one:



In reality it is likely that a combination of all these factors influence someone's experience of bereavement. However, in some ways it is less important to know what causes grief, and more important to know what stops us moving past it.

How to cope

You might be overwhelmed by your first reactions to the death of a loved one. You might feel very little in the beginning. Some people find that these feelings are with them for months or years. In some ways there will be a permanent change in how a person feels following a significant loss. However, over time there will usually be a decrease in the way the feelings affect day-to-day life.



Everyone takes his or her own time to learn to cope.

It is better to avoid big changes in the months following a death. Things such as moving house or changing job are difficult to cope with at the best of times, so unless absolutely necessary it is best not to put yourself through such changes. There is the question of your loved one's possessions and clothing. Dealing with these is one of the hardest parts of the grieving process. It takes a lot of courage to do it, but it can help you to come to terms with your loss. It may help to have someone to help – the time to do it is when you feel you can.

The important thing is for you to accept that **whatever** you feel is not unusual, and to **allow** yourself to feel as you do and not worry about this.

Over time you are likely to find yourself thinking less about your loved one and more about your own life. You might feel guilty or disloyal about this, but you can **allow** yourself to return to the normal aspects of your life.

You can **allow** yourself to enjoy the things you like to do. Some people set aside a special time to think about the person, perhaps visit a certain place where they can think about them without other distractions.

If you can, try to talk to someone about how you are feeling. Sharing your thoughts and feelings can be helpful in coping with your loss.

Others in your family or circle of friends might be finding it difficult to cope. Talking with them might help both you and them. Try not to avoid talking about your loved one. It can be helpful to ask a close friend to let others know how you would like to be approached. For example, the friend could tell people that you don't mind if they don't say anything about your loss when with you.

Remember that everyone has different needs at times of bereavement.
What is right for one person might not be right for another.

What makes grief harder to cope with?

The context and circumstances in which your bereavement took place can effect how easy or difficult it is to deal with grief and loss.

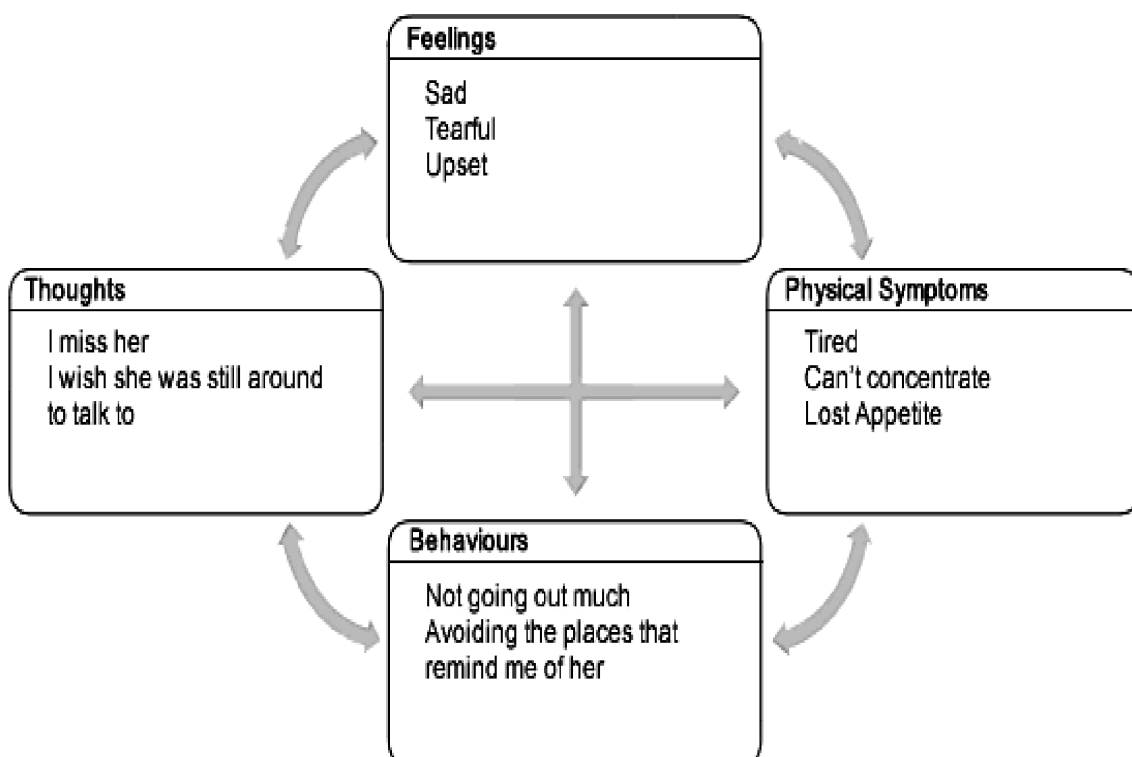
For example:

- How long you knew the person
- How old they were
- What relationship you shared
- How the person died
- Whether the death was expected or unexpected
- Your past experience of loss
- Experiencing multiple losses

A sudden and unexpected death of a young relative may be quite difficult to cope with. You might react differently to the death of an older person, or someone you didn't know well. Avoiding a lot of activities, places or social contact can maintain your grief and low mood. You may find it helpful to aim for a more structured and active lifestyle. Having support from friends can be really helpful.

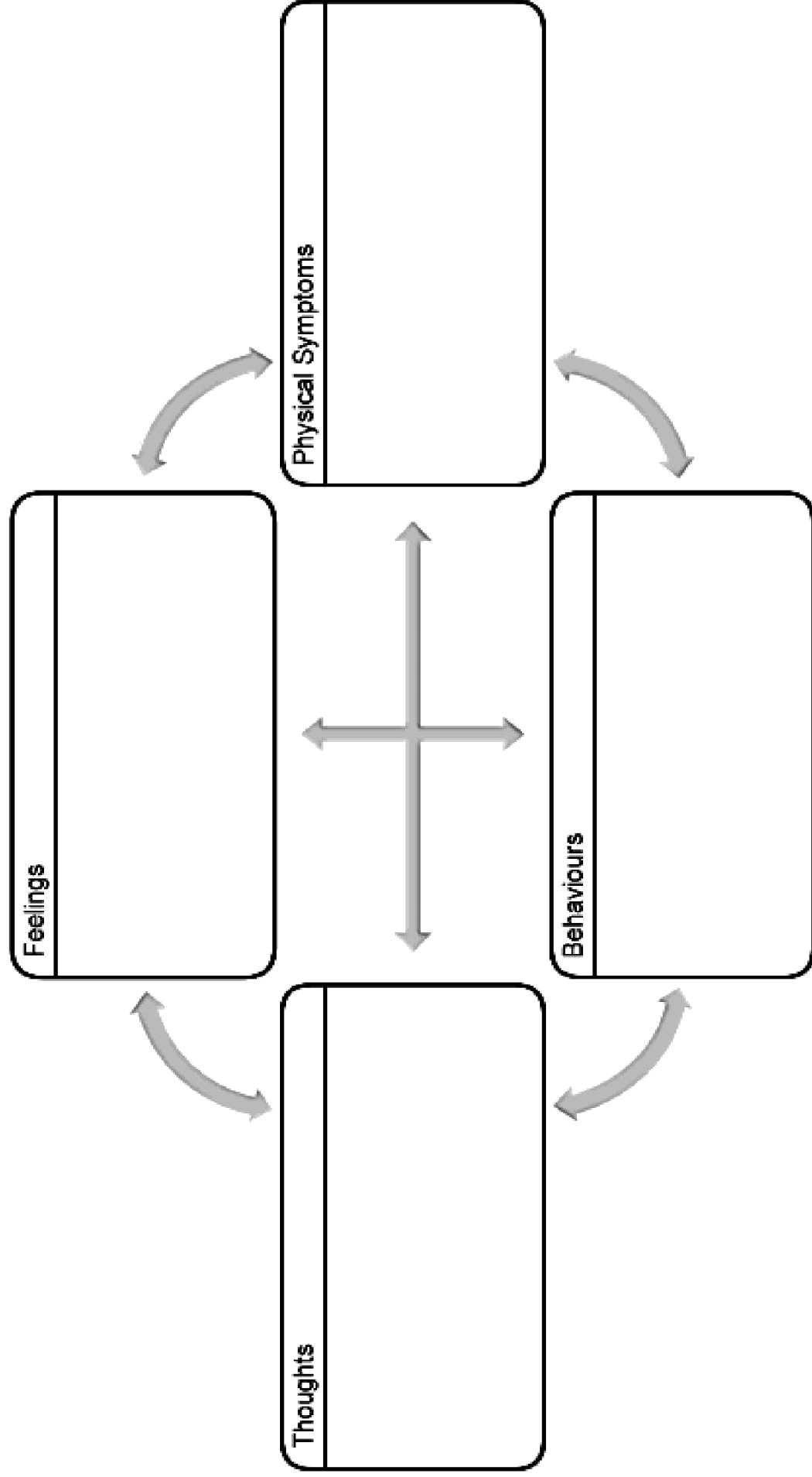
Understanding your grief

Have a look at some of the examples and try to fill in something of your experience. See if you can recognise a similar pattern occurring within yourself.



Understanding Your Experience

Try to fill in something of your own experience. You may begin to understand your difficulties a little better. Particularly what patterns may exist and how things interact.



How have you been coping so far?

You may have been dealing with at least some of these difficulties for a while already. Think about what you've done so far to cope, and how effective these strategies have been.

- Will it be helpful in the long-term, or is it possible that they might be keeping your difficulties going?
For example:
 - ◊ Trying to distract yourself enough so that you never have to think about your loss.
- Think about how you might have coped well with difficulties in the past.
- What is going well currently and what you are doing to achieve that?
- What coping strategies and support do you have available to you? Could you be making better use of these?
 - ◊ **Social support** - speaking to people; family, friends, relatives, colleagues, etc.
 - ◊ **Confidence** - being sure of your own ability to cope.
 - ◊ **Problem solving** - being able to work out solutions to problems.
 - ◊ **Self-awareness** - knowing how this problem effects you; your body, thoughts, feelings and behaviours.
 - ◊ **Looking after yourself** - making sure that you have some time to yourself. For example going for walks, having a relaxing bath, etc.

Making Good Use of Your Time

When we have experienced a recent loss, our motivation to do things often decreases. You may find that you give up hobbies or activities that you previously enjoyed. Over time you might end up doing very little. This can lead you to feel even lower and a cycle can begin which is difficult to escape from.

By using a diary to plan your week in advance, you may be able to do more of the things you want to, in addition to the things that you have to do. This can really help to lift your mood. This section aims to give you advice that will help you to plan your weeks well.

When completing your diary, start by filling in all the activities that you have to do.

For example: *preparing meals, doing housework, attending appointments, etc.*

This will show you all the time that you have free. Then you can begin to plan other activities that you would like to do. Remember to pace yourself. Give yourself space to be busy or take time out to relax.

You may find it helpful to plan in some time for:

- **Socialising** - social contact often helps us feel better, even though you may not feel like it at times.
- **Hobbies and interests** - this might be something you have enjoyed in the past, or a new project.
- **Exercise** - this can improve your mood and general health. It doesn't need to be anything too energetic. Just going for a walk regularly can be a good option.
- **Bedtimes** - try to plan regular and consistent bedtimes. Having a regular sleeping pattern can help improve your mood and energy levels.
- **Time for yourself** - make time to relax and give yourself space between activities.

Some ideas have been provided in the box below that may help you get started. We all have different interests, so try to do things that you know will work for you.

Fill in your ideas in the space provided:

Suggestions	Your Ideas
Visit a friend Go to the cinema Do something active (take the dog for a walk; housework) Take part in a hobby or sport Treat yourself (e.g. buy something nice) Do something creative (e.g. draw; paint etc) Watch a movie Read a book Visit a relative	

Now try to complete a plan for a week. You don't have to fill in every space - this can be quite difficult. You could start by just adding in one or two new activities for each day.

Once you have filled in your diary, all you have to do is try to follow your plan each day. Don't worry if unexpected things come up and you cannot stick to it exactly. In fact, it is very unlikely that things will go exactly as you planned. It is also fine to be flexible and replace some activities with new ones. Leave out some tasks altogether if you don't have time for them. Try to be relaxed if this happens.

Activity Diary

Try to plan activities to fill your week. This can help you to make good use of your time.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Breakfast							
Morning							
Morning							
Lunch							
Afternoon							
Afternoon							
Dinner							
Evening							
Bedtime							

Looking After Yourself

Taking steps towards a healthy lifestyle can have a real impact on our mood and ability to cope. On the other hand, unhealthy habits can put your health, or the health of others, at risk. It can be a real challenge to overcome some habits or behaviours.

Focusing on the benefits of positive change may boost your motivation.

Alcohol

Alcohol can impact your ability to cope and control behaviours. This can be unhelpful if you are trying to overcome problems with anger or anxiety. It can also interfere with your mood, and the quality of your sleep. You might think that consuming alcohol would help you sleep. In fact, as your body processes alcohol overnight it can wake you up. Some people use the numbing effect of alcohol to avoid thinking about or facing problems. Unfortunately, this approach can be damaging and make things worse. Drinking a lot and often can lead to a pattern of addictive substance misuse.

Drugs

Many drugs have a sedative or stimulant effect on the body which can have an impact on your sleep and mood. Some people use recreational drugs as a distraction, to avoid thinking about or facing problems. Using such substances can be damaging and make things worse. Developing a habit of regular or increasing use can lead to a pattern of addictive substance misuse.

Smoking

The content of cigarette smoke and nicotine replacements act as a stimulant. This can have an impact on your sleep and your mood. Some people say that smoking helps them to cope with stress. Smoking is known to have a negative impact on long-term physical health.

Caffeine

Caffeine can trigger a reaction that is similar to the symptoms of anxiety. It can also reduce the quality of sleep. It is best not to have anything caffeinated within four hours of bedtime. Coffee, tea, hot chocolate, energy drinks, and some fizzy drinks contain caffeine.

By cutting down or stopping your consumption of potentially harmful substances, you are taking steps towards a healthier lifestyle.

Relationships / Social Network

Good relationships and support from friends and family can really help us cope better. It can also mean that we overcome problems more quickly and for longer. It can be really helpful to talk through difficulties with friends. You could discuss ways of coping, and some of them might have been through something similar.

Healthy Eating

What you eat and drink can have a significant impact on both your mood, sleep and physical health. Consider making changes towards having a balanced, nutritious diet. Try to eat regular meals and stay hydrated. Avoid unhealthy food that contain a lot of fat or sugar. Also, consider what you eat and drink close to bedtime. Caffeine, alcohol or a large meal can interfere with your sleep.

Exercise

Keeping fit and active can improve your physical health, mood and ability to cope with problems. Try to get at least some gentle exercise each week. You could try going for a walk, doing the garden or housework, playing sport or joining an exercise class. While exercise can also help us sleep, try not to be too active close to bedtime as this can keep you awake.

Routine

Having a consistent routine can help give structure to your life. Patterns can be set as we react the same way or do the same thing in certain situations. Our body can begin to expect and follow such routines. For example, taking time to relax and unwind before bed, and getting up at the same time.

Surroundings

Notice the impact of your environment on your mood. Consider the noise, temperature and light that you have to deal with. Your comfort and the tidiness of your surroundings can all have an impact on your mood. It can also effect your sleep and your overall ability to cope with problems. Try to take practical steps to resolve any particular issues.

Now you have some ideas to inspire healthy changes to your lifestyle, why not try them out? You could ask a friend for support. If you build them into your daily routine they won't seem like such a chore. Before long you might forget you ever did anything different!

How can other people help?

This section is for friends and family of someone who has experienced a bereavement.

Death and loss can be difficult to talk about and many people struggle to know what to say when trying to support someone who has been bereaved, even if they are a close family member or a good friend. You may want to help but worry about saying 'the wrong thing'. Here are some ideas of how you might be able to support somebody after a loss.

"I was shocked when friends didn't ask how I was doing. I felt invisible, as if I were standing there but they couldn't see me."

- **Acknowledge the loss and don't avoid contact.** It's understandable to feel uncomfortable speaking about death or other losses, or to worry that you might say the wrong thing, but staying silent or not contacting somebody after their bereavement can often make feelings of isolation and sadness worse. Reaching out to the bereaved person so that they know you are available to talk and listen if they would like to can be incredibly helpful.
- **Consider how best to be in contact.** There are different ways to grieve and there are different ways to communicate after a loss too. Receiving text messages may be easier for somebody to manage than returning calls. Dropping in to see them in person may be welcome for some but may be an inconvenience for others. It is worth asking the person what they'd prefer rather than making assumptions.
- **Give them space.** Not wanting to spend lots of time with other people or feeling guilty at not acknowledging messages could be an additional burden for a grieving person, so it can be worth letting them know they can respond whenever they feel able, or simply send them a message to let them know you are thinking of them and that no response is needed. Adapting to life after a loss can take a long time and people should be allowed the space to process their emotions for as long as they need. It is useful if you can strike a balance between contacting them so that they do not feel isolated but also giving them space. Again, asking them what they need is a good idea.

*"When someone shows up with a cast, we immediately inquire, "What happened?"
If your life is shattered, we don't."*

- **Talk about the person who died.** When a person dies it can feel like they are erased from people's memories. While you may fear that talking about the deceased person will just bring up painful feelings, many people actually appreciate the opportunity to talk a bit about the memory of the person, finding this a comfort and a way of integrating the memory of the person who has died into their life, rather than pushing memories away. "What's your favourite memory of [the person who has died]?" or "Tell me about a time [the person who has died] made you laugh" can be useful.
- **Focus on listening.** Try to respect what the bereaved person is choosing to share with you and focus on listening rather than finding out more. Give the bereaved person

space to open up if they want to, while also being sensitive if they would rather not take it further.

- **Focus on the bereaved person.** Try to keep the focus on the bereaved person rather than coming back to your own feelings about the loss. Unless you have your own experience of bereavement it may not be helpful to make comparisons with your own experiences.
- **Help them seek additional support.** Supporting someone who is bereaved can be hard work and it is worth exploring what other options for support are out there. If they are ready and interested, help them explore additional support options, such as those listed on our useful contacts section.

Other ways of dealing with your feelings

In addition to the advice discussed in previous sections, there are other ways of dealing with the feelings of bereavement and grief.

Religion and faith

If you have a religion or faith, there are many ways it can help you through this time. Different rituals and practices for grieving can provide an important sense of comfort and offer closure and opportunities to say goodbye.

Your religious community and spiritual leader can provide important sources of support. This is true even if you haven't practised in some time, or don't spend a great deal of time participating in events outside of worship. Reach out to your local spiritual leader for advice on resources and support around you – they can often provide valuable support themselves.

Many people with religious beliefs feel conflicted about grieving – as if the belief that their loved one is in a better place should reduce the pain they're experiencing. Grief comes from the absence of your loved one, and missing them doesn't make your religious beliefs any less real or important.

Similarly, it's normal for people who have lost a loved one to feel angry or question their faith. This isn't something to feel guilty about, or feel pressured to resolve – it's part of the grieving process. Talking to someone, whether it's a spiritual advisor or a secular counsellor, can be helpful.

Peer support

Many people find support groups, either online or in person, very helpful. Talking to others who have similar experiences can make you feel less alone, and it can be useful to discuss and share coping strategies.

Therapy

Therapy can be very helpful for coping with the lasting effects of grief, and provide a safe place where you can talk through your feelings.

Final Word

We hope that you found some of the ideas in this booklet useful. You can continue to use the techniques you found helpful long into the future and they should continue to benefit you. If some of the ideas are not particularly helpful at first, it is perhaps worth sticking with them for a few weeks to give them a chance to work. If however you feel your situation remains largely unchanged or if you did not find this booklet useful, you should speak to your GP who can tell you about the other options available which you could find helpful.

Local & National Information and Support