

FACT SHEET 3

How do I work through my grief?

You may wonder what you have to do to get through your grief. The grieving process is like a journey running from the starting point of your bereavement to a new life. Your journey can be seen as a line on a map.



Grief work

You will progress through your grief as you work through your feelings. Freud called this 'grief work'.

Grief time

Allow yourself a 15 to 20 minute grief period every day. Make sure you can be alone and have put on the answering machine so you won't be disturbed. This time acts as a safety valve. In it you can deal with any emotions that you have stored up.

You may wish to use different ways of grieving at these times: thinking, crying, praying, meditating, writing or drawing.

You may like to keep a diary. Write down your feelings, your grief and the memories of your loved one. You will then notice how your grief changes over a period of weeks and months. This will be proof to you of your progress. Keep the diary in a safe place; the memories you have written down about your loved one will be precious for you in the future.

Many people find crying a relief. Rather than being an indication of weakness, tears are often a sign of strength and show that you are prepared to work through your grief. Some people find it difficult to cry, and yearn for tears to release their grief.

Enlist help

The process can seem long and lonely. The Trans-Help Foundation has trained staff who have personally experienced grief and are willing to talk to you.

Some people find the experience of someone else who has been through a similar situation invaluable.

Alternatively you need to find someone whom you can confide in, for example, a relative or friend.

The Journey

Initially

At first you may be overcome with shock and confusion. You may feel guilty. It may all seem like a bad dream. You may find you can live only minute-by-minute, day-to-day. You may have had to deal with the police, coroner's officials and funeral directors at a very private time of your life.

You may have to speak with your loved one's place of work or education, and deal with questions from friends and neighbours. If your loved one has taken their own life you may be questioning what to tell people, and perhaps even whether or not to try to cover up the suicide.

After the funeral....unreality

After the funeral you may wonder why your grief gets worse instead of better. You may feel the separation from your loved one becomes more painful after parting with the physical body. Your loved one may feel very distant from you.

You may be struggling with the unreality of the death every time you face a new situation which would have involved your loved one. You may find yourself faced repeatedly with the pain that they will not return.

Three to four months

After about three or four months you may reach a low point in your grief as the reality that your loved one is not returning sinks in fully. Many people find this very hard to accept. It takes some much longer than others. You may find yourself fighting against it, crying out, and yearning and pining.

You may be frightened of losing the memories of your loved ones and temporarily be unable to visualise their face. You will never lose those memories. They just become hidden for a while and will re-emerge later. You will hold on to them and they will become very precious to you. This is one way your loved one will be with you now. Making the change towards that acceptance can be very difficult.

You may be given constant subtle reminders of your loss. There are no telephone calls and no home-comings. You watch your loved one's friends continuing with their normal lives. Support from family and friends may be diminishing as they have at this point moved on through their grief and are getting on with their lives and expect you to do the same. You may be feeling intensely lonely.

You are also probably becoming physically and emotionally exhausted. It is usual for the body's mechanisms which promote the coping responses to become drained about this time. And, incredibly, most people expect you to be back on your feet by now. This is a good time to visit your doctor. Your health can be assessed and you have an opportunity to discuss any further help.

But things will not stay this way

Survival

As the days pass you will experience your grief beginning to lift and it may surprise you that life can regain some normality. You will experience good days and bad days. As time goes on you will experience more peaks and fewer troughs and the troughs will become gradually shallower.

Healing

In the early stages you may find it difficult to believe that your grief will lift and your journey will take an upward turn. The intense pain and sadness which you are feeling will subside and the memory of your loved one will become more comfortable in your mind. You will retain the happy memories. You will invest in life again and plan your future, although this may be a different life from the one which you lived before.

And growth

You will discover new strength and courage within yourself that you did not know that you possessed. Just being able to survive demands resourcefulness, determination and strength. As you wrestle to derive sense and purpose from your tragedy and pain, you will discover you are growing and deepening as a person.

From the discoveries which you make during your grief journey will come a new sense of purpose and creativity in your life. Different people find this in different ways: caring for others, accomplishing some task, perfecting some skill, having a great sensitivity to nature or in developing their personal philosophy. You will have changed and your life will have changed too. It takes time to accept the new you.

