

COUNSELLING SERVICE

COPING WITH  
LOSS AND GRIEF

UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER 

MIND MATTERS

3994/02/18/AD

# COPING WITH LOSS AND GRIEF

## WHAT IS GRIEF?

Throughout our lives, we all have to face change and loss. Sometimes this involves a great deal of emotional pain. It may be difficult to make sense of what is happening. Sometimes loss can undermine our sense of who we are.

The death of someone close may be the most severe form of loss, but other losses can also affect us deeply. Divorce or separation, exam failure, leaving home, injury or ill health, the breakdown of a friendship or of a relationship, may have deep significance.

Coping with bereavement, or a major loss, can be particularly difficult when you are at University. If you are living away from home at a time when you most need the support of family or friends, may leave you feeling isolated. You may feel that you do not know your new friends at University sufficiently to share your feelings. You may think the people around you have not had similar experiences and will not be able to understand. In addition, the pressure of exams and deadlines can seem relentless.

Grief is not a one-off event but a natural process of adjustment to loss. You may want to get it over and done with and get back to normal but it takes time. People experience a whole range of feelings in response to loss and sometimes worry that they are going mad, but these feelings are normal.

## SHOCK

**Sudden or unexpected loss may produce a state of shock as a natural anaesthetic to insulate against overwhelming pain and you may experience:**

- Tearfulness
- Physical and emotional pain
- Shivering, sweating and dizziness
- Palpitations, panic
- Sleep and appetite disturbance
- Fatigue.

## NUMBNESS

**You may feel numb and may:**

- Avoid emotion
- Become withdrawn
- Feel isolated
- Feel unable to think, concentrate or make a decision
- Behave in an irrational way
- Use alcohol or drugs to cope.

# HOW DOES GRIEF AFFECT PEOPLE?

## DENIAL

**Denial is a normal response to loss and it may pass quickly, or last a long time. You may:**

- Feel that it is not true or not happening
- Expect the person who has been lost to return
- Continue to behave as if nothing has happened
- Keep busy even to the point of exhaustion
- Feel that you can see or talk with the person who has gone.

Alternatively, you may think constantly about the loss.

THE GRIEVING PROCESS MAY BE DELAYED, OR PUSHED ASIDE BY OTHER LIFE EVENTS, ONLY TO SURFACE, POSSIBLY YEARS AFTER THE ACTUAL LOSS, TAKING YOU BY SURPRISE.

## ANGER

A common response to loss or death is anger. 'Why didn't someone do more?' 'How could they leave me all alone?' 'Why me?' This can be very difficult but anger is a normal and appropriate response and it can be helpful to talk about these feelings.

## GUILT

You may feel guilty and may be troubled by thoughts of 'If only...'

These are common feelings for people who are dealing with loss.

## MOVING ON

At the time, it may feel as if you will never get over it. Gradually, you will no longer think constantly about the loss. This, in itself, can feel like a betrayal.

As time passes, anniversaries and milestones in the year become less difficult. There will come a time when you may find a place for the person or the loss that allows you to get on with life. However, a significant loss or bereavement may produce profound changes in the self, in relationships with others and with the world.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

### If you have experienced a loss or bereavement:

- You may feel vulnerable and accident prone and it can be a relief to have support from family and friends
- Funerals, rituals or finding some way to say goodbye, may help you accept the reality of the loss
- Allow yourself to feel sad, to talk about it again and again, to weep and to dream. These are all natural ways of making sense of your loss
- If you are having trouble sleeping, don't lie in bed tossing and turning. Get up and make a drink, read, listen to the radio or find something that comforts you
- Ask friends and family for what you want. This may be company, a meal, to be left alone, to talk, to listen, to just be there. People often don't know what to say or do and they may be glad to have some guidance
- Accept that you will be in emotional turmoil and don't make any major decisions about moving away, giving up your course or ending a relationship, while you are not quite yourself
- There are many people in the University who you can turn to for support. Initially, you may prefer to speak to someone you know, such as your personal or senior tutor, or a member of staff in your School. They will put you in touch with specialist services, if necessary. You may prefer to approach the Counselling Service, the Student Health Service or the Students' Union
- If your difficulties are affecting your academic work, talk to your personal tutor or a member of staff in your School so that they can help you with arrangements for course work or exams

## HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE ELSE

- Really listening, without interrupting and without trying to offer solutions, is often enough
- Allow the person to express themselves. They may want to cry or to be angry. This may feel very uncomfortable for you, but try not to distract them with forced cheerfulness
- Ask them what they find helpful and respect their wishes, if this is possible
- The person may initially reject your offer of help and may seem to be coping well. It often takes time for the effects of loss to hit home, so do not be put off from offering your support again at a later date
- Loss can take a long time to heal and the immediate rush of attention may quickly fade away, leaving the person feeling abandoned. Small acts of support, sustained over a longer period, may be more helpful
- If the person seems to be stuck in their grief, or if you are concerned about them, encourage them to seek help
- If the person is talking about suicide, either directly or in vague terms, take it seriously and encourage them to see their GP. If this is not possible, speak to someone who can intervene. This may be a member of staff in your School or the Counselling Service.

"...SMALL ACTS OF SUPPORT, SUSTAINED OVER A LONGER PERIOD, MAY BE MORE HELPFUL."

## SPECIALIST HELP

GRIEF IS A NATURAL PROCESS AND PEOPLE HAVE TREMENDOUS INNER RESOURCES, WHICH HELP THEM TO COPE WITH LOSS AND DEATH EVEN IN TRAUMATIC CIRCUMSTANCES. MOST PEOPLE GET THROUGH WITH THE SUPPORT OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY.

However, you may be away from home or not want to worry people you know or you may feel they can't understand. Perhaps you would simply prefer to talk to someone who is not involved.

Occasionally, the grieving process gets stuck and you find you cannot feel anything at all. Maybe the loss rekindles past hurts. You may continue to be intensely distressed long after the event, or continue to have problems with sleeping, work or relationships, alcohol or drugs. You might find that you are thinking of suicide as a way out. In these situations, you need to find some help.

## WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

### INSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- The **Counselling Service** offers free, confidential, individual and group counselling and workshops to all students. The service also offers support and guidance, to those concerned about the welfare of a friend or relative. To arrange an initial appointment, telephone 020 7911 5000 ext 66899 or email [counselling@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:counselling@westminster.ac.uk)
- The **Student Health Service** can offer you information, support, advice and referral for specialist help. Tel: 020 7911 5186 (West End), 020 7911 5000 ext 4107 (Harrow), [westminster.ac.uk/studenthealth](http://westminster.ac.uk/studenthealth)
- **Disability Learning Support** offer information, support and advice with managing as a student with physical disabilities or mental health conditions. Tel 020 7911 5163 (Central London) or visit [westminster.ac.uk/disability](http://westminster.ac.uk/disability)
- The **Student Union** offer advice and support. They can be contacted on 020 7911 5000 ext 5454 and at [uwsu.com](http://uwsu.com)
- The **Student Advice Service** offer advice and information on funding, benefits, visa and immigration matters. They can be contacted on 020 7911 5000 ext 66080 and at [westminster.ac.uk/advice](http://westminster.ac.uk/advice)

## WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

### OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- Your **GP** can offer you support, advice, medical treatment or referral to specialist help. All GP practices offer an out-of-hours service for emergencies.
- **London Nightline** offers a confidential telephone listening service, run by students for students, which is available from 6pm-8am every night during term-time, Tel 020 7631 0101.
- **The Samaritans** offer a listening ear 24 hours a day, Tel 116 123, this number is FREE to call.
- Information, resources and links to useful organisations can be found at [studentdepression.org](http://studentdepression.org)

Details of organisations offering specialist help with coping with loss and grief can be found on the **Counselling Service** webpage, [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](http://westminster.ac.uk/counselling)

"THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE INSIDE  
AND OUTSIDE OF THE UNIVERSITY,  
TO WHOM YOU CAN TURN TO FOR SUPPORT."

DETAILS OF OTHER SPECIALIST HELP CAN BE FOUND AT:  
[WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING](http://WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING)

#### Acknowledgements:

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