

Coping with Grief and Loss



Warmly presented by



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COUNSELLING & PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Introduction

Across our lifespan development, we inevitably encounter loss as well as personal growth. These losses may refer to a loss of friendship, identity, job or living space. Among the most devastating losses we encounter is the bereavement of someone that we love be it a parent, spouse, a child or a friend. When this occurs, our world is shaken to the core as we experience the pain of losing this person who has represented a significant part of our lives.

People grieve differently and this is based on factors like the complexities of the relationship they held with the deceased, the degree to which this was expressed or suppressed and whether their death was sudden or traumatic. Sometimes the process of grieving, whilst very painful, smoothes out in six months to a year. And sometimes it doesn't. There is no 'normal' amount of time to process these feelings as they will be subjective and unique to the person experiencing them.

RISE Counselling & Psychotherapy are glad to provide this companion booklet for grief and loss which may provide some clarity and comfort if you have lost someone recently or are still experiencing the rawness of the loss some years later. The booklet includes general information and is based on the works of respected theorists in the area of grief and loss such as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and William Worden.

Some useful links to support services and telephone numbers are included towards the end of the booklet and on the back page we have included our contact information should you wish to reach out to us at any stage.

Sincerest regards,

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Immediately After a Loss

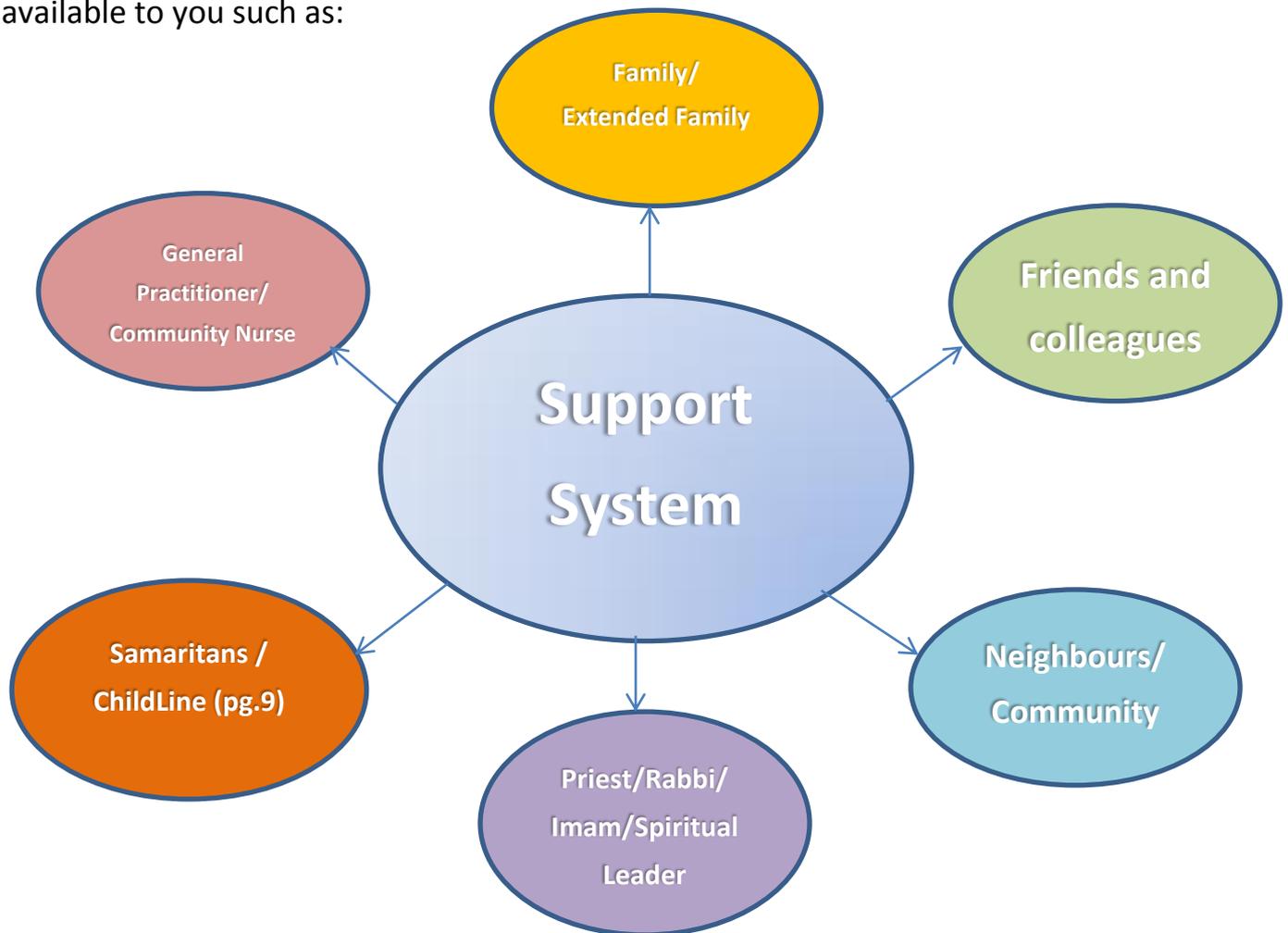
You may experience a number of things immediately after a death. To shield us from more intense emotions, our mind often places us in a state of shock or numbness. Some people feel disorientated or a certain haziness of reality while others react by continuing as if nothing had happened. Again this is a self-protective measure to keep more difficult feelings out of conscious awareness. When shock subsides, and we feel the pain and finality of the loss, this is often very difficult to bear, however it is also a natural psychological response to loss and the beginning of the grieving process.

When someone we care about dies in sudden or traumatic circumstances, integrating the finality of the loss can be more problematic, especially when an individual is a witness to the death. This is a traumatic experience which may result in symptoms such as flashbacks, social anxiety, sleeplessness and disturbing nightmares. This is an eventuality in which it is particularly important to stay connected with your loved ones and wider support system (see page 4) and if you are supporting the bereaved person you should stay engaged with them and assist them to seek medical attention if necessary.

For many children and young people, the death of a parent, sibling or a grandparent will occur at this point of their life. While it is commonly thought that a child or young person who is bereaved from a young age will not be greatly affected or understand the implications of the death, this is not the case. While caregivers may try to protect and shield the child from grief, this is not helpful in the long term, and children or young people regardless of their age need to be given the opportunity to talk about how they are feeling and supported to understand their emotions. It is very likely that if these feelings are suppressed in early life, they may be a lot more complicated or traumatic to experience later in life leading to other mental health and behavioural issues.

Seeking Support, Self-Care & Grounding

As many who have suffered bereavement will know, it is important to be supported by others who are able to listen attentively and empathically to your thoughts and feelings following your loss. They may not always know what to say but to be heard and accompanied at this difficult time provides comfort. There are different sources of support available to you such as:



Understandably, we may pay less attention to basic self-care having experienced bereavement. With that being said there are little things that may help you feel a little better. Try to eat small and filling meals such as pasta, rice, potatoes and some fish and green vegetables where you can. These are nutritious and provide energy and brain food. Drink lots of water and avoid alcohol as this is a depressant. Meditation may not be advisable when a loss is still very raw, however deep breathing and muscle tensing/relaxing can be helpful to ground you. While seeking counselling or group support will help you to process feelings of grief and loss, it is generally more beneficial to consider this at least 2-3 months after the bereavement when feelings of shock and numbness subside. Your GP can advise you on whether or not you may require medication at this time.

Stages of Grief & Loss

Denial

Denial is associated with the initial stages following the death of your loved one. In some cases it may persist where finality cannot be reached. Denial may include continuity of routine involving the deceased such as waiting to meet them from work or the school bus. It may be that the deceased's living quarters are maintained as is, as if they were going to come back at any moment, often referred to as 'keeping a shrine'. Hoarding can also relate to the denial stage of grieving.

Anger

Traditionally we have a saying; "don't speak ill of the dead". However it is as important that anger towards the deceased is felt and expressed as it would be if they were still living and this is in order to reach the deeper layers of sadness and heartache. It may be around the unfairness of their passing or lingering issues regarding financial circumstances. This stage is part of making peace with the loss of your loved one and consolidating your life experience with them.

Bargaining & Yearning

Part of how we react to loss is wishing that the deceased would return or wishing that it had been us who had died. It is characterised by a process of "what if?" questioning e.g. "what if we had known sooner?, what if I had done something?, what if the doctor had done something?". Hence a part of this stage of the process may involve projection of blame onto one's self or others and in a sense it is an extension of the denial stage.

Depression

It is important to understand that grief is not something to just 'snap out of'. Depression is a natural, appropriate response to the realisation that our loved one is not going to get better this time and is not coming back. It is the necessary experiencing of despair that allows us to move towards acceptance.

Acceptance

We may never be "OK" with the loss of our loved one. In this context acceptance is adjusting to life without the deceased as best we can, and adapting to a new 'norm'.

Note: These stages make up part of a framework in how we come to live with the loss of our loved ones and identify what we may be feeling. But they are considered non-linear in that we can move between each of these stages for some time before a more solid, enduring sense of acceptance is reached.

Internal and External Tasks and Adjustments

Accepting the reality of the loss

To many people, “acceptance” often implies agreement or approval. To others, “acceptance” may imply severing ties to the past. Acceptance doesn’t have to mean any of this. Rather, in the case of losing a loved one, acceptance may simply mark the moment we are ready to begin our journey of healing. Engaging in rituals such as funerals or writing a letter to the person who has died, or talking to a therapist or a close friend or family member are helpful ways to start to come to terms with the reality of the situation.

Working through the pain and grief

Grief naturally is accompanied by a wide range of intense emotions such as sadness, longing, emptiness, loneliness, anger, numbness, anger, anxiety, and confusion. This part of the grieving process is considered to be adaptive by many specialists in the field of grief and loss. The grieving process can cause complete exhaustion, sore muscles, loss of appetite, and difficulty focusing and making decisions. It is important that you are patient with yourself and allow all of these feelings to wash over you in order to process them.

Adjusting to a new environment

Gradually, (or in some cases quickly), you will start to resume our normal routine. Students will have to go back to school, and adults will have to either go back to work or continue to engage in community activities. Over time you may come to realize the different roles that your loved one performed – either external or internal. Adjusting to an environment without the deceased can mean different things to different people depending on the relationship of the person who has died, as well as the roles that are impacted by the loss. The task of readjustment happens over an extended period of time, and can require internal adjustments, external adjustments and spiritual adjustments. Accomplishing this task requires learning an array of new skills and tasks, ranging from bill paying, lone parenting redefining how you see yourself without the other person.

Finding an enduring connection with the deceased while moving forward

This task includes finding an appropriate, ongoing connection in our emotional lives with the person who has died, while allowing ourselves to continue living. Like the other tasks, this can mean varying things to each one of us. It means allowing for thoughts and memories, while simultaneously engaging in the activities that are meaningful to us and that bring us pleasure. This may even include new activities, people or new relationships. For example some people who lose loved ones to cancer, may get involved in a cancer charity. It is important for us to continue to live our lives with a sense of purpose and meaning whatever that may now entail in light of the bereavement. The relationship that we have with those who we have lost continue to evolve and change as we do. Talking with a therapist community can be a helpful way of learning what it can look like for you to find an ongoing connection with the person who has died. When you are ready, you can choose to begin to find a new way forward in life while incorporating the deep profound love we still feel – and always will. We can learn what matters most to us, and then invite more of it into our lives and after a time; we can learn to allow joy and happiness back into our lives.

Complex Bereavement

Complex bereavement is described as such because it relates to a number of intersubjective factors. For example; whether the death of your loved one was tragic, sudden or as the result of suicide. In addition it is linked to complexities and unresolved areas of the relationship you shared with the deceased when they were living e.g. the nature of your attachment bond.

In a general sense, complex bereavement is usually evident whereby there are severe and prolonged psychological difficulties attached to one or more of the stages of grief outlined on page 5. The complex grieving process is an area that requires a lot of facilitation and support and counselling can greatly assist with this. Many of our counsellors at RISE are trained in depth on complex bereavement and have experience in this area.

Some specific predetermining factors linked to complex bereavement are listed below to give some context:

- Tragic death where the bereaved was present or witness e.g. car accident
- Individuals who suffered abuse at the hands of the deceased, be it physical, mental or of a sexual nature may experience complex grief.
- Complex grief may well occur where a loved one has committed suicide wherein loved ones can feel very conflicted about what happened.
- If homicide was involved and whether or not there is an on-going investigation into the circumstances of the murder. Body may be missing.
- The death of a child or young person is a very traumatic event in a parent's life and extremely difficult to come to terms with.
- Miscarriage, Abortion, Still-birth, Cot-death, Infanticide

Faith Traditions, Rituals and Spirituality

Ireland has become increasingly multi-cultured and we are now a nation of many different faith traditions; based on the 2016 census, 78% identified as Catholic, down from 92% in 1991. The next most prevalent Christian denomination is the Church of Ireland followed by significant numbers identifying as Presbyterian and Methodist. In addition, Hindu and Muslim populations have experienced growth in recent years due to immigration and there is a clear presence of Buddhism and Celtic shamanic traditions. In addition change has taken place within society such as its embracing of the LGBT community and marriage equality.

Each of these faith traditions has varying beliefs in terms of end of life and funeral rites. For example, most of the Christian faiths will repose for a short period and following a funeral mass will proceed with burial, in the belief that the soul has passed on to be reunited with God in heaven. Hinduism on the other hand believes in *samsara* or the sacred cycle of life, death and reincarnation wherein the soul returns to learn specific lessons. Interment must usually take place within 24 hours and family are encouraged not to be excessive in their mourning so that the transcending soul will receive positive thoughts. Islamic faiths also require prompt burial following ritual washing, shrouding and placing of the remains facing in a south easterly direction (towards Mecca). Celtic traditions often favour burning of the remains following traditional rituals which usually take place privately. If burial is taking place they make seek the use of Eco pods as they have strong ecopsychological beliefs about contaminating the earth.

As we integrate diversity and variety into our society it is useful to understand that we live among others who have differing religious beliefs. Where there are interfaith traditions among families and spouses this may cause conflict when an individual is dying and following death, regarding the wishes of the deceased and their family of origin. These decisions may make the grieving process difficult. Another important point that we make here is to distinguish religion from spirituality; that is that religion which is concerned with building faiths, customs and a blueprint for living, is mainly outside of oneself and embedded in a church or revered leaders. Spirituality focuses within and is the link between mind and spirit and it is found in our truest, most authentic core of Self. Leaning towards enlightenment and expansion the embodied soul may endorse religion as a subset of their spiritual life. In this way, it overarches certain rules and myths concerning heaven, hell and the afterlife, religious perceptions of homosexuality, suicide etc. Spirituality is the container of the on-going loving bond with the deceased.

Useful Contact Numbers

<p>Samaritans Tel: 116 123 www.dublinsamaritans.ie</p>	<p>AWARE (Depression Support) Tel: 1800 804848 http://www.aware.ie/</p>
<p>Crime Victims Helpline Free Phone 116 006 Text on 085 1 33 77 11 Email: info@crimevictimshelpline.ie</p>	<p>Dublin Rape Crisis Centre Tel: 1800 77 88 88 http://www.drcc.ie/</p>
<p>Greystones Garda Station Tel: 01 – 6665800</p>	<p>Ambulance Services Tel: 999</p>
<p>HOMELESS Helpline Central Placement Services Tel: 1800 707 707</p>	<p>Suicide and Self-Harm Helpline Pieta House Tel: 1800 247 247 www.pieta.ie</p>
<p>Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Trans Helpline Tel: 1890 929 539 www.lgbt.ie</p>	<p>Senior Helpline (Support for the Elderly) Tel: 1850 440444</p>
<p>Newcastle Hospital Tel: 01 2819001</p>	<p>Childline Tel: 1800 666666 http://www.childline.ie/</p>
<p>Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline Tel: 1800 341 900</p>	<p>AMEN (Male victims of domestic abuse) Tel: 046 9023718</p>

If you cannot find the service you need to contact, you can call Directory Enquiries on 11811



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Here when you need us

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Adults – Couples – Child & Adolescent – Family Therapy - Addiction

*“These mountains that you are carrying, you were
only supposed to climb”*



“Never lose hope. The butterfly is proof that beauty can emerge from something that is completely falling apart”

- Jane Lee Logan

Bibliography and Further Reading Material

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