

Caring Conversations Bereavement & Covid19



In these unprecedented times, with the Covid19 pandemic claiming lives all over the world, our members, activists, friends and family will all be impacted by it.

This guidance note aims to give you an understanding of how to comfort someone through bereavement, grief and loss. It also outlines how death and bereavement in the circumstances of the pandemic can be particularly upsetting at this time.

Part 1: How to support someone who is grieving

When someone you know is grieving after a loss it can be difficult to know what to say or do. This could be a friend, family member or union colleague. The bereaved can struggle with many intense and painful emotions, including depression, anger, guilt, and profound sadness. Often, they also feel isolated and alone in their grief, since the intense pain and difficult emotions can make people uncomfortable about offering support.



You may be afraid of intruding, saying the wrong thing, or making someone feel even worse at such a difficult time. You may think there's little you can do to make things better and that's understandable.

Try not to let the discomfort prevent you from reaching out and talking to someone who is grieving. Now, more than ever, they need your support.

Important: You don't need to have answers, or give advice, or say and do all the right things. The most important thing you can do for a grieving person is

to simply be there. It's your support and presence that can help people cope with the situation.

Part 2: Some specific impacts of Covid19

Before we look at support for people experiencing bereavement it is important to note some of the ways that the pandemic impacts on the grieving process.

Most people experiencing bereavement are starting from a position of heightened anxiety and stress as a result of the pandemic.

Extensive media coverage of the pandemic increase the exposure of bereaved people seeing and hearing graphic accounts and stories of death. Also, they may have personally experienced or witnessed distressing scenes. This can cause heighten feelings of distress.

Infection controls may mean that family members do not have an opportunity to spend time with someone who is dying, or to say goodbye in person.

The current restrictions during the pandemic mean many people are unable to attend funerals, cremations and wakes. Funerals can only go ahead at a crematorium or graveside. Only 'immediate family' are able to attend and they must abide by social distancing rules.

Compulsory isolation (Shielding) and social distancing guidelines as a result of the pandemic conflicts with regular standard advice to avoid isolation at a time of bereavement.

Increasing pressures on health services may cause friends or family to have concerns about the care the person received before they died. This in turn can lead to feelings of anger and guilt.

Traumatic bereavements are generally more challenging and such experiences are common during the pandemic.

Part 3: Five key ways to support someone who is grieving during the pandemic

- Be mindful of your own wellbeing
- Don't let fears about saying or doing the wrong thing stop you from reaching out
- Let the person know that you're there to listen

- Understand that everyone grieves differently and for different lengths of time
- Offer to help in practical ways if appropriate and manageable, before and after the funeral

Part 4: Understand the grieving process

The better your understanding of grief and how it can manifest itself the better equipped you'll be to help, to understand and to cope yourself.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve - grief does not always unfold in orderly, predictable stages. It can be an emotional rollercoaster, with unpredictable highs, lows, and setbacks. Everyone grieves differently, so avoid telling someone what they "should" be feeling or doing.

Covid19 & unpredictable responses - It is unusual for personal bereavements to occur as part of a global process of anxiety, shock and loss. Grieving in "normal" circumstances is not orderly. Knowledge of the pandemic may give personal loss a wider community context, but the daily unfolding of news may increase the trauma and emotional turbulence associated with bereavement.

Grief may involve extreme emotions and behaviors - Feelings of guilt, anger, despair, and fear are common. People need reassurance that what they feel is normal.

Covid19 & strong responses to grief - Many of these emotions may well be exacerbated due to the suddenness of the death which may have happened without any loved ones being able to be present. Covid19 related deaths can be shocking and unexpected. There may be a strong sense of anger that "more could have been done". The absence of information or contact may trigger denial, anger and resentment. The range of responses may be wide and all quite natural. Don't judge them or take their grief reactions personally.

There is no set timetable for grieving. For many people, recovery after bereavement takes 18 to 24 months, but for others, the grieving process may be longer or shorter. Be mindful of this if you are in contact with someone some time after the death and never pressure someone to move on or make them feel like they've been grieving too long.

Covid19 & recovery processes - It is too early to know how the collective experience of the pandemic will impact on individuals, but it is likely the impact will vary. Isolation and restrictions around funerals may distort initial reactions, whereas the prolonged nature and scale of the

pandemic may affect longer term recovery. The best approach is to accept a person's grief as they experience it, and listen.

Part 5: Know what to say to someone who is grieving

While many of us worry about what to say to a grieving person, it's actually more important to listen. Well-meaning people avoid talking about the death or change the subject when the deceased person is mentioned. Alternatively, most of us will know there is nothing we can say to make it better. As a result we may try to avoid the grieving person altogether.

But the bereaved need to feel that their loss is acknowledged, it's not too terrible to talk about, and their loved one won't be forgotten. When the number of deaths is so incredibly high, it is important that every loss is unique and individually important. By being present face to face or on the phone and listening compassionately we can be a huge source of comfort.

Covid19 & knowing what to say - The pandemic dominates all conversations, news, government announcements and personal accounts. Avoiding Covid19 as a discussion will be impossible, but care should be taken to avoid overwhelming people or triggering the initial shock and trauma of the death.

Debating or arguing over the quality of the national response to the pandemic might appear to divert the person from their grief but this might be unhelpful. Listening to what happened to the person who died might be a more compassionate approach.

(a) How to talk - and listen - to someone who's grieving



While you should never try to force someone to open up, it's important to let them know that you're there to listen if they want to talk and that their discussion with you is confidential. A short text may remind them that they are in your thoughts and that you are available to listen.

Talking about the person who died is okay. Don't steer away from the subject if the deceased's name comes up. Some simple things that might help you in a conversation include:

- I don't know what to say but I am so sorry to hear this news.
- I am so sorry for your loss - you are in my thoughts.
- I'm so sad to hear this and I'm here if you need to talk.
- S/he was such a wonderful person/so selfless - full of positivity/kindness [whatever feels appropriate] - they will be hugely missed.
- S/he will be missed so much - they were so special. You are in my thoughts.
- I am so very sorry to hear this sad news. I cannot imagine how devastated you are.
- I cannot imagine the hole that she/he would have left. If you need anything, let me know.
- So very shocked and saddened by this sad news. Hard to believe [name] has gone. I am here when you need me.

(b) You can also:

Acknowledge the situation. For example, you could say something as simple as: "I heard that your father died." By using the word "died" you'll show that you're more open to talk about how the grieving person really feels.

Express your concern. For example: "I'm sorry to hear that this happened to you."

Let the bereaved talk about how their loved one died. People who are grieving may need to tell the story over and over again. Be patient.

Ask how someone feels. The emotions of grief can change rapidly so don't assume you know how the bereaved person feels at any given time. Remember that grief is an individual experience and no two people experience it exactly the same way, so never claim to "know" what the person is feeling. It is possible to sympathise and empathise without comparing your grief to theirs. The emphasis should be on listening

Accept someone's feelings. It can and will be difficult if someone is crying or angry. Try not to judge or reason with them over how they should or shouldn't feel.

Take talk of suicide very seriously. If a grieving person talks about suicide encourage them to talk to their GP or a specialist organisation such as:

Samaritans - phone: 116 123 (24 hours a day 365 days a year). Samaritans provides phone and email support for anyone who's feeling low, struggling to cope or at risk of suicide.

NHS Inform - Scotland's national health information service. Provides information on how to look after your mental wellbeing.

Cruse Scotland (E-Mail helpline@cruse.org.uk Telephone 0808 808 1677) Offer to call them back to see how they are and you should discuss any concerns with your Line Manager.

Accept that people have different beliefs – It is important that we do not make assumptions about faith or belief or inadvertently push our beliefs onto the bereaved person and never judge them for their beliefs.

Don't feel bad about struggling to talk. It's far better to just listen to someone or simply admit: "I'm not sure what to say, but I am sorry for your loss"

Be willing to sit in silence. Silences will happen and this can be okay if it's a natural pause in an ongoing conversation. Don't press if the grieving person doesn't feel like talking. You can always offer to call them back in a day or two. "Being there" for someone during the pandemic will almost always be a virtual presence. A text message or voicemail can remind the person that they are still in your thoughts. Isolation need not always lead to loneliness if we keep a connection.

(c) You can avoid saying these commonly used phrases

Support for people who are grieving will never be word perfect. But there are some common phrases that can be unhelpful.

"It's part of God's plan." Any assumptions about faith or religion can make people angry. Whether a death has any wider meaning is a very personal thing for the bereaved to decide, on their own terms, in their own time.

“Look at what you have to be thankful for.” As with faith, gratitude is a very personal perspective. They know they have things to be thankful for, but right now that is less important than how they feel, here and now.

“She’s in a better place now.” The bereaved may or may not believe this. It is best to keep your beliefs to yourself unless asked.

“This is behind you now; it’s time to get on with your life.” Sometimes the bereaved are resistant to getting on with life because they feel this means “forgetting” their loved one. Besides, moving on is much easier said than done. Grief has a mind of its own and works at its own pace.

Statements that begin with “You should” or “You will.” These statements are too directive. Instead you could begin your comments with: “Have you thought about...” or “You might try...”

Part 6: Offering practical assistance

It can be difficult for many grieving people to ask for help. They might feel guilty, fear being a burden or simply be too depressed to reach out.

There are practical ways as UNISON Activists or Staff that we can help a grieving person with assistance by signposting and making them aware of services from UNISON and other organisations:

UNISON There for You

UNISON's Welfare Charity assists members experiencing financial and emotional difficulties. Members can contact our welfare charity "There for You" which provides a confidential advice and support service for members and their dependants.

<https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/>

Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

UNISON Staff can use our EAP helpline and online resources. This service is entirely confidential. If a member of staff would like to speak to a trained counsellor, please telephone 0800 072 7072.

Staff can also access lots of information and guidance on a variety of practical, medical and wellbeing topics through the [EAP Online Portal](#). When prompted callers should enter the username "unison" and password EAPun08. Staff can also have counselling via an online "chat" service if they prefer not to speak on the phone.

UNISON – Death Benefit

To claim this benefit a member must have been a member for 4 weeks prior to death, have no arrears of contributions, be in full membership and claim the benefit within 12 months of the date of death.

2019 Rule Book Extract

R2.6.2 *Entitlement*

As from 1 July 2019 the death benefit shall be based on completed years of continued membership

Under 5 years	£ 142.50
Over 5 and less than 15	£ 285.00
Over 15 and less than 25	£ 423.50
Over 25	£ 570.00

Download a claim form here : [HERE](#)

NHS Inform

Scotland's national health information service can be reached at www.nhsinform.scot. NHS Inform provides information on how to look after your mental wellbeing.

Samaritans

Samaritans provides phone and email support for anyone who's feeling low, struggling to cope or at risk of suicide. Phone: 116 123 (24 hours a day 365 days a year).

Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH)

Scotland's national mental health charity. Provides information, links and resources about how to protect your mental health. Contact www.samh.org.uk

Young Scot

Scotland's national youth information and citizenship charity for 11-26 year olds. Provides

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland (CBCS) exists to promote the well-being of bereaved people in Scotland. CBCS seek to help anyone experiencing bereavement to understand their grief and cope with their loss.

They have specific information about bereavement and the pandemic covering

Grieving and isolation

Being bereaved can be a lonely time, and isolation due to the current situation can make it more difficult. Find out how you can help yourself or others.

Traumatic bereavement

If someone dies of coronavirus, it may be particularly traumatic for family and friends. Read about how this can affect bereavement and what can help.

Funerals

Under the current rules funerals are limited and may be delayed. Many bereaved people will not be able to attend. We have some suggestions which might help.

Anger and blame

Feelings of anger and blame are common after any bereavement. When someone has died under sudden or traumatic circumstances it can make these feelings worse. Find out more.

Feeling guilty

Feeling guilty is very common when someone is bereaved. No-one is perfect and sometimes blaming ourselves can be easier than blaming the person who died or others. Find out more.

Feeling your bereavement is not a priority

There can be a strong spoken or unspoken feeling that certain deaths are more tragic than others. But every death can be a tragedy for friends and relatives left behind.

Children and young people

Children and young people will be affected by what is going on around them, and may have many fears about the situation and the coronavirus.

Coping with talk of death and dying

At the moment it is impossible to avoid of discussion of death and dying. This can bring up difficult feelings for those with anxiety and mental health issues. It can also bring up difficult feelings and memories of past bereavements.

E-Mail helpline@cruse.org.uk Telephone 0808 808 1677

Breathing Space - Breathing Space aims to provide the people of Scotland with assistance at an early stage in order to stop problems escalating with empathy, understanding and advice through active listening as well as direction for those who do not know where to seek help

<https://breathingspace.scot/how-we-can-help/what-we-do/>

Helpline number: 0800 83 85 87

Further Learning resources for you

NHS Education have produced this video for use by Health Professionals and carers who need to talk to the bereaved – The principles are the same for us and I would encourage you to watch it [here](#)

The Open University have a Free Course on the Open Learn Platform and for those of you who want a deeper insight you can dip into this material [here](#).