

The Grief Journey

When we are confronted with death, we are given the gift of life. Death is giving us the chance to understand the essence of life and how precious it is.

Bethel Funerals

Compassion . Peace . Hope



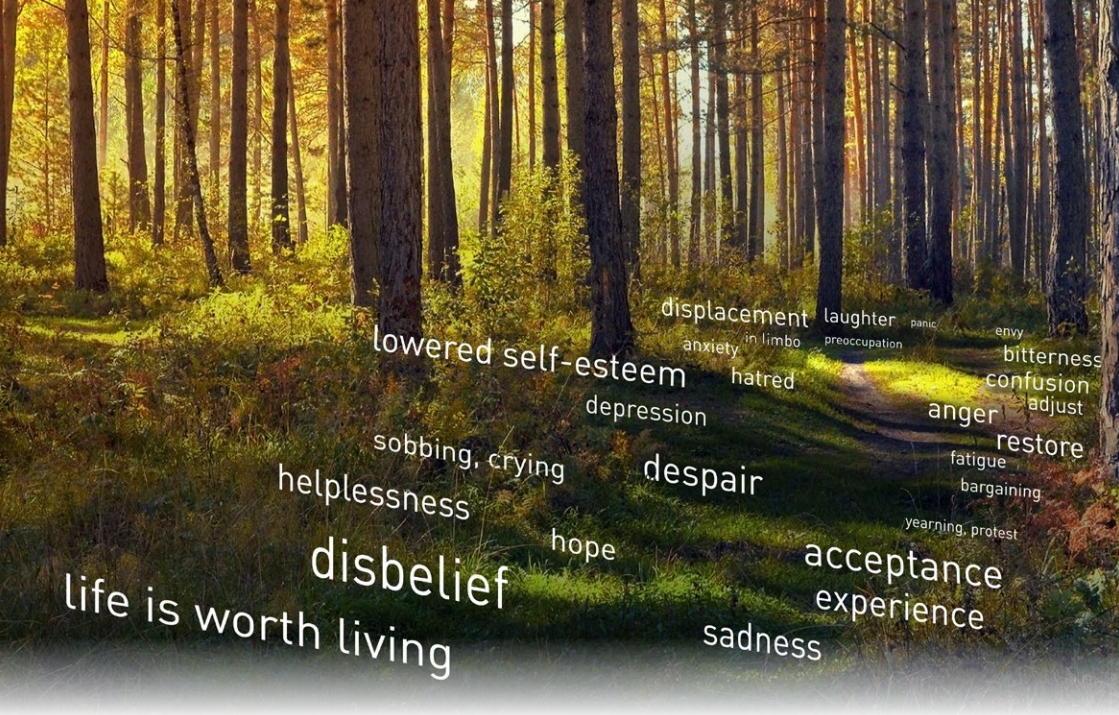
What is Grief?

Grief is an emotional response to our loss. The ability to grieve in a healthy and constructive way is essential for ongoing life.

For each person and family, a loss is experienced differently. A person's grief journey will be influenced by their relationship with the one who died; the circumstances surrounding their death; their own life experiences of managing loss; the amount of support they have in their community; and their ability to express their feelings.

There are many factors which affect the way a person grieves. 'Normal' grief occurs when a person is deeply saddened by the death of a loved one. This may extend over a period of weeks, months and sometimes years. This grief experience or journey is often typified by an intense yearning for your loved one, hearing their voice, seeing their image and a range of varying emotions. People adjust in their own time and in their own way to a new way of different in the absence of their loved one.





What Does Grief Look Like?

Grief is unpredictable!

Below are some thoughts, feelings and emotions that may be experienced as you walk through your journey.

Grief can be:

- All pervasive and all consuming, an intense yearning for the one we have lost
- A heart that feels heavy or empty
- A feeling that you are just functioning on automatic pilot
- A roller coaster of emotions

Grief responses can be triggered when least expected – a song, event, images, a familiar place or even a certain smell can trigger a new wave of feelings for our loss. It is unrealistic to place expectations of “stages” or time frames on the grief process.

Grief is like a wound that heals but leaves us with a scar – this scar is always there, a reminder of your loved one.

Managing your Grief

Strategies you may find helpful as you work through this unpredictable time:

- Find a trusted person to share your thoughts and feelings with
- Be gentle with yourself – take each day at a time
- Set small manageable tasks for each day
- Make a memory book
- Keep a journal
- Accept your feelings as they come
- Have a relaxing bath, enjoy a massage
- Join a support group
- Engage in some new activity that will re-focus your attention – previous shared activities may be hard to continue
- Find the balance between receiving support, having company and spending time on your own
- Know your own private space for tears. This might be the bedroom, the shower or a special memory place such as your garden. Tears bring release, healing and relief
- Keep in balance: rest, exercise and diet
- Be mindful that if you go away from the house for a while, you may find coming home to be especially hard
- Forgive the ‘what ifs’ and regrets
- Recognise anger and what may be underlying this feeling; it may be a key factor in your healing



**Be gentle with yourself – take
each day at a time.**

Many feel that once a year has passed their grief will ease, the reality is - grief has no time limits.

Memorials And Rituals

Memorials and rituals may be a very significant way for you to remember your loved one. These can be created at any time through your grief journey.

A memorial is something that celebrates the person, reminds you of the joy you shared and is a symbol that honours their life.

Sharing photos, planting a plant, or a small ritual ceremony, are all ways that can help to continue your emotional bond and remember the person who has died.

As the anniversary of the death approaches, you may like to think about some of these things:

- What would you like to do on the day?
- Do you want company or would you rather be on your own?
- Do you want to share a ritual of any sort?
- Do you want to visit the grave/memorial site?
- You may like to write a letter to your loved one.
- You could create something by which to remember them, such as a photo album or scrap book.
- Sharing a photo and precious memory on Facebook to allow others to know how you are feeling and support you.





For Those Whose Soul Mate Has Died

One widow describes her journey:

She finds it hard being home alone, coming home to an empty house and the nights are lonely. She finds she has no energy, sometimes she feels betrayed, she is like an empty cicada shell and doesn't know where she belongs. She has found that music is helpful for her, it is soothing, cathartic and healing.



As hard as it may be: make allowances for others' oversight and insensitive comments. They are offering support to the best of their ability and understanding.



- You may feel as if you have been cut in half – particularly after being together for many years.
- Going to an event or on a holiday may leave you feeling very lonely.
- You may find coming home to an empty house confronting.

For Those Whose Parent Has Died

Even though the death of a parent is seen as the 'natural order' in our lives, we still need to grieve our loss and accept the reality of their death.

- We may have conflicting feelings if we continue to care for a surviving parent and support them in their grief.
- Our parent has always been present in our lives, no matter what our relationship with them.
- There is a gap left in our lives when they die.
- Physical and financial adjustments may need to be made.
- There is loss of our relationship with our parent who has died and we need to create a new relationship with our remaining parent.
- Childhood feelings can be reawakened which sometimes need to be acknowledged and understood more fully.

Distribution of parental effects can be a blessing or a curse and has the potential to cause much family disharmony. There may have been ongoing relationship difficulties or sometimes new dissension can emerge. If this does occur, it can be a very difficult time having to deal with both the conflict and your individual grief. Hopefully as each person moves into a new phase of their life, these issues can be resolved.

If you are an only child you may find that this death can bring about feelings of isolation and loneliness. Sometimes the burden of responsibility through this time may feel overwhelming.



If both our parents have died we may feel like an 'adult orphan'.

- We can feel powerless and helpless.
- There is no one to fill in the missing pieces of history.
- We can feel unprotected and afraid.
- We no longer need to buy them presents and are not able to celebrate special events with them.
- There is a gap through lack of their physical presence.
- We can create a new individual identity and make decisions for life ahead, reorganising our identity.

For Those Whose Child Has Died

Parents do not expect to outlive their child – it goes against the natural order and justice in life. Paul Field, manager of The Wiggles, describes the loss of a child:

“When your child dies it is like being thrown off a cliff; it does not feel like you can possibly survive.”

Parents have the common feeling of “putting on a front” or “mask” to protect others from having to hear or see their pain and to protect themselves from other people’s sometimes painful responses.

A Child is many things to a Parent.

- A source of love and joy
- A part of yourself
- Shared with your partner
- A continuing representation of the generations past
- They carry the genes of their forebears and are the hope of the future
- Sometimes a symbol of the best and worst parts of ourselves

Following a child’s death your life experiences may be impacted in the areas of: physical health, social, finances or employment.

The stability of a couple’s relationship prior to the child’s death is a strong contributing factor as to how you will grieve. It’s not a proven fact that your relationship will struggle or fall apart following your child’s death. Your relationship may alter as you grieve differently - ongoing communication is vital.



“Each partner is limited in the support they can offer the other because each is mourning a different loss.”¹

It is important to remember that you are still parents even though your child has died. Your identity and role as a parent can be threatened through this time, leaving you with feelings of guilt, impotence and worthlessness.

How will I know that I have begun to accept the death of my child and am able to manage life again?

- When you sense decreased feelings of regret.
- When you feel peace about the precious opportunity you had to be the parent of your child.
- When you feel confident that you accomplished and said all you could for them during their life.
- When you can look back with happiness at the loving relationship you had with your child.

“It is important to recognise the longevity and intensity of parental bereavement, and that parents will incorporate the child into their ongoing lives and will go from loving in the presence, to loving in the absence.”²





For Those Whose Loved One Has Died Through Unexpected Circumstances

One woman described her grief after her son died in an accident, “the life we knew died as well. It’s like you’re reborn into another life. You’re like a baby again. The first year, if someone says to you, ‘Eat’ you eat and then after about three months you learn to lift your head up, then to sit up, and then finally to walk. You have to learn to live again.”

For each person and family, a loss is felt differently. Anyone who has lost a loved one through unexpected circumstances feels tremendous shock and trauma. There are varying phases of pain that most people experience sooner or later, along with confusion and mixed emotions. These may be manifested by – grief, guilt, anger, blame, shame, despair, betrayal, and rejection. These are normal and valid responses and feelings to the loss that you are carrying and in some cases trying to understand.

There are many factors that affect the way a person grieves. Extra help may be needed as appropriate, through counselling and other support services.

We cannot always understand or know how to accept situations.

We can, however, move on in life without understanding them or having all the answers.

For Those Whose Loved One Has Died By Suicide

Sometimes a death by suicide can be explained, other times it will remain a mystery.

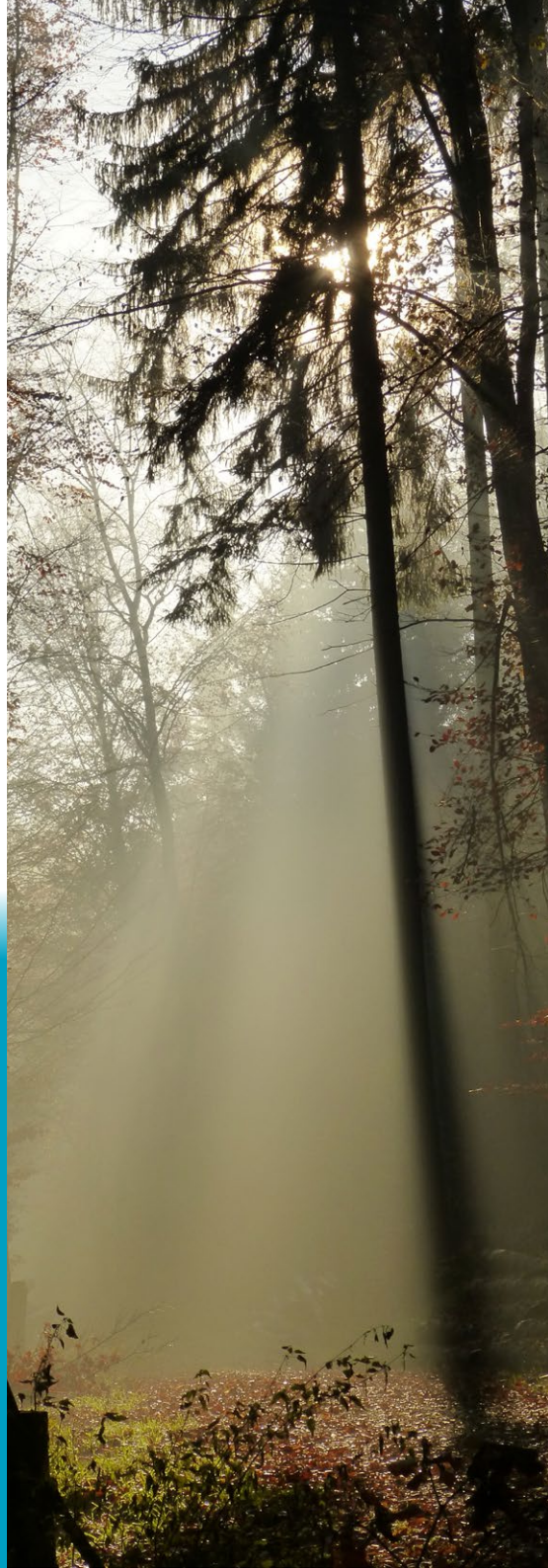
Suicide can be the result of an impulsive, erratic act that is, unfortunately, permanent. You must never feel responsible, or to blame. The person has chosen to end their life of their own accord.

Suicide often raises questions within us:

- Why did this happen?
- Why didn't we anticipate this happening?
- Could we have done anything to prevent it?
- How can we go on?
- Could I have done more to help them?



It may be helpful to remember that the person did what they thought was best at that time. Suicide is a decision and an act that cannot be changed. It is certainly not an easy decision to understand.



Managing Following An Unexpected Death

Deaths which happen unexpectedly and without warning may bring about unexpected feelings and responses.

- If you found your loved one's body or saw them following their death, you may have flashbacks and nightmares.
- The place where your loved one died or how you were informed of their death, may affect your grief response.
- If there is no confirmation of death (missing person) or their body was not suitable for viewing, this may compound your grief.
- During the first few weeks and months it may be helpful to have someone to care for you, to record your cards and visitors, as this time can be a blur.
- In the ensuing months you may remain in shock, feel confusion and disorientation, have trouble concentrating and remembering things, feel a sense of denial, depression or fear.
- Feelings of helplessness and anger, guilt or responsibility, rejection and abandonment may surface. These are all common feelings but when any physical symptoms such as weight loss, sleep disturbance, substance abuse, chest pains, headaches or shortness of breath persist, it is advisable to seek professional help.



Sometimes a death may be a relief if a loved one has struggled through many years of depression or illness. If you have watched your loved one struggle for years with suicidal thoughts, then their death may not be such a surprise or shock, however this does not mean their death is any less stressful or difficult for you.



In the Days/Months/Years Ahead

- It is advisable to keep your loved one's possessions for a while and not to make too many decisions in the first months or year.
- Legal and financial matters may complicate the family's security, including loss of wages due to legal proceedings and/or inability to work.
- You may have been further traumatised by having to deal with the media.
- You may have to wade through lengthy court proceedings.
- If your loved one's death challenges your faith it may be advisable to talk to your minister or a counsellor to help you understand and accept how you feel.

Take your time in making any decisions - don't feel pressured by others' expectations of you.



Words of Comfort

Psalm 46: 1-5 & 7

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.

God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.

The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Psalm 73: 26

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.



Isaiah 40: 29-31

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.



References

- 1 Riches Gordon, Intimacy in couple relationships following the death of a child, in Grief Matters, Summer 2005, p56
- 2 Queensland Palliative Care Project 2006, p31

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May you find God's peace and
comfort through this time of
grieving and adjusting to your loss.
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Need more?

If you are in need of further information or help you are invited to visit our website:
www.bethelfunerals.com.au and select 'Helpful Resources'

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MITCHAM Office & Chapel

2d Cochrane Street,
Mitcham VIC 3132
03 9873 8866
info@bethelfunerals.com.au

CARRUM DOWNS Office & Chapel

620 Frankston-Dandenong Road,
Carum Downs VIC 3201
03 8787 7255
info@bethelfunerals.com.au

BRISBANE Office & Chapel

2998 Logan Road,
Springwood QLD 4127
07 3219 9333
infoqld@bethelfunerals.com.au

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