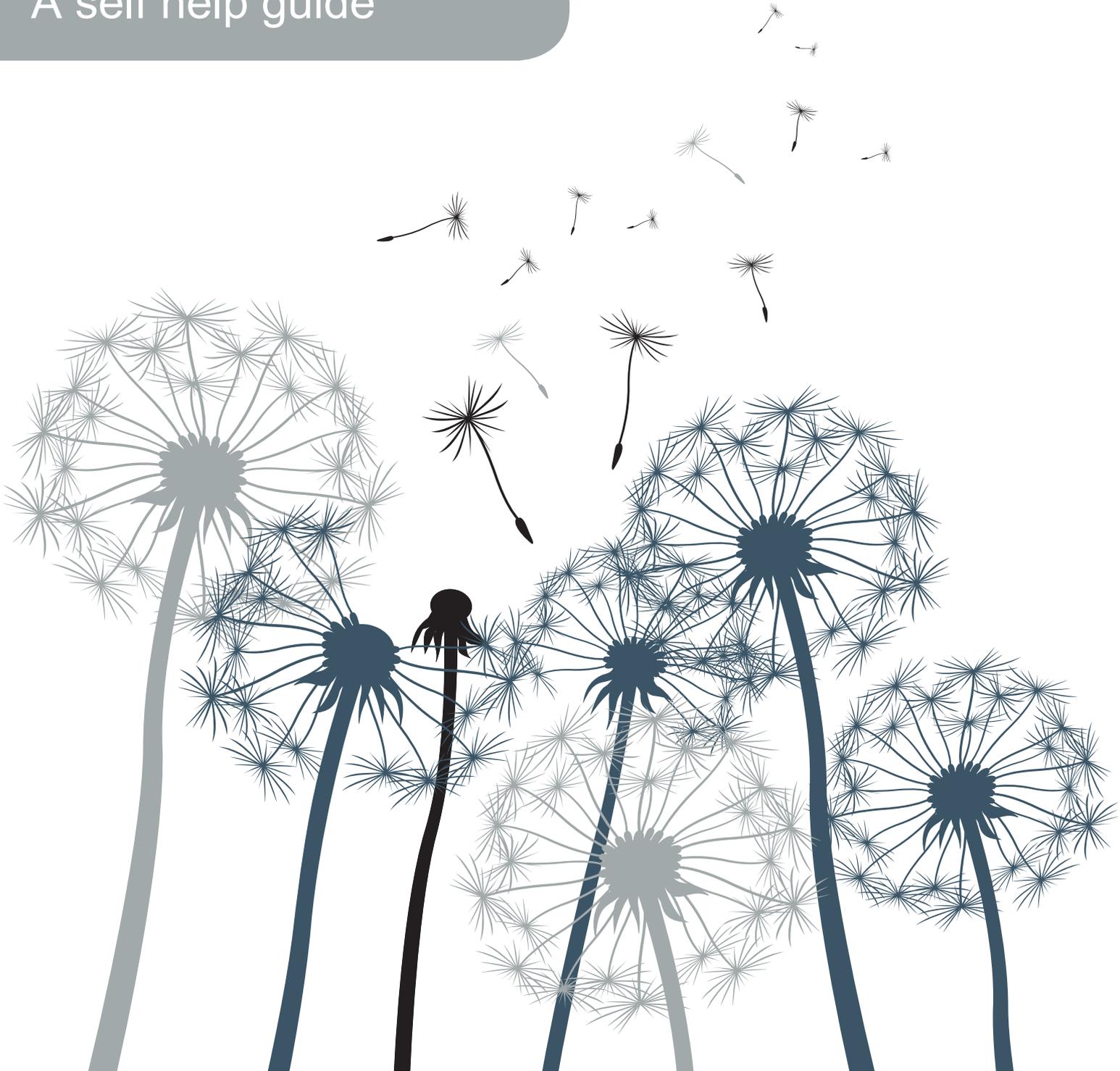




Prohealth UK
THERAPY, SELF-HELP & TRAINING

Bereavement

A self help guide



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Who is this booklet for?

- This booklet is for anyone who has experienced a bereavement either recent or in the past.
- It may also be useful to people facing the certain loss of a loved one. Although it is sometimes hard to face these issues in advance, this can be helpful.
- Relatives or friends of a bereaved person may also find this booklet useful.

Coping with bereavement, grief and certain loss

“We really didn’t believe it when we found out the diagnosis. I thought these things only happened to other people, but the time we had to come to terms with it was really precious. We were able to think and plan together. “

“My father died six weeks ago after an 18 month struggle with cancer. Now I can’t get the picture of him at his worst out of my mind. I wish I could remember him as he was when he was well, but I can’t. I feel so guilty; I wish I could have done more...”

“I lost my wife six months ago after 45 years of marriage. She only had a short period of illness during which she never regained consciousness. It was so sudden I don’t seem to be able to cope with it. I keep expecting her to walk through the door. I sometimes feel she is present during the night but I always wake up disappointed...”

“My husband committed suicide earlier this year, and I am left on my own to bring up my two small children. I feel so lonely and isolated. Sleeping is a big problem. At times I feel angry with my husband for leaving me to cope on my own even though I know it wasn’t his fault. Other times I feel completely numb and still can’t believe it.”

“I don’t think people understand how upset I am about losing my dog. Bobby has been part of our family for 16 years and has seen us through so many ups and downs. It was awful to make the decision to have him put to sleep but I couldn’t bear to see him in such pain.”

These are the experiences of some people who have suffered bereavement.

As you can see, people can have quite different experiences when they lose someone close to them. This booklet gives some basic details of what needs to be done when there is a death. It aims to help you understand some of the emotions which may be faced during a bereavement or loss. It also makes some practical suggestions which may help you get through this difficult time. At the back of the booklet there are some addresses and telephone numbers of organisations which may be helpful to you and some suggestions of books for further reading.

What practical things need to be done if there is a death?

- When someone dies at home a doctor must be called to sign a medical certificate.
- When someone dies in a hospital or hospice, the doctor there will give you a medical certificate.
- If the death has been sudden, the doctor will have to talk to the police who will report it to the coroner. A post mortem examination may be arranged.
- Once you have the medical certificate, you must take it to the register office and register the death within five days. You may need to make an appointment to do this. The registrar will issue a death certificate and a certificate for burial or cremation, which should be given to the funeral director. Ask for a few copies (6-10) of the death certificate. You will have to pay for these extra copies but you may need these for pension and insurance purposes. The registrar may give you details of the 'Tell us once facility', if it is available in your area. This really helpful service informs all government departments of the death to save contacting each separately. Details of this and other useful information about registering a death can be found on the government website www.gov.uk/after-a-death.
- A funeral director can be chosen before or after you have registered the death. Most people obtain a name from the telephone directory or by word of mouth. He or she will advise on the procedures for the funeral.
- Contact your local Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to arrange pension and other entitlements. You may be eligible for funeral payment or widow's payment. The Directgov website www.direct.gov.uk provides information about benefit entitlement.
- Inform the tax office about your change in circumstances.
- You may want to put a death notice in the local or national papers.
- If there is a will, the executors will make sure it is carried out. Contact the solicitor. If there is no will, contact the Probate Registry for an application to administer the 'estate'. Your local Citizens' Advice Bureau can help you if you are not sure.

Understanding grief

How do people feel when they have experienced bereavement?

Serious loss is something which we will all face at some time in our lives. This may be because of the death of someone close to us or it may be because of other circumstances such as the loss of our health or our home or the death of a much loved pet.

Many of us will not experience bereavement or loss until later in life and may have little opportunity to learn about death and about how people are affected by grief. It can be difficult to know what is "normal" and to understand how we or our families respond when we face a loss.

You may think you are the only person who has felt the way you do. Whilst everyone's response to a loss is a very individual experience, there are some common experiences that many people will share.

How do people feel in the hours and days after the death of a close relative or friend?

People often describe the symptoms of shock soon after the death of a loved one. For example, they may feel numb, panicky, very weepy or unable to cry at all. Some people find it difficult to sleep, others may have physical symptoms such as heart palpitations. Some people find they calmly go through the practical tasks surrounding the death, and worry that they may be seen as uncaring. This is just one of the signs of shock and it is most likely that they will feel the impact of the death at a later point. Some people find themselves completely unable to cope and need a lot of practical and emotional support from those around them at this point.

What sorts of feelings do people have weeks and months after a bereavement?

Please remember that everyone is different. There really are no 'rights' or 'wrongs' when people experience grief in the early stages.

Some people feel a sense of agitation for quite a long time after the death. They may become very active at this time, doing things like cleaning out the whole house. This agitation can sometimes amount to panic, and symptoms of anxiety, such as breathlessness, palpitations, dry mouth, tingling and dizziness, can be present.

People may feel they are "going mad" because they have such odd experiences. People often report seeing, hearing or feeling the dead person near them or in the distance. These experiences are not unusual following a death. These feelings may alternate with depression, weepiness, tiredness and low mood.

People may start to wonder "what's the point in going on?" They may feel guilt, and review the circumstances of the death, and their relationship with the person who died. They may wonder what they could have done differently which might have helped the situation. Guilt is also common when there has been relief at someone's death following a painful and prolonged illness. It is worth remembering that many people feel relief when suffering ends.

People also often feel angry after a death. This can be directed at the dead person; "why has he left me?", or at those around. Family members or people involved in caring for the dying person may be the target for the bereaved person's anger. They might think or ask, "Why didn't you do more?"

Other people's reactions may be difficult for the bereaved person. Sometimes people will be clumsy in what they say or do. Occasionally they will avoid contact with the bereaved person. These reactions are usually because people do not know what to do or say in the face of someone's grief. Sometimes other people do not realise that it can take a long time to begin to recover from a death.

When do people begin to recover from bereavement?

Coming to terms with a death is a very gradual process which can take a considerable length of time. People usually find that gradually they are able to get on with their lives and think a little less about the person they have lost. Most people begin to feel like this within one or two years of the death of someone close to them, but this depends on many factors. It may be difficult to accept the death of a loved one but still be possible to move on with life in spite of this. Sometimes bereavement can be more complicated, particularly in a situation where there has been a difficult relationship. Counselling can be immensely helpful for many people who are bereaved. Details of organisations who provide this can be found at the end of this booklet.

It is important not to feel guilty if you are beginning to build a life for yourself following a death. It is quite normal to begin to recover and start to rebuild your life, and is not in any way disloyal to the memory of the person who has died.

If you feel you are stuck or not coping at all well with your grief then contact your doctor to discuss this. Other organisations which may help are listed at the back of this booklet.

Can tablets help?

Your doctor may offer tranquillisers, to help through the early phase following the death. They can make you feel calmer and may help in the short term but are not helpful for longer term use. Some people find that the numbing effect of tranquillisers does not allow them to experience grief during this time, and grief is an important part of healing. Antidepressants can be helpful if depression following bereavement becomes severe or prolonged.

What can a bereaved person or someone facing the certain loss of a loved one do to help themselves?

Bereavement is always a difficult time, but there are things you can do to help yourself through it.

Before someone dies

- If you have the opportunity, prepare for the death of someone you are close to. It is important emotionally and practically to talk things over. If you are preparing for the death of your partner and it is ok with them, discuss such things as the jobs they do that you will need to take over, and sort out finances etc. Say all the things you would want to say.
- Accept practical help if offered. It is sometimes hard to look after yourself when you are caring for someone else. So if friends offer to shop, cook, clean for you – say yes!
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. People are usually only too glad to help.

Directly after a bereavement

- Carefully consider whether you want to see the body of the dead person. Some people may feel this is too distressing but can regret it later on if they have not done this. Follow your own feelings. There is no right or wrong thing to do, but do think it through.
- Funeral arrangements should be considered carefully. Try to have someone with you. Don't feel pressured into a funeral that is too expensive for your budget. Try and think about what you really want.

In the days, weeks and months following a bereavement

- Do make sure you look after your own health. This is a time when you may become prone to illness. Eat well, rest properly, take extra care. You may want to take vitamin supplements if your appetite is very poor. Visit your doctor if your health is not good.
- Do talk to people about how you feel. Go to your doctor if you feel you have no one you can talk to. He or she may suggest speaking to a counsellor.
- Do ask for help if you feel you are not coping.
- Do keep up contacts and relationships. Accept invitations, invite people to visit, keep in touch with family and friends. Find out about local events, clubs and classes.
- Do plan what you will do on anniversaries such as birthdays, Christmas, anniversary of death. It will help if you decide in advance how you want to spend these occasions, which are likely to be emotional times.
- Don't make major changes in your life, such as selling your house, moving areas, jobs, etc. until you have had time to adjust to the death. This is a time when people may make changes they can regret.
- Don't enter into new financial arrangements without proper advice. Talk to a friend, family member or an advice organisation such as Citizens Advice.
- Don't turn to drinking alcohol to get you over this difficult time.
- Don't bottle things up.

What can family and friends do to help?

Family and friends can help at this difficult time.

- Spend time with the bereaved person if that is what they want.
- Talk and listen to the bereaved person. Don't be afraid of saying the wrong thing - this is a situation many of us feel awkward about. It may help to admit that you don't know what to say if that is how you feel.
- Don't be surprised if the bereaved person wants to talk and go over the same ground again and again, this is quite usual.
- Don't take anger or irritability personally, it's part of the bereavement reaction.
- Talking about the dead person can be helpful for the grieving person. Don't try and avoid mentioning them in everyday conversation.
- Offer practical help if the bereaved person wants this. Caring for children, help with shopping etc. may be useful, especially in the early days following a death.
- Don't expect too much of the bereaved person initially even if they look as if they are coping.
- Include your relative/friend in social events.
- Support your relative/friend in building new links, social contacts and interests.
- Try to discourage the bereaved person from making any major decisions, such as moving home soon after the death. Support them in thinking through the options and implications of this.
- If your friend or relative seems 'stuck' and not coping at all well, encourage them to seek help. The family doctor is a good place to start. Other organisations that may help are listed at the back of this booklet.