



Caring *for Yourself and Others* **After a Death**

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Foreword

Few people will escape the ravages of grief. It was late one afternoon after school. I found it odd that my aunt's car was in the driveway. I pushed past the gate only to see her huddling over my mother at the dining table, whose eyes were glistening with sadness. From that moment, life for me changed irrevocably.

It has been years since I lost Father. Yet, whenever I see an unexpected car in the driveway, my pulse races and I dread looking beyond the gates. A flood of memories pours in: a trip to Pulau Tioman that took place after Father completed his radiotherapy; of him standing at the shore watching his (not so little) girl race in a canoeing competition; or of me at the letter box, tearing open the brown envelope which revealed the letter of acceptance into medical school; and just wishing he was around to share my joy and tears.

As a palliative care physician, I have come across many who continue to feel the pangs of hurt long after their loved ones have passed on. We see death so often that one would think that we are experts in dealing with bereavement. The truth is that familiarity does not make us better equipped. In medical school, the subject of bereavement was an orphaned child, lost amongst the many topics jostling for our attention. Even as seasoned professionals today, there are times we feel inadequate when attending to the grieving, especially those whose emotional pain continues to persist. I believe this sense of inadequacy resonates with many others.

I am therefore delighted that a team of dedicated social workers, nurses, doctors, counsellors and researchers from different organisations and settings have come together to move this area of work ahead. They have spoken to many, including those who have lost loved ones, religious leaders,

school counsellors, social service staff and healthcare workers. They have mapped the landscape of bereavement and looked at the needs in service to the grieving. This book is amongst the outcomes of their painstaking work.

Packed with information, tips and a service directory, this book is an attempt to fill a knowledge gap for those who may come across the grieving in the course of their work. We believe it can also serve as a self-help guide for those in grief, or for lay people in different roles – colleague, friend, teacher, employer or other capacity, in their interactions with those who are grieving the loss of a significant person.

May it serve as an empowering tool towards a more compassionate society.

DR ANGEL LEE

Chairman (2016 to 2019)
Singapore Hospice Council

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CHAPTER 1


Preface

Lossing someone to death (i.e. bereavement) is an experience most of us will likely go through at some point in our lives. Whether it is the death of a loved one, family member or friend, bereavement can have a profound impact on us. There is no 'right' way to grieving, but understanding what we are experiencing may be a good and essential step to coping with our loss.

Bereavement experiences can vary and depend on different factors surrounding the loss and the bereaved. We usually assume different roles in life and may require, or provide, bereavement support relevant to our role and context. This book provides some general information and suggestions on caring for yourself and others when you have lost someone. Particularly, it looks at the grieving process and experience specific to various contexts and settings in our everyday life.

The contents of this book, put together from the contributions of several professionals, serve mainly as an overall self-help guide or for supporting someone else. Speak to someone you trust if you need further support while reading this, or if what you're looking for is not covered within this book. In situations where additional professional help is needed, do seek the necessary consultation with a trained professional.

This book has been organised into sections identifiable by coloured tabs at the sides, allowing you to go straight to the chapter you may be interested in. You can read each chapter at a pace you find comfortable, or at an appropriate time when you need information. Towards the end, you can find a list of helpful resources and a list of community organisations in Singapore



where you can seek support from. We have also included blank pages should you wish to make notes of certain thoughts or reflections.

Complementary to this book, the Singapore Hospice Council has also produced another publication named *When a Death Occurs – A Guide to Practical Matters*. This provides information on funeral planning and the management of the deceased's Estate.

Ebook copies of *Caring for Yourself and Others After a Death* and *When a Death Occurs – A Guide to Practical Matters* can be downloaded at library.singaporehospice.org.sg.

While words alone will not be able to ease your grief, we hope these books will be able to help you navigate through it.

Grieving the loss of someone we love is not easy. May we be patient with ourselves and those around us.





CHAPTER 2

Caring for Your Grief

Facing the death and loss of a loved one is never easy. Though it is a normal and universal human experience, it can have a profound impact on us. A wide range of emotions and thoughts may be evoked, even in situations where the death was expected. The way we grieve and cope with loss is different for each individual, and no two persons will react in the same manner.

Understanding what you're experiencing and exploring what is personally helpful for you will be vital for your own coping. Most bereaved individuals will be able to cope with their grief and ultimately adjust well. However, there may be some who have more pronounced difficulties in their bereavement and will benefit from having additional support from a professional.

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is a natural response to a loss we experience. The loss of a loved one can feel intensely painful for some. It is not something we try to get over, but rather, something we learn to manage and get through. While it may seem

almost impossible to get through the anguish in the initial weeks or months after a loss, many bereaved persons have shared that the intensity of grief lessens and eases with time.

It is important we see grief as a changing process over time and not a one-time event. Because it is an individualised journey, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way of grieving. The process is not linear, and it may feel messy or unpredictable at times. There is also no fixed schedule or timeline to grief, and for most, there may never be an 'end point' where the grief completely disappears. Grieving the loss of someone we love may last for a lifetime. However, we eventually grow and adapt, and we learn to integrate the grief into our lives.

COMMON REACTIONS IN GRIEF

The ways we experience grief and react to a loss could be influenced by several factors including:

- the way the death occurs;
- the nature of attachment and relationship to the person we have lost;
- the griever's personality;
- presence of concurrent stressors;
- previous losses and grief experiences;
- the life stage that the bereaved is in; and
- accessibility of a supportive social network.

Grief is often associated with emotional reactions to the loss that has happened. It may include feelings of shock, anguish, sadness or anger. For some, there can also be feelings of relief or comfort, especially in situations where the dying process has been long-drawn or where our loved ones are perceived to have been liberated from the suffering of illness.

Yet beyond the emotional aspect, there are also other ways in which grief can be experienced. These include physical, cognitive and behavioural reactions. You may find yourself identifying with some of the following common reactions at some point throughout your grief journey:

Emotional	Physical	Cognitive	Behavioural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shock • Anguish • Yearning • Disbelief • Sadness • Numbness • Anger • Guilt • Blame • Fear • Emptiness • Helplessness • Worry • Irritation • Anxiety • Loneliness • Relief • At peace • Acceptance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headaches • Muscle tensions • Stomach discomfort • Heart palpitations • Tightness in chest • Fatigue • Difficulty sleeping • Sleeping too much • Loss of appetite • Restlessness • Numbness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion • Rumination on certain perspectives • Thoughts of self-blame • Recollection of memories • Problems concentrating • Thoughts of injustice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying • Preoccupation with personal belongings of loved one • Difficulty organising daily tasks • Withdrawal from others • Poor self-care • Loss of interest in enjoyable activities

EVERYONE GRIEVES DIFFERENTLY

Remember that everyone grieves and copes differently.

Some individuals may experience emotional responses, while others display more physical or cognitive grief reactions. Crying is not the only response to grief. Some people just do not cry, and there may not be anything wrong with that. He or she could still be feeling the loss just as deeply as anyone else affected by it. The absence of observable emotions does not always indicate that one is coping well with the loss. Conversely, crying and being emotional does not always equate to not coping well either.

These differences can be understood from the perspective that there are varying ways to grieving and coping. Kenneth Doka and Terry Martin explain that there is a continuum of grieving styles, where on one end sits those with an *'Intuitive grieving'* style, and on the other end those with an *'Instrumental grieving'* style.

Intuitive Grieving is often associated with a range of rich emotions and the expressions of these emotions. Individuals with this grieving style are comfortable with tears and talking about their emotional experience.

They may find ways to explore, express and process their grief, in order to cope with the weight of their emotions. They may prefer avenues such as:

- Talking to someone else;
- Allowing oneself to cry;
- Recollecting memories and sharing them;
- Reminiscing by going through photos, personal belongings or objects of the deceased;
- Going to places that they have frequented in the past with their loved ones; and
- Expressing feelings through creative means (reflections, writing, journaling, photo-journaling, the arts, music etc.).

Instrumental Grieving usually involves more thinking and doing, as compared to feeling. There are individuals whose intrinsic style of grieving may be less expressive of emotions and instead, more cognitive, task-oriented or solution-focused.

Coping with grief may therefore comprise efforts to understand, learn and rationalise knowledge and thoughts. It may also appear more action-oriented, with the griever being more focused on completing tasks. Some examples include:

- Doing something to fix an issue;
- Logically analysing problems faced in bereavement;
- Thinking of step-by-step solutions to problems faced;
- Finding and gathering information to help oneself; and
- Elaborating a to-do list to manage daily tasks and routines.

Given that grieving styles are viewed as a continuum, most of us would exhibit a blending of both styles, even though it is likely we will be more inclined to either intuitive or instrumental grieving. Where we find ourselves on the continuum would also vary across the different contexts of loss.

The way we grieve and cope is also dependent on our own preferences and temperament. Some individuals may find more comfort in being alone, while others draw significant strength and support from having people around. They maintain connection with others, continue with social meet-ups with family, friends, faith communities or specific interest groups. Some may benefit from attending support groups, while others prefer to have personal and inner reflections on their own.

Knowing that there are different grieving patterns and ways of coping can help explain the variations in how people experience and process their grief. This also enables us to better understand the normalcy of our own grief journey and recognise what will be helpful for us.

GRIEVING THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

In the initial days after a loss, it is normal to occasionally experience moments of shock and disbelief. We grapple in our minds and find it hard to imagine that our loved one is no longer physically around. We may miss him or her deeply and wish that he or she is still with us. We may also have questions relating to “Why has this happened?” or “Have I done enough?”

For a while, the practical matters (e.g. funeral and administrative matters) that need to be handled after a death can often keep us very busy and blur our attention towards our own emotions and thoughts. This may include the eventual need to return to our jobs, most of the time within a week or two. Some may experience difficulties in concentrating or functioning as efficiently as before. As we get back to our routines, the reality of the loss starts to sink in, and the emotions may then be felt to a greater degree.

The absence of our loved one can feel increasingly amplified, and we gradually realise that things are no longer the same as before. We may begin to notice changes in our day-to-day lives and try to adjust to living without our loved one. There may be new roles to undertake, new routines and

“Whenever I face any difficulties, or I want to ask her something, I will write letters to my mom. I will talk to her and update her about my life like she is still around. I touch the things that she gave me, and I will think about her.”

tasks, both big and small. It may be particularly difficult when other family members and friends visit or call less frequently after some time. If we were the caregiver to him or her before the death, the caregiving experience may also add to our emotions, leaving us to feel lost about what's next.

How we view life and death will also have an impact on the grieving process. When faced with the death of someone we love, our world views and beliefs may be challenged. Individuals may find themselves having to re-examine previously held meanings, beliefs and identities in order to make sense of the loss. Some would question their religious faith, while others may seek solace in their religion and ultimately develop a deeper meaning and trust. Spiritual and religious beliefs sometimes help one address the common questions that arise as a result of a death and guide the bereaved to eventually find ways to adjust and be at peace.

It is helpful to understand that our grief can potentially fluctuate like waves, easily raised and lowered by simple reminders or memories from the past. It could be a place you've visited together before, recalling his or her favourite food, a special song you both shared, having to go back to the healthcare institution where he or she was cared for, or a simple question someone asks you that reminds you of your loved one.

Sometimes you may feel calm and things may feel alright. The next moment, you find yourself overwhelmed by a sudden wave of emotions and thoughts, even when it is least expected. You may wonder if you're abnormal, or question whether you have a problem. It may feel like you're 'not getting better', or have 'taken two steps backwards'. Know that this is normal — whatever you experience or appear not to experience. There will always be 'good days' and 'not so good days'. Having this perspective allows us to embrace these fluctuations.

“IS MY GRIEF NORMAL?” is one of the most common questions we hear from bereaved persons and family members. You are not alone if you’ve asked this question. Many will, at some point, question whether it’s normal to be feeling, thinking or behaving the way they do.

Having, or not having, any of the grief reactions does not make you normal or abnormal. Remember we are all different and unique individuals with our own life experiences, personalities and coping styles. There are those who may experience more physical reactions, while others have more emotional ones. Some behaviours we exhibit, even if unusual, may be our own way of remembrance. You may also choose to respond and cope in ways that are in keeping with who you are as a person, or in ways that are appropriate to your lifestyle or life stage you are in.

You may be asking “Am I normal?” as a way of finding assurance that you can get through this time. You may also be wondering if you are ‘still on track’ or if you should seek professional help. In trying to address this question, seek to be aware of your own grief and consider how it is impacting your life — the way you interact with your family and friends, your work, how you are when you’re at home, how you feel about yourself, how you view this world now, your social activities, etc. What do you think of your own grief? Is your grief affecting your life in significant ways that you find disturbing? Are you hurting yourself or others? Is it disrupting your life beyond what you can manage? You may find it helpful to discuss your responses to the above questions with someone who knows you well.

HOW LONG WILL MY GRIEF LAST?

How long grief reactions last truly varies across individuals and situations. For some, it may be days, while for others it may be weeks or longer. However, there is really no fixed schedule to dictate how long you should take to regain your equilibrium. Though some of these reactions may linger, many bereaved individuals have experienced that the intensity and frequency tend to decrease over time.

Sometimes we imagine grief to be something that shrinks and disappears with time. Often, there may never be an end point where it completely goes away. We never stop missing our loved ones. Even years on, we could still be reminded of them and brought to tears. We take time to adapt to the changes and find ways to cope with our emotions and challenges. The grief stays, but we could learn to carry it with us in meaningful and healthy ways. We continue to grow our lives and capacity around the grief, which over time, becomes a part of us.

COPING WITH YOUR GRIEF

Coping with bereavement often requires us to balance between attending to the grief we experience, and concurrently managing the adjustments and changes in our day-to-day lives. It is important we develop avenues and strategies in both these aspects.

Here are some suggestions as you journey through your grief:

1. Allow Yourself to Grieve in Your Own Way and at Your Own Pace

Acknowledge and accept your own feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Your grief will wax and wane. Be careful about comparing yourself with others around you. Refrain from blaming yourself for any of your reactions, even when you feel you've 'failed'. This can be an extremely difficult period, and it takes time for you to gradually find your equilibrium and move forward. There is no timeline and no singular order of things. Recognise your own intrinsic style of grieving, and identify adaptive strategies that you may find personally helpful in expressing or managing your grief. Don't rush yourself or put unnecessary pressure 'to be okay'. It is okay not to feel okay. Learn to be kind and patient with yourself and the process.

2. Create a Schedule and Routine for Yourself

With the death of your loved one, there will be numerous things to handle, especially if you are the one managing your loved one's personal matters and belongings. Along with it comes many changes as well, both big and small. You may be required to learn new skills, assume new roles and do new things. It may be beneficial to establish a routine to give structure and help you manage daily needs. Your daily schedule could include setting aside personal time each day to attend to your grief as well.

Keep your routine simple for a start, and create a list of the things you need to do. It often helps to organise things in a way that enables you to keep track of them easily – e.g. in boxes, folders, the use of colour coding or labels. Even as you attempt to pack your loved one's personal belongings, remind yourself not to rush through it. You may wish to arrange them according to "things with sentimental value and to keep", "things that you no longer need or want", and "things that you are still undecided about and will reconsider at a later time".

Take incremental steps in working out what tasks and matters need to be undertaken first. Choose to do one or two each day, and balance it with your own personal needs and rest. As the weeks go by, you can gradually include more items to handle in your daily routine.

3. Take Care of Yourself and Tend to Your Well-being

Attending to your feelings and adapting to changes can be stressful and exhausting. It can have both emotional and physical effects on you. Make an effort to care for various aspects of your life, including having an adequate amount of sleep, eating well, simple exercising and going back to doing things you used to enjoy. These may be hobbies or activities you find relaxing or rejuvenating. Where needed, it's okay to accept help or support offered by other family members and friends.

4. Seek Support from Trusted Family Members and Friends

It is common for many in grief to prefer to be alone. However, grieving may also be more manageable you are not by yourself. It is important to maintain some form of social bonds, interactions and activities.

You may feel awkward talking to someone else about your grief or you may not wish to trouble others. Sometimes, reactions from your family and friends could make you feel more awkward and uneasy. People around may have good intentions but may feel equally helpless about what to say and do.

Decide for yourself how much time you want to spend with others, and identify the people you find supportive. Reach out to these family and friends whom you trust and feel comfortable with. A call or message from you could help them know when you need company and what you find helpful.

5. Find Ways to Maintain a Sense of Connection with Your Loved One

Many bereaved persons have shared their fear of forgetting their loved ones or having their memories of them become blur and fuzzy over time.

A helpful way to manage this fear is to create your personal ritual for remembrance or memorialisation. It is meaningful and can bring healing. Some examples include taking strolls at a place you used to frequent with your loved one, listening to a favourite song, sharing news with him or her

through talking or writing even though he or she is no longer around, creating a symbolic memento, looking through photos and holding on to his or her personal belongings, and doing something that your loved one used to enjoy.

Rituals and personal objects of your loved one can give you a sense of comfort and security. They can have a way of keeping us connected to the person we love and miss. We learn to develop a new way of remembering and relating to them as we continue living our lives.

6. Take Note of Anticipatory Anniversary Reactions and Prepare for It

Anniversaries and festivities can be particularly difficult as they naturally heighten the painful absence of your loved one and bring about a recurrence of reminders and strong reactions. Identify those possible days or occasions ahead of time, as it is usually the period leading up to the occasion that may be worse than the actual day itself. You may notice that you start experiencing recurring emotions or physical reactions during this period. Keep in mind this can happen and it is normal.

Prepare for such possible reactions and plan beforehand how you may wish to commemorate and manage these occasions. At the same time, try to tell someone about what is happening to you so that you need not go through the experience alone. Help your friends and families to understand should you need to excuse yourself from special gatherings or celebrations for a period of time.

WHEN GRIEF BECOMES A CONCERN

We have emphasised much about grief being an individual journey, and that most people will eventually find ways to adapt to their loss, with the support of their own resources and the people around them.

Nevertheless, there may still be a group of individuals who may have more pronounced difficulties coping with their grief. They may find their grief affecting their lives in significant ways that are disturbing or impairing. It may disrupt various aspects of their lives to a point where they are unable to function properly on a daily basis, over prolonged periods of time. Their grief reactions may be overwhelming beyond what they feel they can manage and are persistently distressing.

Sometimes, it could be that the circumstances surrounding the death may have been exceptionally distressing, which makes it even harder for those who are experiencing the loss. For example, this can happen in traumatic, sudden or unexpected losses.

TRAUMATIC, SUDDEN AND UNEXPECTED LOSSES

Losses can be considered traumatic when they occur without warning or if they involve violence. Bereavement that has occurred because of a suicide is one such example.

Suicide carries with it a unique and distinct form of trauma and grief. Death of a loved one is always painful but suicide comes with an additional profound pain together with an intense burden of anger, guilt and stigma.

Suicide survivors, referring to anyone left behind after a suicide, experience many of the grief reactions described earlier on. For example, shock, anger, irritability, guilt, blame, helplessness, insomnia, extreme fatigue and social isolation. However, because of the nature of the death and loss, these reactions may be more persistent and heightened, and they can result in greater difficulties.

Why did this happen? Why did he or she do this? Why? Why? Why? This is the most common question suicide survivors ask. Survivors may feel guilty and blame themselves for being unable to stop the suicide from happening or they may direct the blame at the loved one who died by suicide. Why did I not do this or that? Could I have prevented the suicide? Why did he or she do this to me? The search to find answers to these questions can be emotionally draining for many.

Sharing about the suicide is difficult as most of the time, the fear of sharing with others about the circumstances of the death brings more questions and pain. Suicide survivors may also have recurring thoughts or nightmares about the event.

Similarly, special occasions and anniversaries can be hard, especially for the first year or so, as it brings back intense and hurtful memories. Try to establish and maintain open communication with your family

members, friends and others to decide if you are ready to be involved. Pace yourself and even consider skipping some of these events until you are ready to attend.

It is important that suicide survivors seek professional support to process the emotional trauma and the feelings of being unable to cope. This is especially important if the emotional upheaval or distressing signs persist for a prolonged period of time, or if you find yourself having thoughts of suicide or self-harm as well.

Friends, families, religious communities and social support groups could provide the additional support, comfort, care and warmth that you will require in this trying time. Seek to re-remember the person positively or reignite good memories of the past with the loved one when you are ready. This can help you reconcile yourself with the loss eventually.

Grief becomes a concern when there are clear warning signs of maladaptive coping, for example:

- Prolonged and marked difficulties in managing daily routine and functioning;
- Extreme focus on the loss;
- Excessive feelings of sorrow, anger, resentment or guilt;
- Neglecting personal care, hygiene and grooming;
- Substance abuse – turning to alcohol, drugs or other vices;
- Experience of hallucinations;
- Persistent thoughts and feelings of being worthless and hopeless;
- Inability to find joy, positive feelings or meaning in life;
- Prolonged withdrawal from social activities and engagements; and
- Having thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

If you find yourself struggling to manage the distress and impact of your grief, or have been significantly affected by a traumatic loss, it is recommended that you seek professional help or speak to your doctor. It is vital to have a trained professional journey with you through this difficult period. You may wish to refer to the *List of Community Service Providers* at the back of this book for relevant organisations providing bereavement support.



Supporting a Grieving Relative or Friend

Grief is a natural process that affects people when they experience a loss. In trying to be of support to grieving relatives or friends, remember that the emotions they are experiencing are universal, while the intensity and duration of these feelings will vary by individual and they cannot be rushed. There is no right way to grieve and mourn. You may not be able to ease the intense pain of their loss, but you can help them cope with this challenging life experience and find comfort amidst their grief.

When people are grieving, thoughts and emotions are often heightened. The death of a loved one is one of life's most difficult experiences. The bereaved struggle with many intense and painful emotions including depression, anger, guilt and profound sadness. Often, they feel isolated and alone in their grief. Having someone to lean on can help them through the grieving process.

The intense pain and overwhelming emotions associated with grieving can often make people uncomfortable or unsure about offering support to an affected relative or friend. You might be afraid of intruding, saying the wrong thing, or making your relative or friend feel even worse at such a difficult time. That is understandable. You are not alone. However, do not allow these discomforts to deter you from supporting a grieving relative or friend as he or she probably needs your support more than ever. Bereaved individuals more often than not need others to simply be present, listen and care. Hence, be very mindful not to impose any of your advice or suggestions upon them, no matter how useful you think they are. It is imperative to master the art of becoming comfortable with supporting a person with your quiet and caring presence.

For possible grief reactions, experiences and behaviours that your grieving relative or friend may have, please refer to the section on 'Caring for Your Grief'.

GRIEVING AS A FAMILY

More often than not, with the death of a loved one, we may find ourselves in a situation where we have to support the grief of other family members while attending to our own. Although the emotions of grief can be a highly personal experience, the experience of grief is not meant to be an individual process. Along with culture and religion, our family influences how we look at and cope with death, dying and grief. Each family has their unique experiences of grief that are influenced by family dynamics, relationships, roles, culture, beliefs and so on.

Family Dynamics

Each family grieves in its own way, just as each person grieves in his or her own way. Most families have unspoken 'rules' about what can be said and what feelings can be expressed openly. These rules often become more apparent when there is a crisis in the family, such as a death. Some families are comfortable being sad, angry or upset in front of one another. In other families, expression of feelings is frowned upon or brushed off. Messages such as "You need to be strong" and "It's all in the past, let's move on", may lead to feelings of isolation and leave a family stuck between repeating old patterns and trying to do things differently. Some families see crying as a

form of weakness, and that it is acceptable for women to be crying but not acceptable for men to cry. Families also differ in how much information they share with each other and how much they actively include children in the grieving process. Sometimes, family members may keep things to themselves for fear that talking about them may be too painful for other family members. The death of a loved one can cause profound changes to family dynamics.

Family Relationships

When a family member or close relative dies, the loss is different for everyone. For example, if you are grieving the death of your mother, other family members will be grieving the death of their spouse, their sister, their grandmother, mother-in-law and so on. We all have different relationships within the family. Some family members will be particularly close to us, while others may have a strained or ambiguous relationship with us. This partly explains why people within the family are impacted differently by the loss. In addition, differences in how each individual family member grieves can create tension in family relationships.

Family Roles

Each family member has multiple roles within the family. Roles such as breadwinner, caregiver, parent, spouse, child, and sibling are very significant and the absence of the person who used to fill the role(s) will inevitably leave a void in everyone's life. For example, there may be financial-related concerns and worries about the future when a breadwinner dies. Or, if the mother of young children dies, they may need to have new childcare arrangement. Other roles may be less obvious but will still leave gaps in the family or cause changes in routines and relational dynamics. For example, a mother may have been the main reason for all her married children and grandchildren to gather on weekends to spend time together. Without the mother, the married children may stop gathering regularly on weekends as they may no longer see a need to do so. Family members may also have a spoken or unspoken expectation of another family member to take on a role previously fulfilled by the family member who has died, and this can cause tension in the family.

“After my mother died, I took on her role. I cooked and cleaned and did everything she would have done for the family, on top of my own job and my own life. My family didn’t understand why I had to do so many things after she died. Everyone is affected differently, and they don’t understand what I am going through.”

Understanding grief and bereavement experiences from a family perspective gives us a new level of insights into how a family grieves after a close family member or relative has died. It helps us recognise how it changes the way a family functions. As you journey through your grief as a family, remember to:

- Respectfully allow each family member to grieve in his or her own way;
- Encourage open communication and seek to understand each other — let others know how you feel and listen to what others have to say as well;
- Find ways as a family to share about and remember the loved one who has died. Each member of the family holds different pieces of the memory and story of the loved one;
- Adjust expectations towards yourself and each other, and refrain from imposing your opinions and views. If needed, re-organise tasks and roles according to each person’s readiness and capacity;
- Accept the changes in family roles and traditions. Yet, where possible, try to continue with previous practices as a family, or develop new rituals that can help the family maintain connection; and
- Consider carefully before making major life decisions or changes as a family at least in the first year after a death.

With time and effective communication, most families adjust to the loss and find new ways to live and function as a family.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING A GRIEVING RELATIVE OR FRIEND

Below are some suggestions and information on ways you can support a grieving relative or friend.

1. Understand the Grieving Process

The better your understanding of grief and the grieving process is, the more empowered you will feel in supporting a grieving relative and friend.

Recognise that 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. Grief is a unique experience. Everyone grieves differently, so avoid telling your loved one what he or she should or should not be feeling or doing.

In the initial period of bereavement, your grieving relative or friend may show extreme emotions and behaviours such as being very angry towards God, having the compulsion to retell the events and circumstances around the death, having emotional outbursts and frequent episodes of excessive crying. He or she needs reassurance that what he or she is going through is normal. On the understanding that there is no time frame for grieving, do not pressure your grieving relative or friend to 'move on' or pass judgement if he or she is coping well or not. On the contrary, it is also possible that your relative or friend may show little emotional reactions nor the desire to discuss the death. The seemingly lesser explicit expression of grief does not mean he or she is not grieving. Remember there is no one way to grieve. Your bereaved relative or friend may also be choosing his or her time, audience and context to express his or her grief.

2. Know What to Say

This always seems like one of the toughest tasks of supporting your relative or friend. You will worry about what to say to him or her that will bring comfort and not cause more distress. It is actually more important to listen.

Many people avoid talking about the loss as they think that might cause the grieving relative or friend to be reminded of his or her sadness and make matters worse. So there is a tendency to change the conversation topic or engage in activities that allow little space for the grieving relative or friend to

“I am so thankful for my friends who were there, who gave me the support and listening ear throughout this whole time, even until now. People kept telling me things like he has suffered enough... and that he is in a better place now. I know all that. There’s no need to tell me more. I just need assurance that someone will be there for me when needed. Silence is okay. I know you can’t take my pain away; I just need a listening ear.”

talk about his or her loss. These are well-meaning acts of care and concern. However, your grieving relative or friend would actually benefit more to know and feel that the loss is acknowledged and understood by you. Your grieving relative or friend needs to know that his or her loved one will not be forgotten and it is alright to talk about the loss.

Be mindful of how your personal beliefs or comfort level around conversations concerning death, dying and bereavement limit you in your ability to engage in meaningful conversations with your grieving relative or friend. By listening compassionately, you can take the cues from your grieving relative or friend to determine the aspects of the loss which are significant to him or her. Let him or her know that you are available to listen.

As you remember to listen more than speak, below are some useful communication strategies:

a. Acknowledge the situation

This will send a message to your grieving relative or friend that you are open and comfortable to talk about how he or she feels about the loss. For example, “I heard your grandmother died in her sleep unexpectedly.”

b. Express your concern

Be specific in articulating your concern for him or her. For example, “I remember you enjoyed a very close relationship with your grandmother. I am so sorry for your loss.”

- c. Let him or her talk about the details of his or her loss
You may find your grieving relative or friend repeating the death story, sometimes including minute details. Be patient and listen to him or her. Some bereaved need to recount the experience in order to make sense of it and to come to terms with what has happened. With each retelling, the pain lessens. By listening patiently and compassionately, you are already a great support for your relative or friend.

- d. Ask them how they feel and think
Remember that grief is an intensely individual experience and no two persons experience it exactly the same way. So, never assume that you know how it feels for them at any given time. Emotions of grief and the thoughts associated with the grief can fluctuate over time. Ask them what they are feeling and thinking at that moment and focus on listening to them share their immediate experience.

If you have gone through a similar loss and think it might be useful for them to hear your experience, ask if they are interested. Be mindful not to compare or impose your own grief experiences on them.

- e. Be open to hearing any concern
Be explicit in letting your grieving relative or friend know that it is okay for him or her to cry, get angry or break down in front of you or raise any concern, no matter how trivial he or she may think it is. This will allow your relative or friend to feel safe and free to express any feeling, thought or concern without fearing any judgement or criticism.

- f. Be genuine in your communication
It is okay to let your grieving relatives know that you are not sure what to say but want them to know that you care. This is far better than unintentionally saying things to minimise their loss or impose your advice on them. Encourage them to find their own answers by asking some questions instead of telling them what they should feel or think.

g. Be willing to sit in silence

Sometimes your grieving relative or friend may not want to talk at all. Your caring presence and silence can be equally comforting for him or her. Non-verbal gestures such as eye contact, an appropriate touch, a pat on the shoulder or a hug may be helpful.

As you remember to listen more than speak, below are some unhelpful statements to avoid:

a. Statements beginning with “You should” or “You will”

These statements will end up being too directive towards your grieving relative or friend. Instead, use statements beginning with “You might want to try...” or “Have you thought about...”

b. Statements that impose your own beliefs

“He is in a better place now.”

“It is part of God’s plan.”

Your grieving relative or friend may not share your beliefs, so keep them to yourself, unless asked.

c. Statements that remind them to think about gratitude rather than grief
“Look at what you have to be thankful for.”

They know they have other people and things to be thankful for but their losses are what concern them at that point in time.

d. Statements that prematurely ask them to ‘move on’ with life

“You have to face the reality. It’s time to get on with your life.”

“Crying won’t help. Pick yourself up.”

Moving on is much easier said than done. Grief works at its own pace for different individuals. For some, they may be ‘resistant’ to moving on as this signifies ‘forgetting’ the person they have just lost and thus is not acceptable to them. Instead, acknowledge that life will never feel the same again.

3. Provide Support Beyond the Initial Period of Loss

Often, during the initial period of loss, the support is strong especially when there are practical matters and rituals to attend to. However, your relative or friend may be more vulnerable when the funeral is over. This is the time

when your support is more valuable than ever. This is because your relative or friend continues to grieve long after all the comforting gestures e.g. text messages, cards, flowers and caring presence have stopped. The period of ongoing grief varies from person to person, but often lasts much longer than most people expect. Your grieving relative or friend may benefit from your ongoing support for months or sometimes even years.

In addition, consider offering extra support on special days. Some days of the year will be particularly difficult for your grieving relative or friend. This may include holiday seasons, family milestones, birthdays, and anniversaries. Be sensitive on these occasions as the sense of loss may be magnified. Let your grieving relative or friend know that you're there for whatever support that may be needed. The pain may be less intense over time but some feelings associated with the loss may never completely go away.

4. Be Specific and Consistent in Your Offers of Practical Assistance

It takes a lot out of your grieving relative or friend to ask for help. There might be feelings of worries and fear of being a burden to others. He or she may not be in the state of mind to reach out even when help is needed. Be specific in what you can offer e.g. "I have made some soup for lunch. When can I come by and bring you some?" instead of "Feel free to let me know if there is anything I can do for you". There are many practical and specific ways you can support your grieving relative or friend. Below are some suggestions for your consideration:

- a. Help with the completion of forms;
- b. Help with funeral arrangements;
- c. Shop for groceries;
- d. Run errands;
- e. Stay with them at home to receive phone calls or host visitors;
- f. Take care of housework such as cleaning and laundry;
- g. Go with them wherever they would like to;
- h. Look after their dependents; and
- i. Share an activity with them such as taking walks, eating together, exercising, etc.

“A few friends took turns and helped me send my daughter to and from school every day at that time. Every single day without fail. I didn't need to worry about her and it's a huge load off my mind.”

As much as possible, be consistent in your offers of practical assistance. This will allow your grieving relative or friend to have some certainty of the support to be expected and not have to ask you repeatedly for the same assistance.

5. Understand and Accept Different Worldviews and Traditions

It is important to be mindful that the expression of grief can also be shaped and influenced by different world views from diverse cultural and religious perspectives, especially in a cosmopolitan city like Singapore. Be open to deepening your understanding of the diversity in world views and mourning practices which are different from your own tradition. Remember it is not about what you would do or believe in but what would fit for your relative or friend. While there are mainstream perspectives and practices, your relatives or friends may have preferences for other perspectives and practices. Show your support by helping them to consider their intentions and meaning behind their decisions and help them find ways to achieve their purpose. For example, some of them may not want to allow their young children to attend the funeral because of objections from other senior family members but at the same time, does not want to leave the children out. You can help them consider other ways to involve the children. Understanding the intention behind their decisions would allow you to help them consider other options to meet the same goal.

SIGNS THAT YOUR RELATIVE OR FRIEND MAY NEED PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

1. Warning Signs

It is common for a grieving relative or friend to experience low mood and feel disconnected from the people around him or her. However, if over time, the intensity of the grief reactions (feelings, thoughts and behaviours) and the preoccupation with the death persist, the grief might have evolved into a more serious concern such as prolonged grief disorder or clinical depression. See below for some of the warning signs. Help your relative or friend to get professional support. Refer to the section on *List of Community Service Providers* for professional bereavement support.

- Prolonged and marked difficulties in managing daily routine and functioning;
- Extreme focus on the loss;
- Excessive feelings of sorrow, anger, resentment or guilt;
- Neglecting personal care, hygiene and grooming;
- Substance abuse – turning to alcohol, drugs or other vices;
- Experience of hallucinations;
- Persistent thoughts and feelings of being worthless and hopeless;
- Inability to find joy, positive feelings or meaning in life; and
- Prolonged withdrawal from social activities and engagements.

2. Talk of Suicide

If a grieving relative or friend talks about suicide, take him or her seriously and seek support from a professional as soon as possible.



CHAPTER 4

Children's and Young Persons' Grief

Childhood is a period of multi-dimensional development for children. They undergo physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. Children's and young persons' understanding of death varies in accordance to their cognitive and socio-emotional development. As children grow, their cognitive ability helps them to better understand death. As they encounter the world, it may influence how they make sense of death. Children who have had a prior encounter with death may develop their own ways of dealing with the current loss experience.

To support them in coping with loss and grief and to facilitate their adaptation to the loss experience, it is necessary to provide them with developmentally-appropriate information. Provide your company, be present to listen to their concerns and address issues that arise. This will help children and young persons understand what has happened and how the death will affect them and the people around them.

This chapter summarises children's and young persons' understanding of death and possible responses to death at different developmental stages according to age. It also suggests some ways to help them cope with their losses.

Death is a concept with four main components which are:

1. Irreversibility

Death is final. One who dies will not come alive again unlike cartoon characters or superheroes.

2. Universality

All living things will die eventually. It is inevitable.

3. Non-functionality

Death means all physiological functioning has ceased.

4. Causality

There is a biological cause for death. There may be internal (e.g. disease) or external (e.g. physical injury) influences for death to occur.

The discussion in relation to children's and young persons' understanding of death will be undertaken with reference to these four components mentioned above.

INFANTS (BIRTH TO 12 MONTHS)

Understanding of Death

- Infants have no understanding of death.
- As they are at the sensory stage, they can experience the impact of death through their sensing of movements and the atmosphere around them.

Possible Signs

As infancy is the time when infants develop a basic sense of trust towards their environment, death of their caregiver can interfere in the process of trust development and hence, can result in a state of distrust.

When that happens, these infants can:

- Be more irritable;
- Develop a disturbed sleeping pattern;
- Display a change in appetite;
- Have an upset tummy; and
- Become more withdrawn.

Ways to Help

- As infants have no means to express themselves, their reactions are mainly physical. Hence, it is necessary to pay attention to any changes in physical and behavioural patterns.
- Show physical affection by making time to hold and cuddle them to address their shaken sense of security.
- Provide more verbal affection to re-establish a sense of warmth and comfort to the infant.
- Avoid changes as much as possible (e.g. changes in caregiver or room) to avoid further reduction of predictability in the infant's world.
- Play soothing music to ease the tension in the surrounding environment as infants are more sensory.

TODDLERS (12 MONTHS – 2 YEARS OLD)

Understanding of Death

- Toddlers do not understand that death is final.
- They lack the understanding that death is universal.
- They can notice someone at home is missing and may be sensitive to separation even though they cannot articulate their experience of loss.

Possible Signs

- As their sense of security is threatened, the toddlers may cry more.
- They may throw tantrums to demonstrate their feeling of unsettledness.
- They may develop separation anxiety and become more clingy.
- They may experience stomach upset.
- They may ask multiple and repeated questions.

Ways to Help

- Show physical affection by making time to hold and cuddle them to re-establish their sense of security.
- Offer comforting objects (e.g. pillow/favourite soft toy) to reduce their sense of instability.
- Keep a consistent schedule as much as possible (e.g. feeding schedule).
- If possible, avoid unnecessary changes (e.g. change in nanny) to reduce the extent of disruption to their sense of familiarity.
- Be attentive to changes in physical or behavioural patterns as they lack the ability to articulate their struggles.

PRE-SCHOOLERS (3 – 6 YEARS OLD)

Understanding of Death

- Pre-schoolers may associate death with old people or the very sick and hence see death as something which will not happen to healthy individuals.
- They may see death as a separation (e.g. going for a journey), and that it is not final.
- They may think that a dead person can continue to move and function.
- As they are at the pre-operational stage of cognitive development, they may explain the cause of death through 'magical thinking'.
- Some pre-schoolers may also misinterpret death as a form of punishment resulting from their mistake as they are relatively egocentric in their thought processes at this stage of life.

Possible Signs

- Pre-schoolers may repeatedly ask about the return date of the deceased.
- They may exhibit regressive behaviours (e.g. thumb sucking, bed-wetting, baby talk).
- They may be anxious to be separated from their caregivers, as they worry about being deserted.
- Pre-schoolers may feel guilty because they wrongly believe they are the cause of the death (e.g. fighting with the deceased).
- They can be easily distracted.

Ways to Help

- As cognitive development revolves largely around language development and the use of symbols to represent objects, it is recommended to use concrete words such as 'die', instead of confusing terms such as 'grandma has gone to a better place' or 'grandma is with your grandfather now'.
- Talk openly about the death to let them know that death is not a toxic topic in the family and it is safe to talk about their thoughts and feelings about it.
- Be honest when answering their questions and use words that are developmentally-appropriate.
- Make it clear to them that they are still loved and assure them that they will continue to be cared for.

LOWER PRIMARY SCHOOLERS (7 – 9 YEARS OLD)

Understanding of Death

- Children in this age group have more knowledge about how the body works and that a dead person is non-functional.
- They can hold understanding on the permanence of death.
- They, however, may not understand that death is universal.
- Lower primary schoolers may associate death with old age only and assume young persons will not die.
- They may also link death with scary images from animations such as ghosts or haunted houses.

Possible Signs

- Lower primary schoolers may ask a lot of questions about how the death occurred.
- They may ask for a lot of details to facilitate the formulation of their understanding of death.
- They may play out their grief due to a lack of security and/or language to articulate their experience.
- They may cope by denial and by avoiding the topic of death.
- It may be common for them to have mood swings and demonstrate an inconsistent grieving pattern as they may process their emotions in doses.

Ways to Help

- Use visual aids that they can understand (e.g. story books/interactive activity books) and facilitate discussion through the use of these visual aids.
- Be patient and a good listener.
- Clarify any misperceptions of what has happened and address their fear and anxiety.
- Involve them in the decision-making, where age-appropriate.
- Involve them in the rituals if they are willing and comfortable, as participation may facilitate their sense of belonging to the bereaved community and reduce their sense of isolation.

UPPER PRIMARY SCHOOLERS (10 – 12 YEARS OLD)

Understanding of Death

- Upper primary schoolers understand that death results in non-functionality of the deceased.
- They can understand that death will cause sadness and arouse a variety of feelings.
- They also understand that death is both final and universal.
- Children in this age group may struggle with the finality of death because of faith-related beliefs about life and the afterlife.
- They may perceive death as relevant to others but not themselves and their loved ones.

Possible Signs

- Upper primary schoolers may experience a variety of emotions such as sadness, fear and anger.
- They may have mood swings and act out as a means of coping with their emotions.
- They may also develop concerns over safety of themselves and their significant others and hence may have separation anxiety and a phobia of going to school.
- Children in this age group may appear oblivious to the episode of death.
- They may worry about the deceased suffering from burns during cremation or suffocation in the grave.
- They may also show interest in skeletons or details of violent deaths.

Ways to Help

- Provide factual and specific information as much as possible.
- Be honest and admit if you do not have the answers to their questions.
- Assure the child that the dead person does not feel pain and hence no longer suffers.
- Be an active listener and spend quality time with them.
- Prepare them for the rituals and accompany them in the process.

ADOLESCENTS

Understanding of Death

- Adolescents understand that death is final and applies to all living things.
- They understand that death results in the non-functionality of the deceased.
- They can understand that there are many possible causes of death.
- They can also understand that death will cause a range of emotional reactions.
- A sense of invulnerability may result in the belief that while death is unavoidable to all, it will not happen to them.

Possible Signs

- Adolescents may seek information independently (e.g. searching for information on the internet).
- They may take on the role of an adult to take care of others.
- Adolescents may experience and display a variety of emotions such as anger, sadness and fear.
- They may act out (e.g. become rebellious and test limits) as a means of coping with their emotions.
- Adolescents may become withdrawn or conceal their struggles as they may assume that many people are observing them due to their belief in an imaginary audience at this stage of life.
- They may ask existential questions as they become more developed in their abstract thinking.

Ways to Help

- Provide factual and specific information as much as possible.
- Be an active listener rather than offering solutions too quickly.
- Share your thoughts and feelings with them if it is appropriate.
- Include them in the discussion about the rituals to be undertaken, or any adjustments to be made in subsequent daily routines.
- Spend quality time with them.

GENERIC REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PERSONS' UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

Developmental	Understanding of Death in Reference to the Four Key Components of Death				
Age	Irreversibility	Universality	Non-functionality	Causality	Remarks
Birth – 12 Months	–	–	–	–	No understanding of death. Concerns are usually egocentric.
12 months – 2 years old	–	–	–	–	
3 – 6 years old	–	–	–	–	
7 – 9 years old	✓	–	✓	✓	At an earlier stage, may believe that death is reversible and hold 'magical thinking' in relation to death.
10 – 12 years old	✓	✓	✓	✓	While they have full understanding of death, they still need adult support due to their limited life exposure, cognitive and emotional development. Their sense of invulnerability may result in their belief that death can happen to all but themselves.
Adolescents	✓	✓	✓	✓	

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Things to Consider with Regard to the Viewing of the Body

As mentioned earlier, involvement in the funeral could ease the children's and young persons' sense of isolation. At the same time, as children often engage in a lot of fantasy thinking, if adults are allowed to view the body, they may also want to know what the body looks like. The process of viewing may help them to understand the permanence of death.

It is recommended that adults provide an explanation of viewing and ask the child if he or she would like to view the body. Some suggestions would be:

The body:

- Is placed in a coffin;
- Will not move;
- Will not return to life; and
- Will look different from the person we knew when he or she was alive.

If the death is a result of an accident, it is recommended to prepare the child for what he or she will be seeing and give him or her the choice to decide about the viewing.

If a child decides not to view the body, adults should respect their decision.

2. Things to Consider When Preparing Children for the Funeral

Children need support in their understanding of the wake and funeral. It will help to:

- Explain to them who will be present, the rites and practices involved, where they will be held and when;
- Prepare children on how to cope at various potentially disturbing moments (e.g. when sending off the deceased from the void deck, when the coffin enters the cremation chamber);
- Be concrete and exact;
- Allow children to ask questions and express their thoughts and concerns; and
- Involve them in making any decision about their participation.

NOTE TO CAREGIVERS

1. Children vary in their individual pace of development. Children of the same age may differ from one another in their ability to understand the concept of death and also vary in their ability to cope with the aftermath.
2. Children are active learners and they may pick up coping stances from their observation of the behaviour of significant others in their environment.
3. As children often seek affirmation from significant adults, they may act according to the preferred way of the adults whom they value. For instance, if adults are observed to avoid talking about the death, children may be mindful of raising the topic openly.
4. Cultural beliefs and practices surrounding the children's upbringing will influence how they cope. Hence, children of the same developmental stage could cope differently in accordance with the teaching imparted to them and practices observed by them.
5. Teenagers are likely to prefer adults who provide their company and presence to adults who provide advice and direction on how to cope.
6. Always use concrete words like 'die' rather than 'sleep' or 'gone away' to avoid creating further confusion to the children and young persons as they are literal thinkers and take meaning at surface value.
7. It is important to build in time for silence when talking to children and young persons as they need time to gather their thoughts as well as get in touch with and figure out their emotions.
8. If the grief reactions are excessively intense or maintained for a prolonged period of time, it is recommended that you consult professionals to help the affected child or young person.

When considering whether to engage professional help, here are some signs to look out for:

- Intensive emotions that compromise health;
- Loss of interest in activities;
- Social withdrawal;
- Absolute denial of the occurrence of death; and
- Self-harming thoughts or behaviour.



CHAPTER 5

Managing Grief in Schools

Schools are an important part of children's developmental and social environment. For students who are grieving, support from the school ecosystem can make a huge difference in their bereavement experience.

This chapter on managing grief in schools is divided into the following sections:

- When a student has lost a significant person;
- Death of a student or a school employee; and
- Tips for young adults in tertiary institutions.

The first two sections are tips and suggestions for school personnel to consider when supporting a particular student who is grieving, and when supporting students who are affected by the death of a classmate or school personnel. The last section outlines some tips for young adults in tertiary institutions who are going back to school after a loss, and also suggestions on how their peers can support them.

Students of different age groups generally have different understanding of death. Hence, common reactions may differ according to the developmental stages of the students. Refer to 'Children's and Young Persons' Grief' in Chapter 4 for more information on common grief reactions and tips on how to support bereaved students of different age groups.

When supporting students in grief, we may sometimes be reminded of our own loss experiences. It is also important for school personnel to recognise their own grief responses and remember that it is alright to ask for the help of other colleagues in supporting affected students.

WHEN A STUDENT HAS LOST A SIGNIFICANT PERSON

Breaking the Bad News

Schools may sometimes receive news of a student's relative's imminent death or news of a relative who just died during school hours. You may be asked to convey the bad news to the student or assist in making arrangements for the student to travel to a hospital, hospice or to go home and be cared for by a relative.

1. Preparing the Child

- Check with the student if any information about the dying or deceased relative has been shared earlier with the student and his or her understanding.
- Fill the student in with information provided to you by the caregiver and acknowledge the lack of information if it is not available immediately. When dealing with stressful situations, family members and caregivers may have difficulty planning or miss out important details.
- When removing a student from the classroom, explain to him or her the reason. Let the student know what to expect in the next few hours or days – e.g. "Your grandfather has just died in the hospital and your aunt is on her way to school to take you home to spend time with your family." Or, "Your mother has called the school. The school counsellor is bringing you to the hospice to see your father."

2. Supporting the Child

- Grief reactions are not unexpected so choose to speak to the student in a part of the school that offers some privacy. Acknowledge the (impending) loss and do not judge their reaction.
- As school personnel, you are in a position to contribute to the physical and emotional safety of the student. Ask what the student is most concerned with about the situation (e.g. the dying/deceased person, other family members or himself/herself) and where appropriate, make the concerns known to the caregiver.
- Offer help and information if the student wants to know about the consequences of missing school.
- Offer companionship if the student is waiting for a caregiver to show up in school.

Before the Student Returns from Compassionate Leave

Students returning from compassionate leave after the death of someone significant can find it difficult to adjust. Schools can support students in their return to school by making some preparations before their return. This can include:

1. Supporting the Family and Bereaved Student

- Check with the family if the school can send representatives to attend the wake or funeral, if appropriate. Besides showing support for the family, the presence of a school representative can signal to the family and the student that the school is supportive. This may also be a good time to connect the school's go-to person with the caregivers, so that both caregivers and school personnel know who to contact if they have updates or concerns regarding the student.
- Be sensitive to the bereaved family. Have a conversation to check with the student and bereaved family about what can and cannot be shared with the classmates and other school personnel.
- Be flexible with school attendance in the early days of bereavement. The student may not be fully prepared to go back to school a few days after the death of a loved one or may require some days off from school even some time after the funeral. Making such provisions and communicating with the child and family can assuage fears that the child might fall behind in school.

“My daughter spends so much time in school, and I have no idea how she is doing there. I have to call the teacher in school to ask them to tell me how my daughter is coping in school, and request for them to take special note of her.”

2. Preparing the School Personnel and Students

- Prepare the school personnel and other classmates before the student's return. For school personnel, discussing plans and ways to support the student may be helpful. For other students, discussing what kinds of difficulties their bereaved classmate might face when returning to school and how they can help their classmate can be a valuable lesson in sensitivity and communal support. It is important to remind everyone that individuals might have different ways of grieving, hence they should not make assumptions on how the student should or will react.

After the Student Returns to School

When a bereaved student returns to school, here are some steps that can be taken by school personnel to support him or her while working closely with the caregivers:

1. Supporting Grief Expressions in the Early Days of Loss

- A student may encounter difficulties concentrating in class or exhibit other signs of grief that may disrupt the class or their learning. It is important to acknowledge that grieving is normal and to be flexible in providing support to the grieving student. For example, a student may need to step out of the class when they need time alone or talk to a school counsellor when they are overwhelmed. Recognise that needs for support are likely to vary among students.
- Be prepared to listen to the student and answer questions. Some grieving students may need to process the death by taking time to seek answers for themselves. In this case, teachers and school counsellors can be candidates for their questioning or discussion. Be careful not to impose your own beliefs and judgements on the student and let the student arrive at conclusions for themselves.

- Respect the privacy of the student and do not share what has been discussed without consent, unless it is pertinent to the provision of additional support. Even so, the student should be informed and encouraged to participate in making decisions on the additional support required.
- Not all students can verbalise their grief. Consider other ways of supporting the expression of grief — through writing, drawing and playing musical instruments, etc.

2. Supporting Grief Expressions in the Later Days of Loss

- Be more attentive on occasions that may trigger a stronger grief reaction in the student — e.g. birthdays, school celebrations and assignments requiring the participation of a close living relative whom the student has lost. Anticipate the difficulties the student may encounter and offer options and alternatives on such occasions — e.g. allowing a favourite uncle to participate in a father-child bonding activity or arranging a separate update with guardians if no parent can attend the regular teacher-parent meeting.
- However, it is not necessary to avoid activities that you think may remind the student of the loss of their loved one. More importantly, give space for the student to express his or her relationship with the deceased through the activities in school. Acknowledge the loss and encourage ways to honour and remember the deceased. The bereaved student will need time to adjust to changes in his or her life. In this process, there will be ups and downs. Some days, the student may appear to be in better spirits. Other days, the student may appear to be grief-stricken. Even if the student seems to have developed healthy adjustment and coping after the death, it is normal for him or her to have low days where he or she may be reminded of the deceased.

3. Supporting Academic Stability

- Consider supplementary classes to support the student's education, especially if he or she has been missing classes prior to or after the death. Providing practical support in this way also helps to relieve stress in the student and caregivers regarding the student's academic results. Sometimes, all it takes may just be assigning a buddy who can keep the student abreast of any missed classroom activities and assignments.

“During that time I had to skip school a lot to visit my mom in the hospital. Thankfully I had friends who would take notes for me and all that, so that I don’t fall behind too much in school. I explained the situation to my teacher and thankfully he was really understanding. He allowed me to take another midterm exam when I was more emotionally-ready.”

- If the loss happens during important times of the school curriculum, consider the possibility of rescheduling the affected activities, such as re-taking the examinations at a later date, extending the deadline for a project, or substituting a written exam paper with a take-home report. Missing important examinations, competitions and performances may be secondary losses associated with the primary loss of a loved one and could result in additional distress for the student. Help the student manage expectations from himself/herself and others.

4. Collaborating With Other Partners to Support the Bereaved Student

- Look out for persistent signs of grief that do not diminish even after a considerable time or expressions of risk of harm to self or others. If needed, in addition to the support of school counsellors, consider support from the Ministry of Education and community partners such as Family Service Centres, and involve significant caregivers or family members.
- Maintain regular contact with caregivers of the student to exchange information on how he or she is coping at home and in school. The needs of the student will change over time and the support provided will have to be adjusted to meet the needs.
- If a student is receiving professional support for his or her grief or if the loss happens at a time of change and transition, e.g. change of class, change of school etc., make it a point to seek permission from his or her caregivers/guardians to update the new school personnel and community partners to avoid a lapse in support.

DEATH OF A STUDENT OR A SCHOOL EMPLOYEE

When there is a death of a student, teacher, or other school personnel, the effects can be far-reaching in the school. This section offers suggestions for managing grief reactions in students after such an event. However, traumatic circumstances (such as death in the school premises or suicides) and support for the deceased's family are not covered in this book.

Besides using the suggestions listed in the previous section on 'When a student has lost a significant person', here are other considerations for supporting the larger student population in their grief:

1. Communicating with Other Students and School Personnel

- In respecting the privacy of the bereaved family and while it is not necessary to detail the circumstances of the death, it is important to acknowledge that a death has occurred. Avoid ambiguous responses, e.g. "John is no longer able to come to school anymore." Instead, acknowledge the death, e.g. "We are sad to inform all of you that John had been very sick in the past few months and he died this morning."
- Provide avenues for students to ask questions and to clarify information.

2. Supporting Students in the Early Days After the Loss

- Consider the relationship or proximity of the students to the deceased, the death event and any significant loss history of the students when deciding whether to provide general or targeted support. While many students can benefit from school-wide or class-wide support activities, some may benefit from targeted support such as individual or small group counselling.
- A letter or email can be sent to the caregivers/guardians if the school intends to engage their help to support the affected students.
- School personnel, especially those whom the students look up to, can act as role models for students to understand that grief is normal and permitted.

- Provide a space and time for students and school personnel to remember and honour the deceased. If the deceased's family agrees, provide the option to students and school personnel to attend the wake or funeral to bid farewell. Alternatively, organise a memorial or special event for students and school personnel so that they may be able to express their grief explicitly. Sometimes, students may collectively express their grief by organising activities to remember the deceased.

3. Supporting Students in the Later Days After the Loss

- If there is a need to remove the belongings of the deceased (e.g. photographs, artwork, etc.) from the classroom or locker, try to do it discreetly. Be mindful that some students may feel ambivalent when a new student or teacher takes over the space or role that the deceased has occupied previously. Students may not know how to react to the changes. Reassure them that the memories and relationships with the deceased will remain. Forming a new relationship (e.g. with the new group member, new desk mate, or new teacher) does not mean that all memories and relationships with the deceased would be severed.
- If the deceased is a school staff, also refer to 'Managing Grief in the Workplace' in Chapter 6 for suggestions on supporting colleagues affected by the death of another co-worker.

4. When the Deceased Has Another Sibling in the Same School

- Pay attention to bereaved siblings in the same school who may find themselves becoming the centre for curiosity and questions related to the deceased and comparison with the deceased. It can be distressful for some of them to be the centre of attention when they are trying to attend to their own grief. For others, it can be an avenue for grief expression and they can benefit from communal support. Provide choices for the siblings of the deceased whether to lead, to participate or to be excused from any activities to remember the deceased.

“My friend lost his father when it was very close to the final exams. He had no motivation to go through the exams at all. I actually did some essay questions and consolidated notes for him to study. If I cannot give him emotional support, then at least I can give him practical support.”



TIPS FOR YOUNG ADULTS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

This section is for young adults in tertiary institutions who need to return to school while experiencing grief. Besides referring to Chapter 2 on 'Caring for Your Grief', here are some tips and strategies on easing back into school life and getting support from peers:

1. Easing Back into School Life

- Pace yourself. Losing a significant person involves more than grieving the loss. It may result in a change in lifestyle, living arrangements, financial circumstances, new responsibilities and even a need to redefine some earlier relationships and roles. Some of these may have an impact on your current life stage as a tertiary student. If you have a choice, consider whether reducing your academic load for one or two semesters will help.
- Identify who among your network of caregivers, mentors and peers can provide guidance and support and allow yourself to proactively seek them out. Student Affairs Office or departments with similar functions in your institution of learning may have information about additional financial support, employment opportunities and provision of counselling and guidance.
- Speak to your team mates, lecturers and tutors if you require more time to complete projects and assignments.
- Be kind and patient with yourself. You may need to recalibrate expectations of yourself in terms of school work, interactions with classmates, etc. Your grief reactions are unique to you. It is important not to compare yourself to someone else who has experienced bereavement.

2. Managing Social Interactions

- Sometimes, classmates or teachers may ask you questions out of concern or curiosity. You do not need to answer them directly if you are not prepared. Confide only in people you are comfortable with.
- There may be times when you need some quiet space to yourself. It would be helpful to identify a location in school where you can go to be alone.

3. Supporting Grief Expression in School

- School can be a place where you take a break from thinking about your loss. There is no need to feel guilty for not remembering the deceased while you are in school or to feel relief from getting back to the school routine.
- Seek outlets for expressing your grief. If you are not comfortable talking to people in school, you can consider engaging in other activities such as sports, writing, drawing, etc.



CHAPTER 6

Managing Grief in the Workplace

With an aging workforce, the prospects of some of our co-workers suffering from a life-threatening illness or facing imminent death can be very real. Many of our co-workers may also be caregivers to a sick relative, and in time to come, will become bereaved through illness-related deaths. Sometimes, death can also happen suddenly and unexpectedly to someone important to us at home or at work. This section offers general information and suggestions on how to manage grief in the workplace. It discusses how to:

- Support ourselves as we return to work after losing someone significant to us;
- Support a colleague who has lost someone significant in his or her life; and
- Support colleagues affected by the death of another co-worker. It does not discuss traumatic or violent deaths that happen at the workplace.

A supportive workplace where employees are treated with sensitivity and compassion following the death of a close one makes a big difference to

the experience of bereavement. In addition to the bereaved, the information provided in this section is relevant to both employers who are concerned with the overall well-being of their staff members and employees who have roles as reporting officers or peers in a workplace.

RETURNING TO WORK AFTER A SIGNIFICANT LOSS

While there is no statutory entitlement in Singapore for bereavement leave, commonly known as compassionate leave, many employers typically extend three days of paid leave to their employees. Even so, grief reactions come in waves and different people continue to experience strong emotions after days, weeks or years from the loss of their loved one. Most people would have returned to work while they are still actively grieving. It may feel isolating when you are unsure of what to expect of yourself to cope with returning to work while you continue to manage other changes related to your loss. Some people also struggle with not knowing how to respond to other colleagues' reactions to their loss. Refer to 'Caring for Your Grief' in Chapter 2 for suggestions on how to cope with grief when you lose someone important to you. Here are some additional suggestions you may consider to cope with the transition back to work after losing a significant person in your life.

1. Easing Back into Work

- If you know in advance that you may need to attend to matters related to your loss, inform and discuss with your reporting officer or HR representative, even if it means letting them know about the uncertainties or non-flexible nature of some appointments – e.g. waiting to be called up to attend a court hearing or assist with an investigation.
- Seeking support from your colleagues or getting professional help to cope with your emotions and functioning after a significant loss is not a sign of weakness. As death is universal, bereavement is a situation almost all adults will experience.

2. Social Interaction with Colleagues

- Death and grief are difficult conversation topics. As you expect a diverse range of reactions from your colleagues, remember that you are in control of what to share and who to share with. If possible, let your preferences be known to others through your HR representative or a trusted colleague.

“Work is where I distract myself from my loss, and where I can be busy and happy. Sometimes I will have flashbacks at work, and I will suddenly tear. My colleagues will ask me, ‘Why are you crying?’”

- You may want to consider proactively directing any conversation to aspects of the loss that you are comfortable with sharing, e.g. “I’d rather talk about my father’s contribution to the family and not his last days.” You do not have to answer a question just because you are asked.

3. Managing Your Workday

- Balancing your day with familiar tasks at work to give you some semblance of structure and control may help you avoid feeling overwhelmed by the anguish of losing a loved one.
- Pace yourself. Create pauses between work activities to allow space for replenishing your energy as grief in the early days can be more tiring. Ranking your work priorities using a checklist may be more productive than trying to complete everything or do catch up.
- If it helps, have in mind a quiet place where you can spend time alone whenever you need to. For those who are concerned with tearing up when they least expect to, carrying some tissues with them may be useful.

SUPPORTING A COLLEAGUE WHO HAS LOST SOMEONE SIGNIFICANT

Returning to work after a bereavement can sometimes be challenging not only for the bereaved person but also their colleagues. While everyone grieves in their own way, besides feeling sad, do keep in mind that feeling lost, relieved, bitter, angry, guilty or irritable is just as much a part of grieving too. Withholding our judgement on how the bereaved person should respond to a loss is a good place to start. While some people may want to talk about their loss, others are more private and prefer not to have too much details about themselves or the loss event shared indiscriminately. Here are some suggestions on what you can do to stay in touch regularly with the bereaved person, without smothering them with too much attention or ignoring them totally.

Suggestions to Employers/HR

1. Before the Employee Returns to Work

- Verify the details of the worker's bereavement as soon as it is practical.
- Establish a way of communicating with the worker or his or her family/representatives upon hearing about the news of their bereavement. Have a designated employee to act as the key point of contact during the bereaved employee's absence from work.
- Inform other colleagues about any appropriate information ahead of time. For example, when the bereaved person is planning to return to work, how they would like to be treated, and if there are ways colleagues can provide support.
- In a multi-ethnic society, observing cultural practices around funeral and bereavement is a way of honouring the deceased and showing respect to the bereaved. Check the bereaved person's wishes around funeral arrangements and what information to share with other colleagues.
- Also, check with the bereaved about how they would like colleagues to respond to them while away from work and upon returning to work.

2. Easing the Employee Back to Work

- Without attracting too much attention, welcome the bereaved person back to the workplace and check in with them on the first day.
- Bring the person up to speed with any relevant changes or developments in the workplace during his or her absence.
- Ensuring and making it possible for the person to approach the assigned go-to person (usually HR) if they require.
- Be understanding about the bereaved person's need to take time off to attend to other follow-up matters (e.g. executing the estate of the deceased) related to the loss.

3. Other Forms of Support

- Offer support immediately, including checking the worker's needs and preferences. Have information related to bereavement benefits (e.g. leave entitlements and other leave options) on hand to provide to the bereaved person.
- Very often, bereaved staff members appreciate the organisation's reassurance to them to attend first to their bereavement tasks and second to work.

“At the wake, some people from my husband’s company came. I think they were from HR and his department. They said they were representing the company and they would take care of everything... They asked if they could put up a newspaper obituary, but we didn’t want it to be so public. There was a bit of discussion but finally they respected our decision.”

- At an appropriate time, inform and offer any work options that may be available to them should there be a need to ease back into the work routine. Employees do not stop grieving after the usual three days of bereavement/compassionate leave accorded to them by their employers. This is also not an appropriate time to introduce new tasks or major changes in the job scope.
- Taking into consideration the circumstances related to the loss, be aware of any unusual behaviours or reactions that are persistent across time and might cause concern for you or other colleagues. Make time and effort to check in with the bereaved person periodically on his/her adjustment in terms of coping with both personal and work life. Adjusting to life after a major loss takes time and effort, and one does not cope better because they are told to do so.
- Offer information on available support within and outside the organisation, appropriate to the needs (e.g. emotional, financial, practical, legal, etc.) of the bereaved person. Make arrangements for him or her to access the support including taking time off. Please refer to the list of organisations providing bereavement support appended in this book (page 89).

Suggestions to Colleagues

1. As the Colleague Returns to Work

- Acknowledge the loss. Even though it may feel uncomfortable, it is normal. Your effort to make contact and acknowledge the loss of your co-worker will be appreciated.
- Express your concern in a simple way. You can say, “I am sorry to hear about your loss” or “Our thoughts are with you during this time of your loss.” It is important not to be too quick to ‘normalise’ the loss or minimise

the grief so avoid clichés such as “We will all die someday” or “He lived till a ripe old age”.

- Don't avoid the person who is bereaved. You may feel uncomfortable to be with the bereaved colleague if you don't know what to do around them or if the loss reminds you of your own mortality. Don't let it stop you from making contact. You can always say, “I'm not sure what to say but I would like you to know that I am thinking of you”. More important than the words are your act of kindness and demonstration of concern.

2. Days or Weeks After the Loss

- Make an effort to include the person in work and social activities. Your colleague who is grieving has good and bad days. They can decide for themselves whether or not they wish to be involved and when to be involved. Refusing once does not mean they will always refuse.
- Check with the person if there is something practical that you could do for them, including work activities. For example, getting lunch or taking up a presentation. If it does not fit for them, they can suggest the type of support that would be helpful.
- For someone who wants to talk about his or her loss, offer a listening ear. Avoid taking over the conversation with your own loss experiences. It is also not necessary to avoid mentioning the deceased. Death does not sever a relationship.
- For someone who does not wish to talk about his or her loss, the work setting may serve as a ‘time out’ for their grief and this should be respected too. A typical greeting like “how are you doing?” may be sufficient to keep the option open for the bereaved person to decide if he or she wants to be engaged and in what ways.

3. Weeks or Months After the Loss

- People do not stop thinking about their loved ones even with the passage of time. Some occasions, events and experiences may remind them of their loved ones and may evoke strong emotions. These are normal grief reactions and should be acknowledged with a simple “Does this remind you of (the deceased)?”, or “Are you missing him/her?” It is not helpful to change the subject of conversation or distract the person with an irrelevant topic.

“After my spouse passed away, I have to bear the responsibilities of a single parent. So far, my workplace has been very flexible with letting me apply leave to meet my children’s needs, like when they have certain activities or parent-teacher meetings.”

- While different individuals have their own timing to incorporate major changes into their life as a result of a loss, the process involves getting in touch with the grief as well as making efforts to adjust to the new reality without their loved one. Be accepting of when a colleague may have a need to express his or her grief and when to move forward. Avoid comparing the grief and coping of one colleague with another.
- If you are concerned that your co-worker is not coping with a loss, bearing in mind that having bad days does not mean he or she is not coping, speak to him or her first. Express your concern and ask for consent to share your observations with a senior staff of the organisation (usually the reporting officer of your co-worker) or the HR department so that additional support can be provided. More often than not, being present and sharing a delicate moment may be all that is needed.
- For a small group of individuals, the grief of losing someone remains so intense over a prolonged period of time that it prevents them from resuming their life. Some persistently express very strong emotions, others may find life empty or meaningless or experience more physical complaints that affect their work performance. If this describes a bereaved co-worker whom you are concerned about, encourage the bereaved co-worker to seek help from one of the organisations that offers bereavement support. Refer to the list of service providers for bereavement support in the community included at the back of this book.

SUPPORTING AFFECTED COLLEAGUES AFTER THE DEATH OF A CO-WORKER

As adults, many of us spend a good part of our lives at work. Some of the relationships with our colleagues have become important to us and contribute significantly to our social and psychological well-being. The death of one of our colleagues may affect us at different levels, leaving a void in our professional or work life. For others, a death in the workplace can feel like a death in the family.

In addition to the suggestions discussed above, employers may consider the following strategies to support employees affected by the death of a co-worker:

1. Breaking the News

- Consider how the news of the death should be conveyed, and to whom. Ensure there is sufficient time to share the news without rushing through it. An enclosed area, e.g. a meeting room, is more conducive than a busy open office.
- After establishing agreement with the next of kin of the deceased employee on what can be shared, start by checking what colleagues already know about the pre-existing health condition of their co-worker and refer to earlier official updates that were provided by the organisation. Build in time to address any concerns that any colleague may have, and to allow time for silence and tears.
- If it is not practical to break the news in person, a written announcement providing simple factual information may be put up or circulated internally. Some organisations may have the option to place an obituary in the local newspapers.

2. Supporting Employees in the Days After the Loss

- Make arrangements for colleagues who will want to participate in the funeral and send-off if it is feasible and acceptable to the next of kin of the departed worker. The opportunity to bid farewell and pay their final respects to the departed co-worker is part of honouring the collegial relationship.

“I needed to know that I can do what I need to do, and that I am supported at work. That is exactly what my colleagues told me, and they covered my work for me in the few days when I was away. So I am really very thankful for them.”



- Where appropriate, share information on the support (e.g. processing of insurance claims and settlement of medical bills) rendered to the next of kin of the deceased co-worker. It will reassure colleagues who are concerned with the well-being of the bereaved family of their departed co-worker.
- Consider other avenues to channel the grief of the colleagues into actions that honour the deceased employee. Some possibilities include donating to his or her favourite charity or an organisation that raises awareness about the illness that took his or her life. If there are dependents in the family of the departed employee, a fundraising event to address their immediate financial needs may bring comfort to the staff team too.

3. Supporting Employees in the Weeks or Months After the Loss

- Similar to losing a family member, affected colleagues may exhibit some of the following grief reactions — disbelief about the death, preoccupation with the thoughts of the deceased, retelling shared experiences, feeling guilty about what has been said or not said, being angry or irritated for no apparent reason and being overly concerned with one's own health. Avoid dismissing or minimising the grief reactions of affected employees.
- Provision of time, support and flexibility are necessary to address different needs of affected colleagues. Some colleagues are closer to the deceased than others. If they are affected by the death, they might need some time off to come to terms with it. Some may benefit from counselling support from a professional grief counsellor.
- Depending on HR practices, organising a memorial, when attending a funeral is not possible, may allow colleagues to have a platform to build memories and foster support among themselves as they grieve the loss of a common colleague. Other platforms to remember the departed employee include paying tribute to him or her at an annual organisation event.

4. Hiring a New Employee in the Same Role

- Give advance notice to the team and affected colleagues before removing the personal items of the departed worker and clearing the work space. Involve colleagues who have been closer to the departed worker and who offer to help. Disposal of any personal items which the next of kin does not want to take back should be undertaken discreetly.
- Be sensitive when it's time to recruit a replacement for the position left vacant by the deceased employee. Team members may have mixed feelings about filling the position. On the one hand, they may welcome the additional manpower to share the work; on the other hand, it may evoke feelings and memories of the late worker, even uncertainties about how to forge working relationships with the new colleague.
- Acknowledge any ambivalent reactions and assure the team that the new colleague will not replace their relationship with the late co-worker but should be treated as an individual in his or her own right.



Grief and Spirituality

After the death of someone close to you, you may find yourself faced with your own unique needs that are beyond the physical and emotional dimensions. Grief can affect our sense of spirituality, and spiritual reactions to grief can occur to those with or without any religious belief.

Despite spirituality and religion often being used interchangeably, spirituality here refers to a wider concept than religion. Broadly defined, spirituality is the aspect of humanity where individuals search for and express meaning and purpose in life. It is often a journey of discovery, learning not only about who you are, but also who you want to be. It is personal and rooted in the way we experience connectedness to the moment, to our personal identities, relationships with others, to nature, and to the significant or the Divine. Religion on the other hand, has historically been identified as an organised system of beliefs, practices, and rituals designed to express spirituality.

In the face of grief and loss, individuals may often turn to religion, faith and the Divine as a way to cope with and make sense of what they are

experiencing. Yet there are also others who may not identify themselves with any particular religion, but still find a way to cope with their loss through their own meanings, beliefs and values.

SPIRITUAL REACTIONS EXPERIENCED BY THE BEREAVED

The calamity of losing a loved one to death sometimes evoke in a person questions such as “Why me?”, “Why now?”, and “Where is the Divine?”. These questions often occur during the early stages of the loss. Other questions may arise as times progresses, including questions about the meaning of life and death, in order to bring about greater understanding.

Spiritual and religious questioning can happen when the experience of loss is not congruent with our religious views and beliefs about the Divine. These challenges encountered in grieving can impact the spiritual dimensions of one’s worldview, inevitably leading to contemplations about the afterlife and the transcendent hand in determining fate. Grieving can also raise questions about one’s own mortality — the degree to which one is living well, maintaining the right priorities, or is living in such a way to be prepared for an encounter with the Divine.

Even for those who may not subscribe to a religious faith, an afterlife or a higher power, their beliefs may still include a desire to find meaning in their lives, maintain a connection with loved ones, and to continue to experience and enjoy the natural world, as found in a survey conducted in 2007 by Smith-Stoner. When faced with a painful loss, it does not make them grieve any less, and their fundamental belief system may also be shaken.

There can be a variety of trajectories when reconsidering one’s spiritual or religious beliefs. Some persons, who were neither spiritual nor religious before their loss, may take their grieving to support their original view. Or, a person with a non-spiritual or non-religious perspective may begin to explore otherwise. There may also be spiritual individuals who find their grief so wrenching that they question the Divine’s role, motive, or love for them or for the deceased. This questioning can set them on a journey of doubt that may lead to rejection of religion, or ultimately to a changing or strengthening of religious beliefs.

“What he has taught me is that there is no point in asking why this has happened to us. We just need to treasure what we have because life is unpredictable. Ultimately this is the fate given to us and we must be brave in accepting it.”

Whether the focus is on religion or spirituality, grieving can sometimes bring with it significant levels of distress, and the loss of a loved one may challenge a previously held understanding. It can set in motion a period of reconsideration of important religious or spiritual matters, and the outcomes are likely to be different for different people. For some, the experience of grieving can be ‘fiery trials’, affecting one’s religious foundations and spiritual meanings. Yet for others, the encounter with grief can be a catalyst for positive changes, bringing about a deeper and more meaningful religious or spiritual life. In their struggle to deal with the significant death, they change in ways that may lead to a renewed spiritual or religious life that is more fulfilling and gratifying.

SIGNS OF SPIRITUAL DISTRESS IN THE BEREAVED

In a research on spiritual distress in bereavement by Laurie A. Burke and Robert A. Neimeyer, the overarching theme in the face of a loss was one of resentment and doubt toward the Divine, dissatisfaction with the spiritual support received, and substantial changes in their spiritual beliefs and behaviours.

Themes of spiritual distress itself can manifest in many different ways. One may experience one or more of the following, or none of them. This is not exhaustive, but common experiences are listed below:

1. Questioning the Character of the Divine

A weakened faith in the Divine following the loss of a loved one can cause one to question the Divine’s character, in terms of goodness, caring, intentions, and reasoning.

2. Negative Feelings towards the Divine

Negative perceptions and feelings in relation to the Divine often emerge in the form of anger and confusion, leaving the bereaved devastated and shocked.

3. Lack of Spiritual Sense Making

Some grieving individuals struggle to make spiritual sense of their loss, often because their constructs or assumptions about the Divine or life have been shattered as a result.

4. Misunderstood by the Community of Faith

Though well intentioned, support at times can cause the person in grief to feel misunderstood by their community of faith, especially when they respond to their grief with invalidating clichés or questions.

5. Negative Feelings Towards the Community of Faith

Spiritually inclined grievers can have negative perceptions and feelings in relation to the spiritual community of faith, specifically when they feel judged or condemned for being angry at or questioning the Divine for their loss.

6. Afterlife Concerns

Concerns related to the afterlife are reflective of a spiritual crisis. Specifically, the bereaved wonder about their loved one's destiny or if they would see him or her again, and questions the existence of heaven and hell.

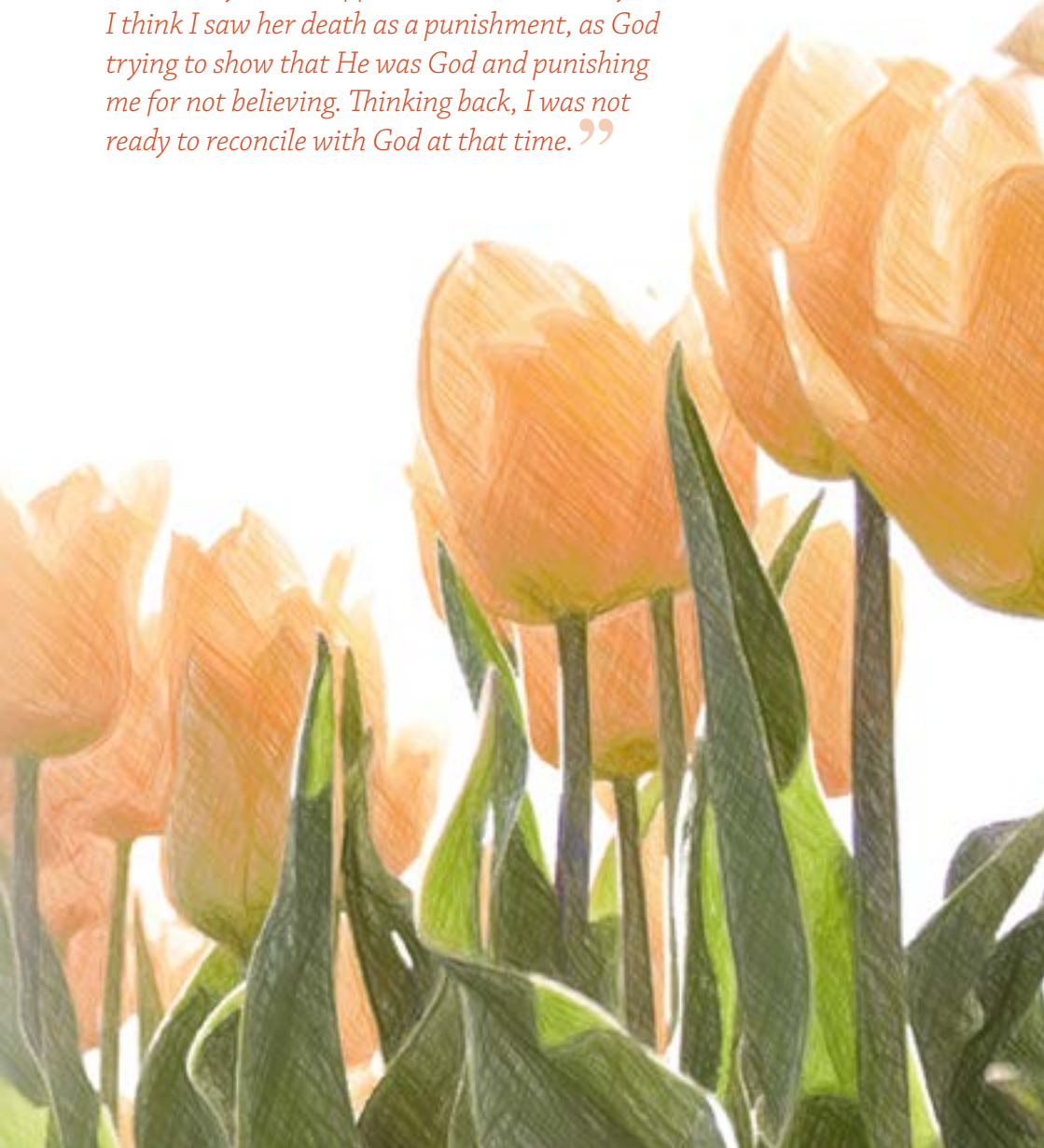
7. Faith-Related Changes

Changes in faith-related behaviours, activities, and attitudes of the bereaved could be expressed in terms of lower levels of participation, where mood governs the level of participation, and they may choose not to worship the Divine anymore.

8. Lapse of Faith

Spiritual crisis that culminates in the bereaved person walking away from the Divine may represent a temporary or permanent loss of faith.

“When he passed away, I was so angry, depressed, confused. Does God even exist? What if I live to the end of my life and find out that God never existed? It feels like God just randomly chose someone to die, and my sister happened to be the unlucky one. I think I saw her death as a punishment, as God trying to show that He was God and punishing me for not believing. Thinking back, I was not ready to reconcile with God at that time.”



COPING STRATEGIES FOR THE BEREAVED

Grieving the loss of a loved one is a difficult journey and is something one 'gets through', instead of 'gets over'. It is important not to let grief dominate your life. The following is a list of coping strategies the bereaved may find useful, some of which are already mentioned in other chapters:

1. Giving Yourself Time and Permission to Grieve

This is sometimes disregarded in our society. Refrain from placing unrealistic demands upon yourself to 'get over it'. Reconsidering the meaning and purpose in our lives will take time. Even when you find yourself having questions and doubts over your spiritual or religious beliefs, do not blame yourself or feel guilty. Remember it is not uncommon. Instead, allow yourself the space and time to address these doubts, and to heal according to your own time frame.

2. Reaching Out to Family Members and Close Friends

While some may want to go through grief alone, it can also be helpful to reach out to those who care for you and love you. They too may be experiencing the pain you are enduring. Facing difficulty together is better than facing it alone. More importantly, being able to openly share your thoughts on life or spiritual questions allows the opportunity to seek possible answers.

3. Turning to the Divine

Experiencing the loss of a loved one, especially in situations where we find it hard to accept, may sometimes result in one being angry with the Divine or blaming the Divine for our sorrows. While we instinctively want to turn away, returning to the Divine may help us clarify our thoughts and emotions, and draw inner strength to endure this difficult time. Pace yourself and give permission to yourself to re-connect with your faith and the Divine.

4. Embracing Your Own Spiritual or Faith Views

The inherent nature of spirituality being based on connections can be a great comfort during a time of grief. Almost all religious faiths and secular schools of thought view death as a natural part of life, with most major religions in the world believing that death is not the end of our existence. Most religions have long encountered death and loss, and speak to human tragedy in complex ways. Finding comfort, solace, and answers from your faith may be reassuring and may bring hope. Even if you do not hold a particular religious faith or view towards an afterlife, you can still discover and deepen the way you make sense of this world and your present life. Seek to understand your personal belief and values that connect you with yourself, to others and to the natural environment around you. These contemplations may support you in coping with your loss and grief, and give meaning to your experiences.

5. Connecting with Your Faith or Spiritual Community

Most faith communities will have supportive programmes or other means to assist people going through the loss of a loved one. You may find comfort in the rituals that your faith community provides, including rituals offered during illness and after death. Where possible, speaking with your faith or spiritual leader may help you examine and perhaps even modify your beliefs as you adjust to life without the person you loved. On the other hand, excuse yourself from situations or people who are unhelpful to your grief, if you have to.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FAITH OR SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES SUPPORTING THE BEREAVED

1. Just be there for the bereaved person, encourage self-reflection and allow the person to express himself or herself as long or as often as needed. Do not tell them how they should or should not feel. Allow the space and time for tears and emotions whenever they come, and be comfortable in embracing these expressions.
2. Refrain from giving false reassurance or assuming all grief experiences are the same, i.e. "I know how you feel." In this way, we may be invalidating their grief or making them feel that it is not important.

3. Withhold judgment on what the bereaved person has shared, even when it may be anger, doubts and questions towards the shared faith or religious beliefs. Be compassionate and lend a listening ear with sincerity and respect. Do not be quick to offer a religious or spiritual teaching all the time. They may not always be looking for an immediate explanation or solutions.
4. Avoid making statements like “You should have moved on by now”, “It is wrong for you to think this way about the Divine” or suggesting the death may be a way of Divine punishment. This may invoke further guilt or anger, or may cause them to feel abnormal about themselves.
5. Well-meaning, religious jargon can sometimes sound patronising or insensitive, especially when said in an untimely manner. These may include “He or she is in a better place”, “It is God’s will”, “God needed another angel”, “God is teaching you a lesson from this loss” etc. In a painful time of grief, such explanations may not sit well with the bereaved.
6. Seek to understand a bereaved person’s views and beliefs, and connect with these even as you find ways to address any spiritual distress or questioning. Do not force religious opinions or teachings on them when they are not yet aligned or ready.
7. Seek a balance between over-staying and giving the bereaved person adequate space and time for themselves. If they are not ready to return to previous religious duties or commitments, allow them more time. Also respect their preferences if they are not comfortable with joining faith groups or activities in the period where they are still trying to grapple with their grief or spiritual unease.
8. Beyond spiritual or religious counselling, be willing to offer additional practical help for the bereaved to manage the concurrent stressors they experience through their grief.

“Now that he’s gone, I start thinking about how should I live my life so that it is worthy of him.”

9. Encourage the bereaved person to seek professional support if persistent, intense grief reactions are so overwhelming that the overall well-being of the person, especially the emotional and social functions, are grossly compromised. Faith leaders can consider working with secular professionals to ensure the bereaved person has his or her varying needs met appropriately.

Grief can affect our sense of spirituality and the way we make sense of our lives and the world around us. While losses can test our beliefs, they also create opportunities for us to reconnect and rebuild a faith or a philosophy of our lives.



Supporting Grief in the Community

The provision of care and concern by the community to its bereaved members is a reflection of how compassionate a society is. Many of us find ourselves in at least one of the below roles in our community:

- As a resident of a neighbourhood or as a volunteer at a Residents' Committee;
- As a member of an interest group, e.g. exercise group, gardening group, Community Club etc.; or
- As a user or provider of a care institution in the community, e.g. day care centre, senior activity centre, nursing home etc.

Death may happen to someone we know from any of our above associations or their families. When someone we know in the community stays away or stops participating in a regular activity or social group due to bereavement, we may want to consider if the bereaved requires support and how we can be of help. As members of a community group, we may be affected by the death of a fellow member too, even if we are not a family member. This section offers suggestions on what members of the community can do for

the bereaved individuals and families among them and other members of the community affected by a death. Please also refer to tips offered in the other section on 'Supporting a Grieving Relative or Friend' in Chapter 3.

SUGGESTIONS TO SUPPORT BEREAVED MEMBERS OF YOUR COMMUNITY

1. Participate in the Funeral Service and Keep in Touch

Contact the bereaved person when you come to know about their loss. Attend the funeral or memorial service of the deceased if you can. The bereaved needs to know that you care and are there to support them through this difficult journey. Allow the bereaved to share their experience of the loss as much or as little as they wish. You may want to take this opportunity to find out if the bereaved may have any concern or difficulty to carry out activities of daily living, financial challenges, employment, schooling or health issues especially among the more vulnerable in the community – e.g. those with young dependents and bereaved elderly living alone in the community. Do not shy away from the bereaved person after the funeral. Keep in contact with them, even if you can only do so by phone calls or text messages.

2. Give Practical Help

Some people are not used to sitting with another person in grief nor will all bereaved open up to you about their intense emotions. You can show them you care by offering practical help, including:

- Offering pre-cooked meals that only need to be reheated before serving;
- Taking over some of their routine responsibilities, such as picking up the children from school or childcare, especially for a young widow or widower;
- Helping with household chores such as cleaning or laundry;
- Providing medical escort especially for a bereaved senior;
- Buying groceries and food;
- Answering phone calls or making phone enquiries on their behalf; and
- Helping those less proficient in English to review documents and correspondences with agencies related to estate matters of the deceased.

“There were so many people who came to the wake from the various blocks, people I didn’t even know. They came and they contributed. It was quite amazing.”

It is also possible that they may not want you to support them with practical help and their decisions should be respected.

3. Connect to Community Resources

If you have some rapport with the bereaved, and can meet their needs of companionship or assistance with practical matters, be consistent in what you can offer. However, be aware of your own limitations. Where appropriate, consider how the bereaved may benefit from services offered by other community, health or social groups, such as religious organisations, grassroots organisations, voluntary welfare organisations, family service centres, senior activity centres, schools, hospitals, and even clan associations. You could be the bridge for the bereaved in your community who may not be aware of the resources available to support them.

4. When to Seek Professional Help?

Although grief can be very painful, a majority of the bereaved find that with the support of their family and friends and their own resources, they gradually find ways to learn to live with their loss, and do not require professional support. However, sometimes the circumstances of death may be particularly distressing, especially in unexpected and unnatural deaths, or there may be other competing stressors that complicate the grief experience. If someone in your community appears to be persistently struggling with day-to-day activities, complains about more physical ailments, withdraws from social interactions and you can hardly recognise any semblance of his or her usual self, encourage him or her to seek professional help. Take notice of any pre-existing mental health conditions and the use of intoxicants which may complicate the grief experience. Health and social care professionals, e.g. social workers, counsellors, psychiatrists etc. can work with the volunteers and members of the community to support the well-being of the bereaved.

5. Returning to the Group After a Loss

Some members of your group may not have been active due to caregiving duties or when they are newly bereaved. Physical, mental and emotional fatigue from caregiving and grief may prevent these members from participating in social activities. While it is understandable and even necessary for them to cut back or stay away if they do not feel up to it to join any communal activities, you can make an effort to invite them back into the group at an appropriate time, especially if they have been keeping to themselves with little social interaction after a loss. Bereaved individuals who are socially isolated may not cope as well as their counterparts who are more socially engaged.

The bereaved may feel socially awkward and worry about how to respond or handle conversations and relationships with other members of the group after their loss. They may also be unsure of how other members of the group may respond to them. Provide additional assurance, encouragement and preparation to ease back into the group. Allow them to decide on the level of engagement and support them to take small steps to return to their comfort level with the group. Be patient, move at their pace and do not give up on them. Help them build a renewed sense of connection with the group.

SUPPORTING OTHER MEMBERS AFFECTED BY THE DEATH OF A FELLOW MEMBER

The death of a fellow member who shared common life experiences, life stage or similar interests may trigger grief reactions e.g. shock, sadness, disbelief, etc. in other members of the group. It may heighten the awareness of one's mortality in some members or remind others of their own loss experiences. It is important to acknowledge the death of the member and the grief of fellow members. Construct opportunities to collectively remember the deceased member, share memories and legacies of the deceased. Remind fellow members that missing the deceased and feeling sad etc. are normal human reactions.

RESPONDING TO ‘HIGH PROFILE’ DEATHS IN THE COMMUNITY

In cases where a death attracts public and media attention, especially those involving multiple losses, unnatural deaths or high profile public figures, in addition to the grief of affected individuals and families, another dimension of grief prevails in the community.

Be mindful of how we use various platforms, including social media, to express our reactions and opinions and the impact they may have on the immediate family members and significant others of the deceased. While the expressions of one’s grief, the show of concern and support for the bereaved may be valid and rightly motivated, the bereaved may be unprepared and overwhelmed by the attention and flood of calls, messages and postings on social media. The expression of grief on social media is best left to the bereaved themselves. Avoid circulating videos, images and personal accounts of events relating to the circumstances of the death. Verify the accuracy of any information related to the death events and do not circulate indiscriminately. Attending the wake and funeral of the deceased to satisfy one’s own curiosity adds unnecessary stress to the bereaved. Instead, refrain from such behaviours to show understanding and respect for the immediate family members and relatives of the deceased.

List of Helpful Resources

American Hospice Foundation

<https://hospicefoundation.org>

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

<https://www.grief.org.au>

Child Bereavement UK

<https://childbereavementuk.org>

Children and Youth Grief Network

<https://www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com/videos/>

Cruse Bereavement Care, United Kingdom

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland

<https://www.crusescotland.org.uk/>

Marie Curie

<https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/bereaved-family-friends#>

National Association of School Psychologists

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/addressing-grief/addressing-grief-tips-for-teachers-and-administrators>

The Dougy Center – The National Centre for Grieving Children & Families

<https://www.dougy.org>

The Irish Hospice Foundation

<https://hospicefoundation.ie/our-supports-services/bereavement-loss-hub/>

Victoria State Government

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/servicesandsupport/grief-how-to-support-the-bereaved>

List of Community Service Providers for Bereavement Support

There are organisations who offer a range of grief and bereavement services to individuals and families in need. These services are often provided by professional social workers, counsellors, psychologists or therapists.

If you have lost a loved one while at a healthcare institution, i.e. hospitals, community hospitals, hospices or nursing homes, you may wish to first approach the social workers or psychosocial team to support your grief. There are also Family Service Centres (FSCs) located near your residential area whom you can approach to seek support from.

The following page is an additional list of community service providers for bereavement support. A brief description of their respective services and contact information is included. Please contact them for further information on the support you may need as you journey through your grief.

Organisation	Types of Bereavement Services	For Who
Assisi Hospice Grief and Bereavement Care	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual Bereavement Counselling 2. Bereavement Support Group 3. Grief Cafe 	<p>Any bereaved individual who needs support to cope with grief and reintegrate into life after loss</p>
Children's Cancer Foundation (CCF)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Casework and Counselling 2. Legacy Building Programme 3. Love Continues (Support Group) 4. A Day of Remembrance (ADORE)- Memorial Day <p>1. Children Impacted by Cancer</p>	<p>Bereaved caregivers (of children with cancer who are CCF beneficiaries)</p> <p>Children who lost their caregivers to cancer (the child must be aged 4-19 and at least one parent is Singaporean/PR)</p>
Counselling and Care Centre (CCC)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family Therapy 2. Couple/Marital Therapy 3. Individual Psychotherapy 4. Child Focused Therapy 5. Trauma Counselling 6. Critical Incident Stress Debrief (CISD) 7. Psychological Assessment Service 	<p>English or Mandarin-speaking</p>
Hua Mei Counselling and Coaching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual & Family Counselling 2. Coaching Workshop 	<p>Above 50 years old (no age limit for family caregivers of older persons)</p> <p>Call to find out the geographical areas where home visits are available</p>
Montfort Care	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Specialised grief counselling and therapy for individuals and families 2. Referral and coordination of services required by the bereaved (practical and social support) 3. Information helpline for the bereaved and their caregivers 4. Consultation, talks, and workshops on grief, death education and bereavement for the public, community groups and professionals. 	<p>Individuals and families who lost a significant other (especially through a sudden and unexpected death)</p> <p>Face to face support can be provided at Montfort Care Centre near your home or at your home, if necessary</p>

By Who	Contact Details
Counsellors Therapists	<p>Address: 832 Thomson Road, Singapore 574627</p> <p>Operation Hours: Monday to Sunday Open 24 hours</p> <p>WhatsApp: 9787 9890</p> <p>Website: www.assisihospice.org.sg</p> <p>Email: assisi@singaporehospice.org.sg</p>
Counsellors Creative Therapist Psychotherapists Social Workers	<p>Address: 535 Kallang Bahru #02-01 GB Point Singapore 339351</p> <p>Operation Hours: Monday to Friday 9am - 5.30pm</p> <p>Tel: 6229 3701</p> <p>Website: www.ccf.org.sg</p>
Counsellors Psychotherapists	<p>Address: Hong Lim Complex Blk 536 Upper Cross Street #05-241 Singapore 050536</p> <p>Operation Hours: Monday & Wednesday 9am - 9pm Tuesday, Thursday, & Friday 9.30am - 6pm</p> <p>Tel: 6536 6366</p> <p>Website: www.counsel.org.sg</p>
Counsellors	<p>Address: Central Plaza 298 Tiong Bahru Road #15-01/06 Singapore 168730</p> <p>Operation Hours: Monday to Thursday 8.30am - 6pm Friday 8.30am - 5.30pm</p> <p>Tel: 6593 9455</p> <p>Counselling Tel: 9048 4987</p> <p>Website: www.tsaofoundation.org</p>
Counsellors Social Workers Thanatologists Volunteers and with staff of our partner organisations	<p>Address: Multiple Locations including home-based support</p> <p>Operation Hours: Information helpline - Monday to Friday 9am - 6pm</p> <p>Helpline Tel: 8181 0448</p> <p>Email: hello@montfortcare.org.sg</p>

Organisation	Types of Bereavement Services	For Who
O'Joy Limited	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual & Family Counselling 2. Grief & Bereavement Therapy 	<p>Any person aged 18 and above with bereavement issues. For elderly clients with mobility issues, we provide grief counselling via home visitations, please call to ascertain service boundary.</p>
SAGE Counselling Centre	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual & Family Counselling 2. Expressive Art Therapy 3. Home Maintenance Service 	<p>For the bereaved individuals seeking support, he or she must be above 50 years old. For family members or caregivers of the bereaved, there is no age limit</p>
Samaritans of Singapore (SOS)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 24-Hour Hotline 2. 24-Hour Care Text (Text Messaging Service) 3. Caremail Support (Email) 4. Crisis Support 5. Specialist Counselling 6. Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors 7. Support Group 	<p>Individuals affected by a crisis, thinking about suicide and/or affected by suicide.</p>
Viriya Community Services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual & Family Grief and Bereavement Casework and Counselling 2. Grief and Bereavement Workshops & Groupwork 3. Grief and Bereavement Awareness Talks 4. Supportive Services 	<p>For individuals and families impacted by loss and grief.</p>
Wicare Support Group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Group Grief & Bereavement Recovery Therapy 2. Individual Counselling 3. Peer-to-peer Support Group for widows and their children 4. Talks & Workshops 5. Social activities for widows and their children 	<p>Widows and their children All our programs are in both English and Mandarin</p>

By Who	Contact Details
Counsellors Social Workers	<p>Address: Blk 5 Upper Boon Keng Road #02-10 Singapore 380005</p> <p>Operation Hours: Monday to Friday 8am - 5.30pm</p> <p>Tel: 6749 0190</p> <p>Website: www.ojoy.org</p>
Counsellors Art Therapists Para-counsellors Social Workers Volunteers	<p>Address: Jurong Point Shopping Centre 1 Jurong West Central 2 #06-04 Singapore 648886</p> <p>Operation Hours: Monday to Friday 8.30am - 5.30pm</p> <p>Tel: 6354 1191</p> <p>Helpline: 1800 555-5555</p> <p>Website: www.sagecc.org.sg</p>
Counsellors Social Workers Volunteers	<p>Address: 10 Cantonment Close #01-01 Singapore 080010</p> <p>Operation Hours: Monday to Friday 9am - 6pm</p> <p>Hotline: 1-767 (24-Hour)</p> <p>Text Messaging: 9151 1767 (24-Hour)</p> <p>Email: pat@sos.org.sg</p> <p>Website: www.sos.org.sg</p>
Counsellors Social Workers Therapists	<p>Address: 72 Shrewsbury Road Singapore 307837</p> <p>Operation Hours: Monday to Friday 9am - 6pm</p> <p>Tel: 6256 1311</p> <p>Email: support@viriya.org.sg</p> <p>Website: www.viriya.org.sg</p>
Counsellors Volunteers Wicare Members	<p>Address: 9 Bishan Place Junction 8 Office Tower #08-01 Singapore 579837</p> <p>Operation Hours: Monday to Friday 9am - 6pm (Closed 1pm - 2pm)</p> <p>Tel: 6354 1941 / 9616 5091</p> <p>Website: www.wicare.org.sg</p>

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Community Bereavement Service Providers

You are encouraged to detach this flap and keep it where you can access it easily. Alternatively, you can also detach this flap and pass it on to someone whom you think might need to contact community service providers.

Assisi Hospice Grief and Bereavement Care

For all bereaved persons in the community
www.assisihospice.org.sg | WhatsApp Message: 9787 9890

Children's Cancer Foundation

For children and families affected by cancer
www.ccf.org.sg | Tel: 6229 3701

Counselling and Care Centre

For those who need bereavement counselling
www.counsel.org.sg | Tel: 6536 6366

Hua Mei Counselling and Coaching

For grieving elderly above 50 years old
www.tsaofoundation.org | Tel: 6593 9549
Counselling Tel: 9048 4987

Montfort Care

For anyone who has lost a significant person
<https://montfortcare.org.sg/> | Tel: 8181 0448

O'Joy Limited

For those above 18 in need of grief counselling
www.ojoy.org | Tel: 6749 0190

SAGE Counselling Centre

*For bereaved seniors above 50
and their families/caregivers*
www.sagecc.org.sg | Tel: 6354 1191 | Helpline: 1800 555-5555

Samaritans of Singapore (SOS)

*Individuals affected by a crisis, thinking about suicide and/or
affected by suicide.*
www.sos.org.sg | 24-hour Hotline: 1-767
24-hour CareText: 9151 1767 (WhatsApp)
CareMail: pat@sos.org.sg (Email)

Viriya Community Services

*For individuals and families impacted by loss
and grief*
www.viriya.org.sg | Tel: 6256 1311
Email: support@viriya.org.sg

Wicare Support Group

For widows and their children
www.wicare.org.sg | Tel: 6354 1941 / 9616 5091

You can also approach a social worker in a health or social service institution known to you for bereavement support.

Note: Information is accurate as at time of print.