Loss and Bereavement

Throughout our lives, we all have to face change and loss. Sometimes this involves a great deal of emotional pain and suffering. It can cause us to re-evaluate our lives in order to make sense of what is happening, or even force us to look at who we are as individuals.

When someone close to us dies, we probably experience the most severe form of loss in our lives. Usually, this is experienced with not just one feeling but a whole range of feelings. This is a normal, natural process. A University of Leicester survey found that approximately 40% of students had experienced concerns about coping with the death of someone close.

It may take some time to get through these feelings and unfortunately, the process cannot be hurried. Coping with loss is difficult at any time, but as a student, with deadlines to meet, exams to revise for, not to mention the money worries, it can feel even worse.

What is grief?

The word ‘grief’ describes the human response to change and loss. There are a number of responses that can be experienced:

- **Shock**: tears, sobbing and deep sighs; severe physical and mental pain; shivering, sweating and dizziness; sleep and appetite disturbance; lack of energy.
- **Numbness**: feelings of isolation; indecision; feeling lost; irrational behaviour; withdrawal; avoidance of emotions.
- **Denial**: “It can't be true”; expectation of a return; constant thinking about the deceased or about the loss; keeping busy, often to the point of exhaustion.
- **Anger**: a feeling of “Why me?” or irritation with those that try to console you.

The grieving process

Grief is a process, rather like going on a journey that you wouldn’t choose to take. People often say things like “I just want to get through this and get back to normal”, or “I feel really confused about my feelings”. Sometimes there is a sense that they are ‘weird’ in some way because of the range of feelings that are being experienced.
Sometimes the bereaved person becomes preoccupied with the deceased. In the early stages this is a way of coming to terms with the loss. Grief must be allowed to happen, it is a natural process of adjusting to loss, and it is different for everyone. It cannot be bypassed or rushed. If we try to take a shortcut, the process invariably leads to complications and more pain in the longer term.

If your loss is sudden, you may experience some degree of shock. In one way this can be seen as a natural anaesthetic to protect you from overwhelming pain. This stage in the grieving process could be characterised by a ‘not me’ approach, and you may even continue to act as if nothing has happened. You may also feel numb. Denial is normal, it may pass quickly or last a lot longer.

If it lasts too long, it may begin to feel as though it separates you from the real world. For some, the emotional pain may be experienced as real physical pain, aching and feeling very tender.

Anger is a common response to situations of loss. Many people have a difficult time dealing with this emotion at the best of times. Being angry can be a frightening emotion to deal with, especially for those who grew up in families where it was a ‘forbidden emotion’. But in grief, anger is normal and appropriate and needs to be expressed and talked through. This stage in the grieving process could be characterised by a ‘why me’ approach. You may find that you feel guilty for a number of reasons. ‘If only’ thoughts come to mind. Again, these are normal feelings to have and usually there is absolutely no reason to feel guilty.

**Helping yourself**

It is important to have support during the grieving process and to try to come to terms with the initial shock and subsequent feelings. Here are some suggestions:

- be as open as you can in expressing your feelings
- cry when you need to
- tell the story of your loss to someone you trust
- try and focus on what you did for the deceased, rather than what you should have done
- if you are having trouble sleeping, try to do something that will relax you before you get to bed, such as taking a bath or exercising earlier in the day
Helping others who are grieving

Sometimes, all a bereaved person wants is to be heard without interruption or solutions. Listening to a friend or partner who has been bereaved makes you feel you should say or do something. Often, just being there and giving your full attention is enough.

Allow the person to express their feelings openly. Attempting to distract the bereaved from their grief through forced cheerfulness is not helpful.

Anger is a common response to grief. Avoid being defensive, and listen.

Where can I get support?

At some point in the grieving process, you will start to come to terms with your loss, and engage more readily with life and its events.

However, occasionally, the bereaved process gets stuck, and you may find that you are still grieving intensely, long after the event. Or, you may feel stuck in a different way by not being able to react to the loss at all, perhaps to the point of not being able to cry. In these situations you need to find some help.

Parents, friends and family can often be supportive, but not everyone will have family or friends for support, so you may want to seek help elsewhere. On the other hand, you may be concerned about worrying them or think that they will not understand, in which case you may want to consider seeking support from someone who is not directly involved in the situation.

Below you will find a list of suggested sources of help and support.

Sources of support

The University of Leicester Counselling and Wellbeing Service offers free, confidential, non-judgemental counselling. Talking to someone who is not involved in your life can help you recognise patterns of behaviour and find your strengths. Counselling sessions usually last 50 minutes and the number of appointments will be decided by you and your counsellor.

You can arrange an appointment by contacting our receptionist by telephone on 0116 223 1780 or email at counselling@le.ac.uk or by calling into reception at the Student Counselling Service. Web page: www.le.ac.uk/ssds/counselling
Your **GP** may be able to help by referring you to counselling or other support services.

Sometimes it is easier to talk to someone over the telephone. The following organisations offer support:

**MIND** (National Association for Mental Health) has an information line on 0845 766 0163 9 am to 5 pm Mon-Fri [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

**The Samaritans** Local telephone number: 0116 270 0007, national telephone number: 0845 790 9090.

**CRUSE Bereavement Care** National Helpline: 0844 477 9400 [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)
Local: Leicester@cruse.org.uk  T: 0116 288 4119

**Rd4u.org.uk** (Cruse website for young bereaved persons) [www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk)
National helpline: freephone 0808 808 1677

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The Student Support Services (SSS) have a web page for other student services that can provide information and assistance for a wide range of issues. This is at [www.le.ac.uk/ssds](http://www.le.ac.uk/ssds) or you can call in to look at their leaflets, 2nd Floor, David Wilson Library on main campus.

We would like to thank University of Teeside for allowing us to adapt their student leaflets, on which this information on Loss and Bereavement has been based.
Where to find Counselling and Wellbeing

Our entrance is at the rear of the building located directly on the junction of University Road and Welford Road. We have a ramp and there is a large sign on the wall. The building is accessible to wheelchair users.

Contact Details

Counselling and Wellbeing
University of Leicester
161 Welford Road
Leicester
LE2 6BF

T: 0116 223 1780
F: 0116 223 1269

www.le.ac.uk/counselling

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