FACT SHEET
Coping with grief and loss

This fact sheet is designed to help you to understand grief and to suggest some strategies to assist in coping during the grieving process.

“Grief is love which has been made homeless.”

What is grief and how do we grieve?

Grief is our response to a loss, such as losing someone we loved or who was significant in our lives in some way. Grief can also be experienced when other types of losses occur, such as when someone is seriously injured due to road trauma and they can no longer live the life they knew before the crash.

While grief is a normal and expected response to loss, it can feel very frightening because of the intensity and unpredictability of feelings we may experience. Most people are not prepared for, and don’t know how to cope with, the “utter emotional, physical and mental chaos” as one grieving person described it. Often their family, friends and the wider community are also unprepared to deal with grief and may struggle to support the grieving person in a helpful way.

Everyone grieves differently and there is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve. Our personality, culture, religion, relationship to the deceased, nature of the death and many other factors affect how we grieve. One of the hardest tasks of grieving is to accept that we need time and space to grieve while at the same time trying to attend to the task of living. We have to grieve and mourn, while continuing to look after children, be a partner, make a living, pay bills, and adapt to all the changes the death of a loved one brings.

Grief can have profound and significant effects on every part of our life, including our physical health, thinking, feelings, spiritual life, work and relationships with others. Our lives will usually be altered forever after a significant loss, and we are then required to create a new “normal”. Often when we read about grief we are told that people go through various stages and that the end point of grief

“Healing grief does not mean getting over the feeling of pain, loss, or missing. It is the development of coping to continue without the lost one…”

D. Fireman (2011)
is closure. This suggests that when we have moved through these stages and the ‘grief work’ has been done we can then ‘move on’. This is not everyone’s experience. Many people who have suffered a devastating and traumatic loss due to road trauma say that they never “get over it” or achieve closure. The grief may never really go away but rather we learn to live alongside it and adapt to the changes that the loss has brought to our life.

It is common for grief to be triggered again at a point in time when you believe you are coping better or “have put it behind you”. This happens especially during significant events, special occasions and anniversaries. Your reactions can feel just as intense and raw as they were shortly after the loss. This is normal and it is important not to be frightened by this – and to realise that you are not “going crazy”. Sometimes it helps to acknowledge and prepare for these times (see our fact sheet titled, “Coping with grief during special occasions and anniversaries”). To find or admit you are struggling with grief, months, years, or even decades later, is part of the human experience and it is never too late to seek help or give yourself permission to grieve.

What are common responses to grief?

Grief affects our entire world. It includes physical, emotional, thinking, spiritual, social and work elements. The diagram below includes some, but not all, of our possible responses to grief.

**Emotional**
- Numbness
- Shock
- Sadness
- Anger
- Fear
- Relief
- Guilt
- Longing
- Meaningless
- Emptiness
- Abandonment
- Up and down
- Apathy

**Social**
- Overly sensitive
- Avoiding others
- Avoiding places
- Lack of interest
- Relationship problems

**Physical**
- Restlessness
- Tightness in the throat
- Chest, back or stomach pain
- Change in weight/appetite
- Exhaustion
- Sleep problems
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea

**Thinking**
- Forgetfulness
- Poor concentration
- Denial
- Disorganised
- Trying to think of reasons why
- Feeling like the death hasn’t happened
- Slowed thinking
- Confusion
- Vagueness
- Dreaming of the deceased
- Hallucinations

**Occupational**
- Poor concentration
- Short temper
- Questioning importance of work
- Anger
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Reduced performance
- Loss of confidence

**Spiritual**
- Loss or questioning of faith
- Disappointment in religion
- Angry with God or deity
- Feeling betrayed by God or deity
- Pre-occupation with own death
- Sensing presence
- Looking for signs
- Trying to stay connected to the loved one
How do we cope with grief?

It can be really difficult to think about caring for ourselves when our life has been turned upside down and we are mourning deeply. Sometimes, the only reason we can see to try to keep living is because of our connections to others (e.g. our children, our partners, our parents and friends). We may not feel particularly motivated to care for ourselves but even small positive steps can eventually help soften the journey through grief. Basic self-care is very important at this time. The following suggestions may help:

• Try to look after your health by eating regularly, sleeping and exercising to reduce the stress on your body and mind.
• Try to avoid making important decisions, especially those which can’t be reversed for 6-12 months. This applies to things like disposing of personal belongings, moving house, etc.
• Keep a journal or diary where you can freely express what you feel by writing or drawing.
• Use other creative ways to express how you feel e.g. writing a song, poem, dancing, playing music etc.
• Hold a personal ceremony or ritual. For example, light a candle or plant a tree, flower or shrub. Have a conversation out loud with your loved one, read them a passage or poem, or offer up a prayer.
• Make something as a memorial for your loved one’s life or do something active in your loved one’s name e.g. donate money or time to their chosen charity or participate in a fundraising walk.
• Join an online group to commemorate your loved one. For example, Journey Beyond Road Trauma is an online community where you can create a tribute, connect with other people affected by road trauma, tell your story and campaign for road safety.
• Safely release excess energy by doing something physical such as walking, cycling, gardening, going to the gym or swimming.
• Continue, re-embrace or pursue spiritual practices which you find soothing or comforting.
• Find out what other people have done with their experience of grief. This could be through reading, watching films, joining support groups, or reading blogs.
• Do relaxing and soothing things such as having a hot bath, receiving a massage, sitting in the garden, playing with a pet, having a cup of tea while reading a book – anything which you would ordinarily enjoy.
• Let other people help you, if they offer. It may be difficult for you to allow people to help you and it is also difficult for people to know how to help, without “interfering”. It may be useful to make a list of things you need help with (e.g. someone to go to appointments with you, child-minding, cooking, sorting through belongings, having a cup of tea with you and just listening – be very specific if you can – then ask appropriate people). Not everyone will be good at doing some of these things, but most people will want to help in some way.
• Join a support group, whether on-line or face to face (see support services organisations on the next page).
• Often people don’t know whether talking about the deceased will be more painful for you. Let your friends and family know if it is okay to say the deceased person’s name in front of you and talk about them with you. It does not have to just be sad memories which are talked about, the funny and touching ones are also very important. Maintaining a connection with your loved one is important.
• Attend grief counselling where you can express your feelings in a safe environment.
• Give yourself permission to go about your daily life. It is okay and not disrespectful to your loved one’s memory if you enjoy yourself or momentarily forget that your loved one is gone. Remember we need space both to grieve and mourn but also to re-connect with life.

Seeking further help

The majority of people deal with the grief of losing a loved one without professional help. They rely on family and friends and community and gradually find ways to cope with and adapt to their loss. When a death occurs suddenly, unexpectedly or in very traumatic circumstances, such as with a road crash, it can be very difficult to cope with the strong reactions this causes. Additional stress may result from having to deal with police investigations, legal processes, financial issues and physical injuries (if you were also involved in the crash). If you find yourself overwhelmed by grief, anger, trauma or other strong reactions it’s best to seek help.

Our dedicated team of counsellors provide a non-judgemental, confidential, free counselling and support service. Counselling is provided face-to-face, via telephone or online (i.e. Skype) for anyone affected by road trauma in Western Australia regardless of when the crash occurred or your level of involvement, direct or indirect. Contact us direct if you would like to book an appointment.
Each year Over 38,000 West Australians are affected by road trauma. Road Trauma Support WA provide support.

Support services/websites/blogs

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
www.grief.org.au

Journey Beyond Road Trauma
www.journeybeyondroadtrauma.com

My Grief Assist
www.mygriefassist.com

What's Your Grief?
www.whatsyourgrief.com

The Compassionate Friends
a self-help organisation for parents who have lost a child of any age. www.compassionatefriendswa.org.au

Solace Australia
a self-help organisation for those grieving over the death of their partner. www.solace.org.au

Young Widowed Grief Support Group on Facebook
www.facebook.com/pages/Young-Widowed-Support-Group/218858261482000

Further support services

Lifeline 13 11 14

Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (ages 5-18)

Crisis Care 9223 1111 or 1800 199 008 (free call)

GriefLine 1300 845 745

Rural Link 1800 552 002

About us

Road Trauma Support WA is a state-wide service assisting anyone affected by road trauma, regardless of when the incident occurred or what level of involvement (direct or indirect) the person had.

FREE counselling sessions are available.

No referral is required.

We provide:

- Information and support;
- Education and training (costs may apply); and
- Counselling.

We are committed to being respectful of cultural and family values and provide our service in a safe, non-judgemental environment.

Road Trauma Support WA is delivered by Injury Matters with funding from the Road Trauma Trust Account and contract management through the Road Safety Commission.

Road Trauma Support WA

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