



Why did you have to go ...

Sarah Hicks / Jimi D Katsis



Arkesie Self Help Guide Series

Identifying Bereavement

- Are you having trouble coping after the loss of a loved one?
- Are you finding yourself constantly thinking about someone you have lost?
- Are you finding it difficult to come to terms with a bereavement?

If you have answered 'yes' to any of the questions above, then you could be suffering from grief. If so, you will find this *Self-Help Guide* to be useful in providing support with regards to learning about how to recognise some of the symptoms of grief, as well as understand what grief is and what ignites it. Through reading and practising some of the helpful strategies in this workbook, you will learn ways in which to understand, manage and even transcend the grief that you are experiencing.

Strategies

- Learn more about what bereavement is.
- Consider using physical exercise as well as other activities to help cope with grief and loss.
- Implement positive changes to your life that will help you process the effects of the separation that you are experiencing.

It is crucial that you approach these strategies at your own pace and tempo. Everyone works at a different speed. It is important to be kind, patient and consistent with yourself. You have already made the first step to seek help, give yourself some credit!

Symptoms of Bereavement

Experiencing grief and loss can result in experiencing a range of different symptoms. These can be in the forms of; thoughts, feelings, physical reactions and behavioural patterns. You might find that some of these symptoms resonate with you.

Feelings:

- Scared
- Anxiety
- Depressed
- Sadness
- Tearful
- Loneliness
- Loss
- Pain
- Guilt
- Anger

Thoughts:

- I wish they were here.
- I can't understand where they have gone.
- What am I going to do now?
- I wish that I had done things differently.
- I wish we had more time.

Physical Reactions:

- Exhaustion
- Increased Blood Pressure
- Stomach Ache
- Chills down the spine
- Sleeplessness/ Very Tired
- Fatigue
- Food Aversion/ Increased Appetite
- Nausea

Behavioural Patterns:

- Communicating openly about the loss, even after a long period of time.
- Not communicating at all.
- Withdrawing from social interaction with friends or loved ones.
- Avoiding participating in social interaction, this could include not going to work.
- Avoiding things related to the person you have lost.

If any of the points listed above do resonate with you, do not fear, these are common symptoms of grief and can be managed effectively. Remember, you are not alone in this and you can always ask for help. Remember to follow this *Self Help Guide* at your own pace to ensure that you are able to apply the strategies successfully.

What is Grief?

Grief is a strong and powerful emotion that can take its form in a variety of different symptoms. Grief is often rooted after we have suffered a loss of a loved one and is a natural process that almost everyone will go through in their life time. Overcoming the loss of a loved one can be a painful and overwhelming feeling which can impact our physical health, as well as our mental health. When we experience grief, it can be difficult to eat, sleep or even think clearly. It is important to remember that although bereavement can be linked to the death of a loved one, it also encompasses the feeling of sadness following different types of loss too.

It is normal to experience grief when we have suffered a relationship break-up or a miscarriage. It is also common to experience these same feelings when we lose a job, financial security or stability and possibly the loss of a dream.

It can be difficult to let go of material possessions too and we can also suffer a level of bereavement when we retire from work, even sell our family homes or sentimental items too.

The Impact of Loss

It doesn't matter how much we try to prepare ourselves for the way in which the feeling of loss can impact on our lives. Grief can be a roller-coaster of a ride and it is important to acknowledge that it can hit us in stages. This *Self-Help Guide* aims to assist your healing process from bereavement through providing you with an insight into how to grief works.

Remember, there is no typical response to loss. We all respond differently and it is important to be kind and patient with ourselves.

1. Shock

It often starts with an initial shock and disbelief. This can happen immediately after the loss has occurred, but it can sometimes take a little longer to hit us too. This is all because it can be hard to accept what is going on and it may be difficult to believe that it has even happened at all. When we have lost someone, it is normal to expect them to still answer our calls or even show up in person, even though we are aware they are gone.

2. Sadness

This can be a very painful stage and it is here that we start to show symptoms of what most people can identify as overt grief. We experience deep feelings of despair, loneliness, emptiness and even emotional instability.

3. **Guilt**

This is the stage in which we start to experience regret about things that we didn't say or do. Memories might come flooding back of a time when we fought or argued with someone that we lost too, or even feel that we took them for granted. Sometimes we experience guilt about ever feeling relieved that the person who had passed away after experiencing suffering during a terminal illness. Other times we feel guilty for not having prevented contributing factors of their death. For example; if it was a terminal illness, we might have regretted taking them to the doctor's for a check-up earlier.

4. **Anger**

Experiencing loss can leave us feeling totally alone. Anger is a natural response if we feel wronged, or have been served an injustice. It can be hard to comprehend why someone died, which can leave us feeling as though we need to blame someone e.g., God, the healthcare system, other relatives or the person themselves for leaving you behind.

5. **Fear**

The aftermath of losing someone can trigger a whole host of worries and anxieties. This could be worried about being alone, or even having a new found fear of your own morality - as well as those who are still alive. Sometimes we are faced with new responsibilities following the loss of someone, these could be looking after their family members, pets or material assets which further adds to our fear of being able to cope.

Grief is a process that is unique to every person and their encompassing situation. It may feel like your whole world is crashing down around you and it can be difficult to envisage a positive future ahead, but things will get easier. As the strongest and most intense feelings will begin to settle, they will gradually reduce in frequency too.

Everyone deals with bereavement in a different way too. Some may want to close themselves off from those around them and internalise the pain that they are feeling, while others will have more inclination to verbalise their feelings and talk to a friend or family. There is no right or wrong way. Everyone copes differently. For some people, it may only take a short period of time to settle down after the strongest emotions release their hold, while others may take longer.

Remember that there is no straight path along the journey of processing a loss. There will be bumps in the road with even more obstacles too, but what you may not realise is that you might be dealing with your feelings as anyone else would in your position. Grief is a natural response to loss and it does hurt.

Why is grief so complicated?

Current Life Situation

Some of us are burdened with the demands of others who need us around the time of the loss, such as family members or friends. This can make it difficult to process our own bereavement and cope with those strong emotions.

There might also be an array of practical issues that feel as though they have been thrust on you without any prior warning or explanation. These could be funeral arrangements, sorting out remaining assets and possessions, registering the death, navigating legal documents and ensuring that everything has been processed effectively. With all these changes amounting, it can almost feel suffocating.

Ways We Cope/ Our Thoughts

We all approach loss with different thoughts and feelings. No two experiences are ever the same. Some of us might feel immediately sad or guilty, while others feel angry and lonely. Either way, the situation leaves us all feeling vulnerable, which makes it difficult to manage and cope with our feelings and the event of the loss itself. As a result, these strong emotions may remind us of other past experiences that trigger unhelpful memories and difficulties. It is common for us to start to think of ourselves in a more negative light. It is important to recognise that these are unhelpful thoughts are occurring and try to challenge them directly. If not, they could spiral into a pattern of unhelpful thoughts that might be making our grieving process even harder to deal with.

Changes to the way we behave:

After experiencing a loss, it is normal to feel reminded of that person in a song that they might like, a place or even a smell. It is common for many people to avoid going to places that remind them of that person. Although it can be difficult to talk about the loss, or reminded of it, it can be helpful to mark painful occasions (e.g., birthdays, wedding anniversaries or Christmas) by doing something special.

Bereavement is not as clean-cut and boxed as the categories listed above. Everyone's experiences and responses to loss are unique and it is likely that you are experiencing a combination of a few of these responses or rather none at all. Either way, it is important to recognise what causes our grief and how our responses are preventing us from moving past it.

Why is it so hard to cope with grief?

There are so many reasons why grief can be hard to deal with. Everyone's story is different but what could make it harder is:

- The length of time that you knew the person
- How close you were to them
- How old they were/ how old you are
- How the person died – was it a sudden death, or a long illness?
- Whether you expected the death, or did it come as a shock?
- Your own experience with previous loss. Perhaps you have lost other people, or have had a traumatic experience with loss in the past.

Sometimes a sudden death of young person can be very difficult to come to terms with. We can be left feeling abandoned and alone with no explanation or preparation for our feelings what-so-ever. This can lead us to avoiding places or people that remind us of that person, which can perpetuate a cycle of isolating behaviours. It can help to establish a regular routine, as well as factoring in periods of physical activity to help elevate those strong and painful feelings.

The Cycle of Grief

Grief can follow a cycle of feelings, physical symptoms, behavioural traits and thoughts. They can follow each other in any succinct order; however, it is important to recognise them as we experience them. Through doing this, we can build an awareness of how these symptoms interact with each other and set in motion a cycle of grief.

For example:

Feelings – *Lonely, depressed and upset.*

Physical symptoms – *Drained, tired and loss of appetite*

Behaviour – *Wanting to stay in, not feeling communicative and avoiding my mother's favourite pub.*

Thoughts – *I miss her. I hate the doctors; they could have helped more. This is their fault*

Feelings – *Lonely, depressed and angry.*

Your Journey

We all cope with grief in different ways. Some of us are just at the beginning of our journey, while others have been dealing with it for some time already.

Consider how you have been dealing with bereavement. How effective have your strategies

been for you?

Think about:

- Is it going to help you in the long-term?
- Could your strategies be potentially fuelling your difficulties?
- What support do you have around you? Do you have friends or family that you can speak to? Even colleagues or distant relatives?
- Any period of difficulty in the past. How did you cope well with that?
- Have you considered reaching out for social support? This could include friends, family members, more distant relatives or even colleagues.
- How do you think you have coped? If you think you have not coped well, consider a friend in the same position and try to look at yourself objectively. You might be surprised at how much your self-confidence has plummeted.
- Could you try to consider breaking the feelings down into problem solving strategies? Have you tried working out solutions to your problems?
- Self-reflection. Are you aware of how the problems are truly affecting you? Try to take time out to think about how you are experiencing your grief through your thoughts, feelings, body and behaviour in general. Think back to the categories at the

beginning of this chapter. Taking the step to develop more self-awareness will help to harness your problems.

- Relaxation – It is important that you are taking care of yourself. Run yourself a bath, go for a walk, watch a film or read a book. Grief can be exhausting and if we do not take the time out to stop and allow ourselves an opportunity to self-care, then the unhelpful thoughts are more likely to creep their way in again. Periods of restfulness help to build strength to cope with our thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Keeping a Diary

After losing someone or something that means a lot to us, it can be difficult to find the energy to want to participate in activities that we once loved. As our motivation begins to wane, we often start to withdraw from others as well as our hobbies too. This can feel like you have not done very much in a long period of time, which can then cause us to feel even more depressed and unhappy. Those feelings then perpetuate the cycle of grief that we discussed earlier, which can be difficult to break away from.

Through using a journal or a diary, you can actively jot in some activities a week in advance, that you know you will enjoy. This can be an effective tool in helping us cope as well as lift our mood. Not only will it endeavour to build some much needed structure (in a time of great uncertainty and change), but it also gives us something positive to look forward to as well.

A great way to start is to ensure that you fill in all the activities that you have to do. These could be:

- Making breakfast
- Going food shopping
- Doing housework
- Filling the car up with fuel
- Cleaning the car

Once you have added in the tasks that you know you have to complete, you can now start to build in some activities that you would like to do. Remember not to go overboard by throwing in over-the-top goals. Try with something light and steady. Some examples are:

- Read a book or listen to a podcast
- Watch a film
- Socialise – Meet a friend for a coffee?
- Return to a hobby that you always loved. If you used to like kayaking, why not give it a go again?
- Exercise – This is so important as it will really help you feel better. It will help to ease some of those physical symptoms of grief, as well as elevate your mood in general. This does not have to be stressful or strenuous, it could be yoga or going for a gentle walk.
- Sleep pattern – Note down when you would like to go to sleep each night and keep it consistent.

- Relaxation time – Actively allocate set times each day to stop and relax. Make sure you do just that during that allocated slot and do not compromise with this.

Self-Care

Although it can be difficult to find the motivation to return to once-loved hobbies and enjoyable activities, it is important to ensure that we are looking after ourselves properly. This means that we are taking the necessary steps to ensure that we are nourishing our body with the right foods, as well as staying hydrated, establishing routines, taking exercise and sleeping properly. Although it can be hard to change unhealthy habits, sometimes it is vitally important in order to care for ourselves and others too. You will find that your ability to manage your emotions will be strengthened, as your physical self will start to flourish and heal too. A healthy body sets the foundations for building a healthy mind.

Alcohol

Many of us like to have a drink. It is an easy way for us to relax, let our hair down and even feel more confident. The issue with alcohol is that it can impair our ability to control our own

behaviour. This can be problematic when we are trying to overcome difficulties with bereavement. Furthermore, it can also interfere with our mood and disturb our quality of sleep. This is often hard to believe, however, our body processes alcohol overnight and it can actually wake us up. Another reason why many of us enjoy alcohol is because of its numbing effect. This can seem like it is helping us cope with the stresses of pressures from work, relationship difficulties or other amounting worries. More often than not, this view can actually make our situations worse and through regular misuse can be highly addictive too.

Drugs

The sedative or stimulant side effects of drugs can directly affect our mood, emotions and sleep. Although taking drugs can provide a distraction to facing difficult problems, they can actually make things worse. Drugs are also be highly addictive, so through developing a regular habit of misusing them could have an acutely damaging effect on our own health as well as our ability to safely regulate our own mood.

Smoking

A reason why people often turn to smoking in times of great turmoil is because of the nicotine acting as a stimulant. This can also have an impact on our ability to regulate our mood healthily, as well as our sleep pattern too. Although it is widely believed by many that smoking helps to ease stress, it's impact on our physical health far outweigh the pros to this claim. Not only can smoking harm you, but those around you too.

Caffeine

Caffeine acts as a stimulant that triggers a physical reaction in our bodies that mirror that experienced when suffering from anxiety. Furthermore, it is not advised to consume products with caffeine in for at least four hours before bedtime. Do not be fooled, it is not only tea and coffee that contain caffeine, so do fizzy drinks, energy drinks and products containing chocolate too.

Friendships and Positive Relationships

Although it is beneficial to take time out to enjoy some peace and quiet in solitude, it is equally as important to build strong relationships with other people too. Humans are highly sociable and have always depended on group settings for our survival as a species.

Maintaining good relationships with family and friends can provide us with the support and advice when we are struggling with managing our emotions. A problem shared, is a problem halved and positive relationships help us overcome our difficulties more quickly. It is helpful to have a few people to be able to talk through our troubles with as they might be able to offer ways in which they have found solutions to similar problems that you might not have considered. You never know, by sharing something, you might be helping someone else out who is secretly facing the same difficulties.

A Healthy Diet

What we consume has a surprising impact on our emotions and sleep too. It is important to eat a consistently nutritious foods in order to maintain our physical health as well as our mental health too. Eating regular, wholesome meals and drinking plenty of water nourishes our body. Similarly, try to consider what you consume close to bedtime as having caffeine, alcohol or even a large meal can disturb our sleep routine.

Exercise

Maintaining a healthy body is important in harnessing the physical symptoms of extreme anger. Taking exercise releases endorphins which make us feel better. You do not have to participate in overly vigorous routines to achieve this. Even just going for a walk, or trying gentle exercises regularly such as Pilates or Yoga will help ease that stress and tension. Examples of light exercise could be; gardening, cleaning for an extended period of time or joining an exercise class.

Routine

Creating a consistent routine can offer structure into our lives. Once we set in motion patterns that inform us to react the same way to the same situation, we are providing an element of safety and stability into our lives. Even taking time to relax at the same time every day, setting an alarm, or even deciding when to eat your meals can help us follow something structured.

Being Observant

Think carefully about the world around you and try to consider the noise, temperature and even how much light there is in your surroundings. This can have a direct impact on our

feelings of safety as well as our mood in general. If you are keeping your home tidy or working environment comfortable, you are more likely to feel at ease and more relaxed. The environment that we are regularly in contact with can also have a direct impact on our ability to sleep sufficiently enough too.

The points listed above should provide you with some ideas on how to self-care and make healthy, responsible changes to your life. You should give these a try and be patient with yourself too as changes do not happen overnight. Even planning healthy meals, or creating a small routine can all help you make positive changes that will directly impact your physical and mental health.

End Statement

I hope that you have found some of the concepts in this *Self-Help Guide* affective in providing you with advice and support on how to manage your grief. Bereavement is a normal part of life, yet we all deal with it in different ways. Grief manifests itself into different symptoms and reactions depending on the person, their life experience, age, relationship to the person or thing that they have lost as well as an endless list of factors. It is important that you develop the skills to become increasingly self-aware so that you can better manage those periods of emotional difficulty and are able to break the vicious cycle of thoughts, feeling behaviours and physical symptoms too.

Such intense emotions do not go away overnight, so try to give yourself time and don't be afraid to reach out to others around you for support too. Remember to allow yourself those regular moments to relax and take care of yourself too.

If you have tried some of the strategies mentioned in this *Self-Help Guide* and have remaining worries or concerns, then please reach out to our trained therapists at Arkesie, or even speak to your doctor about further support which might be helpful to you too.

