

**STEPS primary care mental health team, Glasgow**

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## **Coping with a death**

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# COPING WITH A DEATH

This booklet is for people who are trying to cope with the death of a person who they knew well or were close to e.g. a friend or family member.

- This booklet will talk about some of the things it is normal to feel when someone you are close to dies.
- It will give you some ideas and help to get you through this time

## **PART ONE: HOW DO PEOPLE REACT WHEN SOMEONE DIES?**

- A. Quotes - John's story
- B. The stages of grief
- C. What things affect how you feel

## **PART TWO: WAYS OF COPING**

- A. Getting better
- B. Helping yourself

## **PART THREE: HOW YOU CAN HELP OTHERS**

- A. Friends & family
- B. Children

## **PART FOUR: GETTING HELP**

- A. If you feel that you are not getting better
- B. Getting outside help

## **PART FIVE: USEFUL THINGS TO KNOW**

- A. What to do if someone you know dies
- B. Phone numbers, websites and books

## **PART ONE**

**HOW DO PEOPLE REACT WHEN SOMEONE  
DIES?**

## A. QUOTES

*"My dad died six weeks ago. He had cancer for 18 months. Now, I can't get the picture of him at his worst out of my mind. He was pale, very thin and not able to sit up. I wish I could remember him as he was when he was well 2 years ago, but I can't. I feel so guilty. I wish I could have done more..."*

**Stewart, 37**

*"My mum died last year; she had Alzheimer's for years. By the end she was just a shell. It was so sad seeing her there in the hospital bed. There didn't seem to be anything I could do to get through to her. She seemed so far away, so lost. She didn't recognise me or anyone else she knew before. It was awful to see that happen to someone you love. Once she was dead – and I feel really guilty for saying this – I actually felt quite glad that she was away. The last few years have been such a strain on me. In a way I felt really relieved"*

**Jen 55**

*"I lost my wife six months ago. We were married for 45 years. She was only ill for a short time. I don't seem to be able to cope with it. I keep thinking she'll walk through the door. I sometimes think she is still around me ..."*

**Dave, 63**

*"My husband was killed in a car crash this year. I am left on my own to bring up the 2 kids. I feel so lonely. I don't sleep. . At times I feel cross with him for leaving me to cope on my own ..."*

**Elaine, 24**

**This is the story of John. You'll hear parts of John's story through this booklet. John was 42 when his wife Donna was killed in a car crash three years ago. This is a true story, and it is written the way John told it.**

*"When Donna died, at first it just wouldn't sink in. I couldn't get my head around it. I just couldn't believe it. Donna, dead! No way could that be true! The police lady came around the house and told me face to face. The first thing I did was laugh at her. It just seemed not real. For the next few days, I felt like I was on another planet. In a right bloody daze. Couldn't think straight. Head all over the shop. It was like I couldn't feel a thing either. No tears or nothing like that. Just pure shocked."*

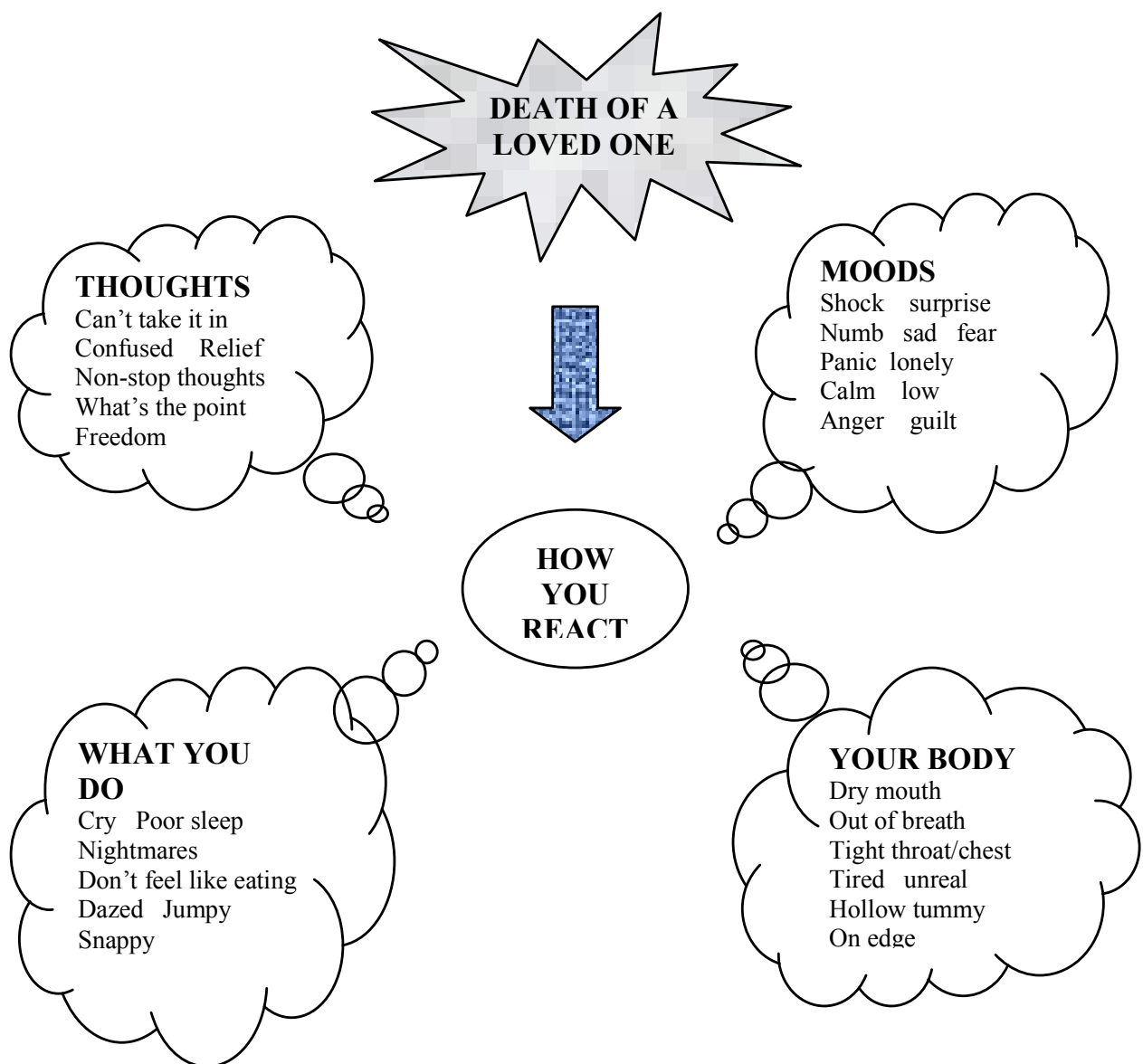
*"For days I couldn't sit still, really on edge. Totally freaked out. My sleep was shot to bits too. Couldn't eat nothing either. All I did was just pace around the house. The phone rang non stop for days. Folks checking up on me and trying to help. Totally did my head in. I could hardly speak to nobody. When I thought about Donna being dead I could hardly breathe! Nights were the worst. Only thing I could think to do was take a drink. Helped me sleep, but I would feel much worse next day."*

*"It was only after about two weeks, after the funeral, it hit me, all at once. I felt as if someone had knocked the stuffing out of me. I couldn't stop crying. I just felt so bad and so alone."*

**You can read more of John's story later on in this booklet**

## THE STAGES OF GRIEF

We will all lose loved ones at some point in our lives. Each of us will react in our own way. There is no right or wrong way to feel (as you can see from page 7, you may even feel relief if you think the death has been a blessing in disguise). It may seem hard to know what is normal. You may think that you are the only person who has felt this way. Here are some of the things that might happen to you:-



## **Early stages: The first hours and days after the death**

### **Moods**

You may feel strong shock. You might feel numb and have a lack of any feelings at all. You may feel very upset and very sad. You may want to cry or shout out. You might feel panic. You may fear that you can't cope or go on without your loved one. Some feel quite calm – this is often a sign of shock. Often the upset kicks in later.

### **Things you think about**

You can't take it in - you might refuse to believe the person is dead even though you know they are. You are sure there has been a mistake. You might be confused. You can't think straight.

### **Things you feel in your body**

You may have a very dry mouth. It is common to be breathless, have a tight feeling in your throat or chest, or a hollow feeling in your stomach. Things may seem a bit unreal – like you are here but not here. You may also feel on edge and jumpy.

### **Things that you do**

You may be in tears a lot of the time. You may find it hard to cry at all. Changes in your sleep are normal. You may find it hard to get to sleep, or you wake up often. You may have vivid dreams or nightmares. You may feel like eating less, or more, than usual. You may be in your own world for a while. You may be in a bit of a daze. You may forget where you have put things or what you have been doing. You may also get quite restless and jumpy. You may find it hard to sit still.

## **Later stages - A few weeks and months after the death.**

### **Moods**

After a few days or weeks you may feel quite down or low. People often feel angry that the person has died and left them alone. Guilt is common. Maybe you wish you had done more or been there more for the person. You might feel very lonely too.

### **Things you think about**

You can't stop thinking about your loved one. You may think about the death, and how you got on with the dead person. You may wonder if you could have done something different which might have changed things. You may find it more easy to accept that they are gone and not coming back. You may think a great deal about places, people and things that bring back memories of the person. You miss them really badly. You might think you are not able to do things for yourself. You may feel helpless.

You may think you have seen or heard the dead person close by. You may even think you are 'going mad' because you see or hear strange things.

You may get quite low and dread the future without your loved one - "what's the point in going on?"

Sometimes there can be a sense of relief or freedom after a death, often if the person had been ill a long time or suffered badly.

## **Things you feel in your body**

You might feel tired all the time. You may have weak muscles. You may feel you have no energy. You may feel restless and can't sit still for quite a long time after the death. You may also feel very active and don't often stop to rest. It is still common to feel a bit of panic at times later on too.

## **Things that you do**

You may want to be on your own more and go out and about far less. You may not feel like talking to family or friends. You might find it hard to go about your day to day life. Your social life may change. This is most true when your loved one was a big part of your social life. Losing a partner often affects this a lot.

Sleep can still be poor. Very vivid dreams - good and bad – are still common. You may still not feel like eating, or want to eat a lot more than normal. You may lose interest in sex.

You may stay away from things that remind you of your loved one. Some do carry things around with them that remind them of their loved one.

The way other people deal with you can be hard. Some may seem OK, but others will be clumsy in what they say or do, or may try to avoid you. This often happens because others feel awkward and do not know what to do or say. You may even feel angry that others are able to get on with their lives whereas you feel that is difficult. You may find that you can't talk about your loss. Everyone else may seem to be getting on with their lives, but you find it hard to do this.

## JOHNS STORY (2)

*“For a while I felt really angry. Just pure rage! Donna wasn’t even driving! The guy that went into them was drunk. The more I thought about what had happened, the more angry I got. All I could think about was that drunken idiot that had driven into the car. If I’d seen that bloke then, I would have wrung his neck”*

*“I also felt bad about myself, and the things I didn’t do for Donna. I just felt dead guilty the whole time. Couldn’t get arguments we’d had out of my mind. I started to feel low all the time. I was off work for four weeks – signed off by the doc. Couldn’t get out of bed. Sleep was shot to bits too. I felt tired and heavy. Donna, Donna, Donna. Couldn’t think about anything else. Couldn’t get the image of her dead out of my head. Totally mad dreams, and waking up in a sweat. A couple of times I would wake up thinking she was in the room, or I’d heard her speak to me. I really felt in a total mess”*

*“At one point I began to think what’s the point in all this? I couldn’t think about going on without her. Even had wild thoughts about chucking myself in the Clyde, I was that low. I totally shut myself off from friends and family. Felt as if I couldn’t face folk. My brother was good though. Kept coming round the house and chatting to me. That helped a bit when I was really down.”*

**You can read more about John later on**

## **WHAT THINGS EFFECT HOW YOU FEEL?**

These are a few things that may affect how you feel after the death, and how long these feelings last for.

### ***Who the person was***

People often find it most hard to deal with the loss of a child or a partner, then a brother, sister or parent. But, there are no hard and fast rules here.

### ***How you got on with your loved one***

If you were close and got on well with the person, it is going to be very hard for you to deal with their death. Sometimes if you did not get on with the dead person, it can make it hard too. You might feel guilt or anger.

### ***Way of dying***

The way that the person died has an effect. Things that can be hard are if the death is a huge shock, or if the person suffered a lot before they died. Murder or suicide, if the person is missing and you are not 100% sure they are dead, or more than one death, can all be hard to cope with.

### ***Things in the past***

Sometimes things in the past can have an effect. Have there been other times where someone you know has died and you have found it hard to cope? Have there been family problems that may not help?

### ***The way you are***

Maybe you already get times where you feel very low, or have been depressed before. You might find it hard to deal with changes. Maybe you are the type of person who finds it very hard to deal with strong feelings. Perhaps you are a very strong person, or a real copier. These things can have a big say on how you deal with a death.

### ***What else is going on in your life***

Stresses in other areas, or not having much close support can affect you.

## **PART TWO**

### **Ways of coping**

## **GETTING BETTER**

The time it takes to get over a death varies. We are all different. Getting over a death can be a slow process. Time does heal though. It can be hard to agree with this when your grief is really strong. If you can think of your loved one without it hurting badly, you are through the worst of it. For some this could take years. Some people never feel that they get over a death.

After a few months people will often find that little by little they are able to get on with their lives. They will think a bit less about the person they have lost. As time goes by things get easier. You may feel sad when you think of the dead person, but it is not as strong as before. The death doesn't seem to be the main thing in your life anymore.

It may still be hard for you, but you are able to get on with your life. Some of your old interests return. You start to look into the future more instead of brooding on the past. Try not to feel guilty if you start to build a new life after a death. It is normal to rebuild your life. You should try not to see this as disloyal.

### JOHN'S STORY (3)

*“I’m not kidding; it took me near enough ten months to start to feel better. It still hurt when I thought about her or what happened, but just not as strong. I began to get things back on track. I didn’t feel so run down all the time. I began to go out with my brother and some pals, and even had some good nights out.”*

*“When I was out I got chatting to girls a few times. I felt guilty at first, like I shouldn’t be doing that, or that folks were looking at me or talking about me. But when I thought about it, Donna wouldn’t have wanted me to sit there and feel low all the time, and not get on with my life. She just wasn’t that sort of person. That helped me a bit.”*

*“It was really hard at Christmas the first time without Donna. I felt empty and alone. My family helped me out. They wouldn’t take no for an answer. I went to my aunties for Christmas day, and they were all great. Really supported me at a tough time.”*

**The last bit of John’s story is at the end of the leaflet.**

## HELPING YOURSELF

### ***a) Prepare for the death***

If you can, prepare for the death. Take care of things like money issues. Say all the things you want to say, and give your loved one a chance to do the same. You may regret it if you don't take time to do this.

### ***b) First few days and weeks after the death***

Once the person has died, think about whether you want to see their body. Seeing the body can give you a chance to say goodbye. Some people may find this too hard, but it can help you later on. You may regret it if you don't. But if you don't want to see a body this will always be OK. There is no right or wrong thing to do, but think about it closely.

Think about the funeral. What would your loved one have wanted? Also think about the cost. Take someone with you to help you sort this out.

Try to get the first year out of the way before you make big changes in your life, such as moving home or jobs. You don't want to rush into changes you may regret later.

Look after your own health. This is a time when you can get unwell. Eat well, take plenty fluids, rest, take extra care. **Do not turn to alcohol.** It's a short term fix. It will only make you feel worse later.

Try to keep busy. Accept invites. Keep in touch with family and friends.

### ***c) Coping with the first year***

Plan what you will do on days like birthdays or Christmas. These days will be harder for you, so planning ahead will help.

Think about giving away your loved ones clothes, or changing their room.

Talk to people about how you feel. Don't bottle things up. Go to your doctor if you feel you have no one you can talk to. Talking about how you feel may be the single most helpful thing you can do.

## **PART THREE**

### **How you can help others**

## **Friends and Family**

If it is friends or family who are trying to cope with a death, here are things that you can do to help them.

- Spend time with them, if that is what they want.
- Talk and listen to them. Try not to be afraid of saying the wrong thing.
- It is usual for the person to talk about the same things again and again
- Talking about the dead person can be helpful. Don't try and avoid this.
- Offer help like child care or doing the shopping, if the person wants this.
- Don't expect too much of them, even if they look like they are coping.
- Include them in events.
- Support them in doing new things and meeting new people.
- If you think they aren't coping, talk with them about getting outside help.

## **Children**

Often adults won't talk to their children about death. They might think that they need to protect them, or that they can't make sense of death. But even very young children can make sense in their own way of what death means.

Children who have a death in their family are more prone to have problems later on. Talking to them can help protect them. Ask them how they are feeling. Discuss the death as openly as you can. Prepare them for a death if you can. Involve them in funerals if they want.

Children may want to see a body. If they ask it is OK to do so, but try to prepare them for what they might see. Help them to get back to normal things after. Seek help if you think they may need it.

## **PART FOUR**

### **Getting help**

## **If you feel that you are not getting better**

Most people will get over a death with time. But for a small number of people things don't seem to get any better, even after a long time. Your feelings remain very strong. You carry on thinking a lot about the dead person even years after they have gone. You may not even be able to speak of them without getting upset. You might not want to move their things even after this long time. You might even feel some of the pains that the person went through when they died.

Around 1 in 10 people feel that they are not getting over a death even after a long time. There can be different reasons that can cause this to happen. Factors such as how you got on with the person or how they died have an affect. Also, the kind of person that you are, or what else is going on in your life, can be important.

***You will be your own best judge of whether you are getting over a death or not. If you feel that you are struggling to cope even after a long time, then maybe the time is right to get outside help.***

## **Getting outside help**

Most people will not need outside help when someone close dies. However, some people feel that they do need extra help.

### ***Talking to someone***

A counsellor can help you if things get very hard for you. They can help to work out what the problem is, and help you to find ways of moving on, and of coping and feeling better. This can also help stop other problems in the long term. If you are religious, it can help to talk to someone at your place of worship.

### ***Medicine***

Your doctor may offer you medicine to help you through the difficult early stages after a death. Certain pills can make you feel more calm if you are very upset. They may help short term. Some find that these pills make you too numb and spaced out, and that you can't feel things for yourself.

Other kinds of tablets can be more helpful if you get really low.

Bear in mind that it is important that you get the chance to grieve. Medicine may just make you numb.

### ***What can I do to get help?***

1. Go to your GP, and ask about talking to someone
2. Contact groups like CRUSE, and see what they have to offer
3. Look at self-help, get hold of a book, or go onto the internet.

There is a list at the back of this leaflet which may be helpful.

## JOHN'S STORY

### This is the final part of John's story

*“One of the best things I did was go and speak to the doc. He signed me off work until I felt I could cope, and gave me some pills which helped me to sleep. After about 6 months I still didn't feel I was getting much better, so I went back to the doc. He put me in touch with STEPS. They're a local NHS team who can help folk like me. I got some good advice which really helped me to get my head sorted out.”*

*“After that things did get better. My brother and auntie were great. I was able to chat to them loads. The gaffer at work was good too. Gave me time off when I needed it”*

*“It's now 3 years since Donna died. I still miss her, every day. But I can now think of all the good times we had, and not just about what happened to her. I'm getting on with my life to. I'm seeing someone new now. She knows all about Donna, and has been a good support. If I think about it now, Donna would feel happy for me knowing that I was getting on OK.”*

## **PART FIVE**

### **Useful things to know**

## **What to do if someone you know dies**

If there has been a death in your family, there are a few things you will need to do.

- Think about organ donation
- Get a medical certificate
- Register the death
- Organise a funeral
- Sort out what happens with the person's children, or things they owned

Some of these things may take quite a bit of thought. If you are finding it hard to cope with this, get help from family or friends.

You can also get help from:

- GP
- Funeral director – see the phone book or yellow pages
- Social Work
- Citizens Advice Bureaux
- A religious person

You can get a full guide of what to do from the Citizens Advice Bureaux, or from the local council.

## **Phone numbers, websites and books**

### **Cruse Bereavement Care**

7<sup>th</sup> Floor, Telfer House, 74 Miller Street, Glasgow, G1 1DT

Phone: 0141 248 2199 (Monday to Friday 10 till 4pm)

National Helpline: 0870 167 1677 (Monday to Friday 9.30-5pm)

Offers phone support and info. Also can offer one-to-one work after a first meeting. Also offer groups.

### **Compassionate Friends**

Phone: 08451 23 23 04 (10–4pm, 6.30-10.30pm, 7 days)

Offers support through one-to-one, letter/email, reading, and meetings.

### **Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths (FSID)**

Phone: 0870 787 0554; Email: [fsid@sids.org.uk](mailto:fsid@sids.org.uk); Website: [www.sids.org.uk](http://www.sids.org.uk)

Helpline and local parent groups for those who have suffered a cot death.

### **Sudden Death Support Association**

Phone: 0118 988 9797 - for help if someone close has died suddenly

## **Websites**

[www.growthhouse.org](http://www.growthhouse.org) – for those facing death

[www.babyloss.co.uk](http://www.babyloss.co.uk) - for those who have had miscarriage, still birth, etc

[www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org) - for parents of people who have killed themselves.

[www.rcpsych.org.uk](http://www.rcpsych.org.uk) – further self-help info.

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) – has a leaflet on coping with death you can download

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk) (phone 0845 357 1000). Info. and support for children and families.

## **Books**

“Living with Loss” by L. McNeill-Taylor.

Published by Constable & Robinson (2000). *ISBN 1841191051*

## **Tackling other problems**

Many people find that having a problem with coping with a death is only one problem among others. If you feel you would like to tackle problems such as stress, depression, anxiety, alcohol, poor sleep, panic, low self-confidence, etc., then STEPS might be able to help.

Ask at your GP practice for more information or take a look at our web site ([www.glasgowsteps.com](http://www.glasgowsteps.com)) to find out more.