



# **B** is for understanding **BEREAVEMENT**

This resource has been designed by Lyn French, A Space Director, to be used with the emotional learning cards from the set entitled '**A-Z of Emotions**'. Purchase the cards online at [www.inivacreativelearning.org](http://www.inivacreativelearning.org)

## **Introduction**

The word 'bereaved' comes from Old English. It means to have something or someone taken away. We are bereaved when someone dies. Even though we know that everyone will die, including us, death is very hard for most people to talk about openly.

If you've been bereaved, you may want to start by describing your experience of loss. It can be useful to go through the questionnaire entitled '**B is for Bereavement & how to talk about it**'. (It can be found at the end of this set of worksheets.) Or you may prefer to start with a more general exploration of death and common reactions to it by going through this worksheet. You might also look at the cards in the **A-Z of Emotions** and pick out the feelings which apply to you. There is no right or wrong way to approach the subject. What is important is to find a way into talking about it even if it might feel difficult at first.

## **Our reaction to death**

Everyone has their own response to a death - some people are visibly upset and want to talk about it. Others need time to get used to it and don't show much emotion right afterwards - maybe in general, they prefer to keep their feelings to themselves. There is no 'correct' or 'normal' way to react when someone dies.

- **Describe some of the thoughts and feelings any of us can have if we are bereaved.**  
(If you'd like help with this, you can look at the handout on common feelings and thoughts about bereavement which is included at the end of this worksheet. )

## **How we experience grief will be determined by different factors such as:**

**Our age and our circumstances** (eg. If we're young and living alone with a single parent who dies, our response to the death will be different from that of an older person whose parent dies.)

**Our history of loss** (eg. If we have experienced other deaths or loss of a family member, home or country or if we are, or have been, fostered or adopted, we might find death stirs up even stronger feelings.)

**The way in which the person we've lost has died** (eg. If death is a result of a long standing illness it will probably feel different than sudden death or death which is the result of violence.)



**What the person meant to us** (eg. We may have a difficult relationship with a parent who has, for example, disappointed us or neglected us in some way. When that parent dies, we feel we 'should be' sad, but instead we feel cheated and angry, as if we'll now never have the parent we so wanted and will never experience the kind of parental love we might have yearned for. there are no 'right' or 'wrong' feelings to have - what is important is to be able to talk about them even if we feel uncomfortable owning up to them.)

**Our ability to be in touch with our feelings** (Most people need to learn to identify what they feel and then get used to talking about it. It doesn't always come naturally - it's a life skill that can take work. )

### ***It's natural to have mixed feelings***

It's likely we'll have a mixed reaction when someone dies. Perhaps we find we're crying a lot. It could be a relief or the opposite - it may feel exposing, as if we're out of control. Or perhaps we can't cry even if we want to. We might be blocked up and numb, especially at first. There is no 'correct' way to feel when we're bereaved.

- ***Do you think everyone feels okay about crying? If not, why not?***

### ***Different kinds of bereavement***

Sometimes we lose someone who hasn't ever been in our life or has been absent for quite a while. An example of this is when someone has never had the chance to get to know their birth father before he dies. If this happens to us, we may be taken by surprise at how upset we become. This could be because we feel the loss of the father we wanted but never had and now never will. Even if we have an everyday relationship with our father, we can still feel something like this because, after death, our father won't be there to support us or to celebrate any of our life achievements. This feels the same regardless of who dies - whether they are a friend or family member, they will never be part of our future life and this hurts.

- ***What do you think upsets people most when someone dies?***

### ***Feeling lonely and alone***

The pain of loss may be in the background all the time or come and go. It could be stronger when we're alone at night. Or it might take us by surprise when we're with friends who haven't experienced a bereavement and we suddenly feel very different from them and alone with our grief. If it's a family member who died, everyone else may be preoccupied with their own mourning and might not be available for us. It's important to find someone we can share our inner thoughts and feelings with and who can support us while we grieve.

- ***What feelings might a bereaved person find it hardest to bear?***



## **Making the most of our lives**

When people experience a death, there may be times when they wish they could die too so that they could be re-united with their lost loved one. But we know that our loved ones want the best for us - even if they die, their lasting hope is likely to be that we'll live a good life. When we lose someone, they stay in our memory and are always with us in our thoughts. We respect this memory by making the most of our lives.

- **What does it mean to live a meaningful life?**

### **Self-blame**

When someone dies, it's quite common to think that somehow we've caused the death. None of us have behaved perfectly. There will always be times when we've been angry or even hated our loved ones - this can leave us feeling guilty. However, to imagine we've had a role to play in someone's death is irrational. We can't cause a person's death by hurtful thoughts.

- **What kinds of thoughts or feelings about a family member or friend might someone feel guilty about having?**

### **Holding onto good memories**

We often find that we really miss the person who has died when it's a special occasion such as Christmas or our birthday and they won't be there to celebrate with us. It can be painful, especially the first year after their death. Remembering the good times we've had with them can help.

- **Give some examples of the best times people have with each other.**

### **Our reaction to illness can change**

Sometimes when someone dies, we get anxious if we fall ill. Remember that being sick doesn't usually lead to death. Most illnesses or injuries heal on their own or with treatment from the doctor.

- **What makes death so frightening for everyone?**

### **Grief takes time**

We never leave grief behind forever. At first, we might be grieving most of the time, feeling hurt, angry, fearful and lonely in turn. Then the feelings are usually less strong. However, the feelings linked with loss will keep coming back especially on special occasions when we particularly miss the person who has died.

### **After death**

No one knows for certain what happens after death. Some people have religious or spiritual beliefs which can provide comfort. Whatever our beliefs, talking about our



feelings helps us to cope better with our losses. We're all part of the same human family - everyone will experience death at different stages in life and, of course, we all live with the knowledge that we, too, will die at some point. Perhaps we can put this knowledge to good use, reminding ourselves to make the most of our life and aim to live it in a meaningful way.

## **B** is for **BEREAVEMENT** & getting support

To help you learn more about feelings in general, you might find it useful to look through the **A to Z of Emotions**. The cards in this boxed set feature images made by artists illustrating different feelings and their opposites. Each card also includes a short description of the emotions highlighted followed by questions to reflect on. This can open up thinking and spark off conversation about the kinds of feelings that come up in the course of our lives. Thinking about the subject of death, you could start with the following cards from the set:

**F is for Fragile:** We can all feel vulnerable and fragile after a death.

**L is for Loss:** When someone dies, we may feel the loss very strongly.

**M is for Messy or Mixed up feelings:** We might be all over the place when we're going through a bereavement and could find it confusing to name how we feel.

**O is for overwhelmed:** It's common to feel overwhelmed in the face of death.

**Z** is the last letter of the alphabet and therefore represents **endings**. Death is a final ending. It is a reminder that our time is limited - we should use it as best we can with the aim of creating a meaningful life for ourselves and those around us.

### INFORMATION & SUPPORT

You can also get support in your own time. Here are some suggestions:

**Cruse Bereavement Care** provides support including face to face meetings, telephone contact and group support. Visit [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

**Hopeagain** (Cruse for young people) Visit [www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk)

**Child Bereavement UK** supports families and children going through a bereavement. Visit [www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org)

**The Compassionate Friends (TCF)** provides support, understanding and comfort to bereaved siblings and parents coping with a death. Visit [www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)

**Winston's Wish** provides services to bereaved children, young people and their families + offers practical support and guidance. Visit [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

**Childline** offers support via telephone counselling and through providing information and advice to children + young people. Visit [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

## UNDERSTANDING BEREAVEMENT

*We'll all have our own reaction to a death. We could feel:*

<b>Sad &amp; tearful</b>	<b>Shocked</b>
<b>Angry</b>	<b>Disbelieving</b>
<b>Scared</b>	<b>Confused</b>
<b>Panicky</b>	<b>Anxious</b>
<b>Abandoned &amp; lonely</b>	<b>Fearful of the future</b>
<b>Ashamed of feeling like a lost child</b>	<b>Hopeless - nothing makes sense any more</b>
<b>Lonely - as if cut off from what life was like before the death</b>	<b>Isolated - no one can understand what it's like</b>
<b>Cut off - not wanting to think about it</b>	<b>Numbed out - not wanting to feel anything</b>

## UNDERSTANDING BEREAVEMENT

*Our reaction to a death is very personal. Here are some common feelings and thoughts:*

<b>Hating everyone knowing about it</b>	<b>Relieved - the death released our loved one from pain</b>
<b>Feeling it's our fault</b>	<b>Accepting - death happens to us all</b>
<b>Feeling bad about some of our more hateful thoughts &amp; feelings towards the person who died</b>	<b>Good about our history with our loved one</b>
<b>Wanting to give up</b>	<b>At peace - our relationship with our loved one was meaningful &amp; fulfilling</b>
<b>Wishing we'd had a better relationship with the person who died</b>	<b>We have few regrets</b>
<b>Feeling like an outsider</b>	<b>Respectful of the life cycle- all people &amp; all things die</b>

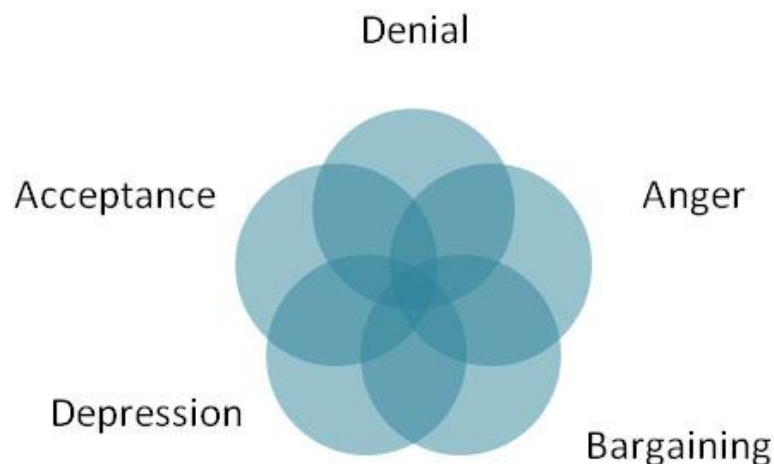
## UNDERSTANDING BEREAVEMENT

*Bereavement stirs up a range of feelings & thoughts. Here are some examples:*

<b>We may wish we could turn back the clock</b>	<b>We understand that time never stands still</b>
<b>We could feel guilty about not having done enough</b>	<b>We know that death can bring new possibilities</b>
<b>We may envy others who haven't experienced a death</b>	<b>Experiencing death can make us take our lives more seriously</b>
<b>We could want to punish ourselves as if we're somehow to blame for the death</b>	<b>We might re-think what's important in life</b>
<b>We may fear that we will never be loved</b>	<b>Our values could change</b>
<b>We could find it hard to believe that things will seem better in time</b>	<b>We may seek out a more meaningful way to live</b>

# **B** is for **BEREAVEMENT** & the **Grief Cycle**

Grief is a very personal experience. Everyone experiences it in different ways. That said, there is a common a pattern which people often go through, starting with shock and disbelief. This pattern has been called the '**grief cycle**'. When we suffer a major loss, we 'cycle' through these feelings and thoughts over and over again, sometimes in a different order or for different lengths of time. We don't go through the grief cycle just once - we keep re-experiencing our feelings until the intensity of the emotion fades. The memory of loss never completely goes away but we learn to live with it.



## **Denial and Shock**

Our first reaction to a death is usually one of shock and disbelief. Shock can make everything seem unreal and may leave us feeling numb or cut off. We could feel completely disorientated and confused, not knowing what to do with ourselves. When the shock begins to wear off, we might go through a stage of denial during which we cannot accept the reality of the loss. This might involve what is called 'searching behaviour'. Sometimes people try to 'search' for their loved one and may even find themselves thinking they have seen or heard the dead person. Many people talk aloud to the person they have lost - this is a completely normal reaction to death.





## Anger and guilt

It is common to experience anger and guilt when someone close to us is dying as well as after they die. We might find ourselves asking: "Why has this happened and why to me?" This is particularly so if the death was sudden or involved violence or an accident. Whatever the cause of death, we may get very angry and seek out someone to blame, either ourselves or others. We could also feel guilty, remembering times when things didn't go so well between ourselves and the person who has died. We might wish we'd behaved differently or showed our love more openly.

## Bargaining

As a way of trying to escape from the reality of death, we might find ourselves trying to bargain. This frequently happens before death when someone has a terminal illness and we know they will die soon. We could attempt to hold on to some kind of hope, no matter how irrational. We might, for example, bargain with our version of God asking him (or her) to save the dying person, making promises that we'll be a better person if our wish is granted. The human mind finds it very hard to accept death and will resort to this kind of 'magical thinking' to try to avoid it happening.

## Despair and Depression

Experiencing a death may seem unbearable especially at first. In the months that follow, it can be hard to hold onto hope. It might seem as if life has lost its purpose and nothing in the outside world holds any interest for us. We could feel very down and depressed. For some people, deep grief can cause them to feel as if they are losing their mind but this is just a phase and it will end.

## Acceptance

Eventually we pass through the first stages of loss and despair. We begin to accept the death. This can take a year or longer. We know that we're moving forward when we begin to feel more engaged with our everyday life. Some people feel that resuming normal routines is somehow disloyal to the person who has died but this is not so. We don't have to feel guilty about enjoying ourselves or about making plans for the future. This isn't a sign of lack of love but of a healthy response to death. After all, life carries on and our loved one who died would want us to live it to the full. This is a way of respecting their memory.

There is no quick way to get through the worst stages of grief. It's now widely accepted that it helps to express our grief by sharing our feelings about it. However, we may find that friends or family don't know how to talk about what



we're going through. Sometimes its most useful to speak to someone who is trained to listen and understand and can support us in making sense of our loss.



**A-Z of Emotions**

## **B** is for **BEREAVEMENT** & how people grieve

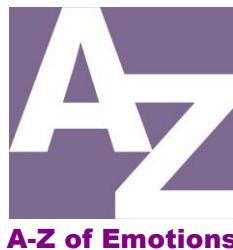
There is no 'one way' or 'correct' way to mourn a loss. Some people prefer time alone while others want the support and company of family and friends. Or perhaps talking to someone who is trained to offer support and understanding is the preferred option. Here are some examples of what the grief experience can feel like:

- Things can seem very unreal for a while. We may feel as if nothing is the same and never will be. We could feel very much on our own as if our experience of death separates us from everyone else.
- If we can't feel anything and are mostly numb a lot of the time, we could feel guilty, as if we're not reacting in the 'right' way. (This is, of course, an incorrect assumption - there is no 'one way' to react to grief.)
- We might become aware of changes in our everyday life and how we feel . We may, for example, suffer from poor sleep, decreased appetite and lower mood. Feelings of anxiety or depression could come and go.
- We can feel self-conscious about, and even embarrassed by, people asking if we're alright or wanting to know how we're doing. We might even feel shame, as if its 'not right' to be vulnerable or feel broken up inside. Feelings like this are part and parcel of being human - we should never feel ashamed of how we feel or of crying in front of others.
- At times we may unexpectedly find ourselves flooded with sadness or anger sometimes for no reason that we can think of. This is one of the effects of loss - our deepest feelings are on the surface and can suddenly be triggered by everyday happenings.
- We might catch ourselves looking for reminders of the person who has died (eg. wanting to be around their things and even imagining that they are there with us).
- Guilt about gradually returning to everyday life and at times 'forgetting' to feel sad could be quite strong.



- We might imagine that the world has suddenly become a frightening place and we could feel less safe.
- Anxieties about our own death could come to the surface.

When we experience a death, it can take quite a long time to adjust to the loss. Talking about it may feel very difficult especially if we're not used to sharing our feelings. However expressing our thoughts and feelings is usually the most helpful way to cope with loss.



## **B** is for **BEREAVEMENT** & how to talk about it

People vary in their ability to talk about their bereavement. Some want to share their thoughts and feelings and have no trouble opening up. Others find being asked how they are makes them feel very uncomfortable and self-conscious, even embarrassed. Or they feel too vulnerable and exposed as if talking about their experience of death will cause them to fall apart. We can even have all these responses at different times and with different people. Whatever our reaction to talking, it's important to try to express our feelings honestly. Going through the questions below can help with this.

- *Describe your experience of losing someone through death.*
- *When did the death take place?*
- *What was the cause of death? Was it expected or did it come as a surprise?*
- *What was your first reaction when you heard the news?*
- *How have those around you reacted?*
- *What have you found hardest?*
- *What has upset you most?*
- *Are you feeling these feelings: anger/ guilt / anxiety/ tearful/ numb? When are the feelings the strongest?*
- *How did you find out about the death? Did you get the chance for a final goodbye? Is there anything you wished you could've said?*



- *Did you go to the funeral - if so, what was that like? If not, whose decision was this? Do you feel it was the right one?*
- *How much time did you used to spend with the person who died?*
- *What did you like to do with them? What's your fondest memory of them?*
- *Everyone has arguments or disagreements from time to time. What was the most upsetting disagreement you had with the person who has recently died?*
- *How has this death affected how you see life?*