

Common Questions from the Bereaved

A helpful guide for grief



Being bereaved after a loved one has died can be difficult. You are important and Melbourne City Mission's Palliative Care Bereavement Team is here to help.

We hope this booklet provides you with resources and information to help make sense of the often painful jumble of thoughts and emotions that come with grief. The questions and experiences from hundreds of bereaved carers have been included in this booklet.

This booklet contains a wide range of information on grief from counsellors, educators, and writers. We have attempted to reference all sources and are grateful for the contributions from many bereaved people who we consulted during its creation. Attention has been given to ensure the information is current at the time of publication. However, the material is not definitive or exhaustive. The information is not intended to be a substitute for professional services or advice, including grief counselling or therapy.

MCM acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the waterways and lands where we work. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We are committed to ensuring everyone we work with is safe, empowered, supported and respected. We support and celebrate diversity of race, culture, ability, age, gender, sexuality and gender identity.

The 'Common Questions from the Bereaved: A helpful guide for grief' booklet has been funded by the North and West Metropolitan Region Palliative Care Consortium and compiled by the Melbourne City Mission Bereavement Team, 2024.



**NORTH AND WEST
METROPOLITAN REGION
PALLIATIVE CARE CONSORTIUM**



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What actually is grief?

Grief is a normal part of life.

The word grief comes from the Latin word Gravis meaning heavy and burdensome.

A **loss** occurs when an event is perceived to be negative, and results in long-term changes.

Grief is our response to that loss. It is normal and natural in our lives.

Bereavement is the period after the death of a person important to you.

Mourning is the public display of grief. It is a term given to diverse social and cultural expression of grief.

“Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.”

— Earl Grollman, 1993



Why is grieving so hard?

Many bereaved people are surprised they find grief so difficult. You may have expected it to be upsetting, but perhaps not this hard. When your loved one was alive, there was a clear purpose and a way to make a difference. After they've died there's a huge change, in who you are and what you do, every day.

BEFORE

Clear role

A way to love them

Busy days

Keeping positive

Determined

Full

AFTER

Lack of purpose

Yearning for their presence

Directionless

Deep despair

Shattered

Empty

You are going through a big transition from carer to... now what? This adjustment sometimes takes longer than we expect. And it's tiring. **Grief is hard work.**

"I thought I was prepared"

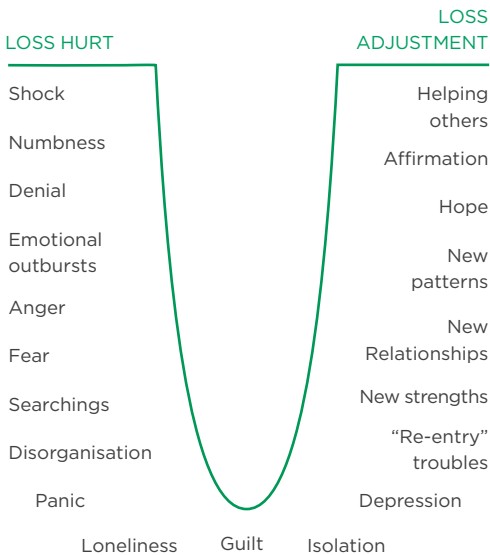
"I don't know who I am now that I'm not a carer"

"I thought caring would be the hard bit"

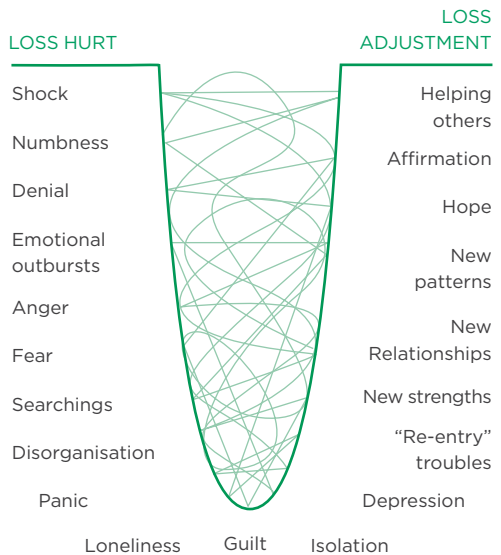
Why is grief so messy?

There are no set stages of grief. Grief can be unpredictable and has a life force of its own. It breathes, it provokes, it teaches, it aggravates, it wants attention. This is why you might feel that you're not coping. It's hard to feel you are managing when you find yourself going over and over things. But this is often part of the grieving process. **The way you grieve is unique and personal to you and your situation.**

Stages of grief?

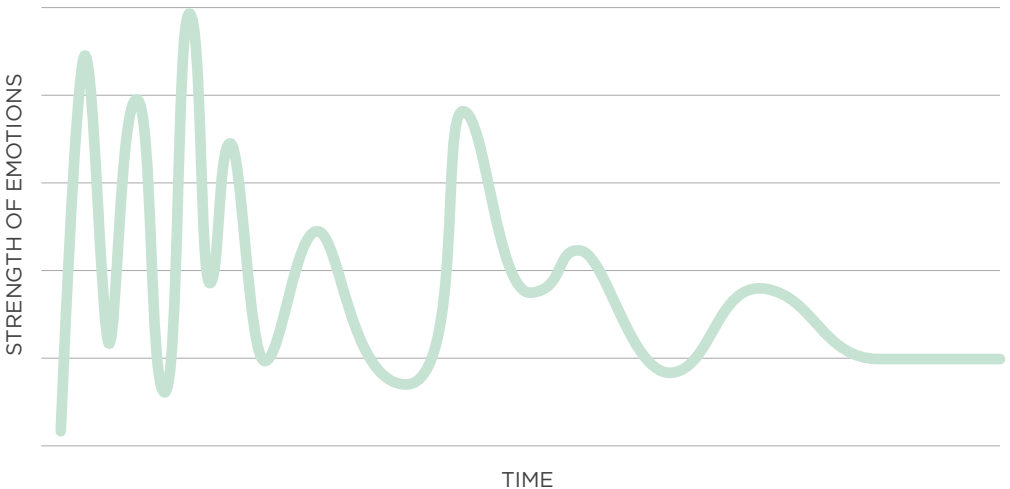


My experience



Is my grief going to change?

Grief can come in waves, and as firsts and triggers happen and time goes on, we can feel grief comes and goes. Waves of grief are often close together to begin with. Waves of grief can be triggered by events such as anniversaries or unexpected reminders. **There really is no timetable, however, grief does change over time.**



“In the beginning I kept going over the ‘couldas, the wouldas and the shouldas’, and later on these settled and I remembered the person I was missing. Looking back I realised that my grief changed with time.”

“In the beginning, the waves are 100 feet tall and crash over you without mercy. They come 10 seconds apart and don’t even give you time to catch your breath. All you can do is hang on and float. After a while, maybe weeks, maybe months, you’ll find the waves are still 100 feet tall, but they come further apart. When they come, they still crash all over you and wipe you out. But in between, you can breathe, you can function”.

— G. Snow



Are you learning to cope with the waves of grief?

Why is everything so different?

Grief can impact all parts of our lives:



Our Emotions

Common emotions in grief are more than sadness and despair. Yearning, anger, regret, anxiety, doubts, relief, and gratitude also happen for most people. It is not unusual to experience two opposing feelings at once - sadness can often accompany happiness. Finding ways to manage these and express them safely is important. Emotions change over time and can take us by surprise or be hard to contain. It's easy to judge ourselves when we feel strong emotions - all feelings are OK.

- * Do you need to find someone you trust to talk with?
- * Is there someone who is good at listening?
- * Can you find an outlet in music, writing, poetry or movies?



Our Brains

Our thoughts can be jumbled when we're bereaved. Grief brain is real. When we have high stress and anxiety we can become reactive, forgetful, and not concentrate well. We often go over and over events. We worry about other things going wrong, and question ourselves. It takes some time for our brain to settle.

- * What are activities you like to do that soothe you, or distract you, to help your brain calm?
- * Listen to gentle meditations or audio books, take long walks.
- * Try some apps or recordings to help guide your thoughts.



Our Behaviour

It's normal to often feel impatient, frustrated, short tempered, distracted, unable to settle or focus. Avoiding things, withdrawing, struggling to know what to do with ourselves - these are really common behaviours.

- * It can be reassuring to write lists, just focus doing one thing a day, setting simple routines, reducing your expectations of what you can achieve, pacing yourself with tasks.
- * Build confidence with small decisions.



Our Bodies

Grief affects our bodies in many ways. From loss of appetite, exhaustion, aches and pains, sleeplessness – in many ways our bodies are recovering from a stressful time.

- * Help your body by eating well, (even if you've got no appetite, something nutritious would help), and try to reduce stimulants like caffeine and alcohol.
- * Try to get some exercise and sunshine.
- * Visit your GP for a check ups. Many people also find massages, swimming, baths, heat packs and beneficial.



Our Relationships

After a death, everyone close to that person is in their own pain. Often you can feel disconnected and alone, your expectations not met. Our friendships and relationships can be challenged. Some people step up, others can't or don't. We worry what people think of us when we are grieving.

- * Social invitations can be draining: give yourself permission to 'say no' if it is causing you anxiety. You may have more energy to give later.
- * It takes time to work out which people you can go to for different reasons.
- * Bereavement groups can be very reassuring.
- * Maybe take up a short course if you have a hobby, or pop in to your neighbourhood house.



Our Identity

Finding meaning and purpose is hard after such a big change in life when a loved one dies and we're no longer caring for them. Many bereaved people feel 'not like their old selves'. Grief changes us. It takes time to work out what's satisfying and motivating. Our beliefs can be challenged too.

- * Being kind to yourself by not setting up expectations to be 'just like you were', is vital.
- * When you can, give familiar things a go.
- * Looking for small aspects of your day to be grateful for.
- * Take things one day at a time, with small steps, rather than trying to achieve too much. You're learning so much that is new, give yourself a pat on the back.

Will I ever feel ok?

We do learn to live with grief.

People may expect grief to be over at some point, and we'll be back to our 'normal' selves. Some people may even think that grief eventually disappears. This isn't helpful, or even true.

At the start grief fills us up and consumes our lives, but over time, we grow, we learn new ways to live and cope, and grief becomes easier to manage. With time and as we adapt, our lives expand around the grief. We learn to live with grief. It becomes part of us.

"In some ways the pain of grief stayed the same, but as time went on my world expanded so it felt less suffocating"

People tend to believe that grief shrinks over time



What really happens is that we grow around our grief





Where are you in your grief journey?

**Early on, grief is
all-consuming**

**I'm learning to
live with my grief
but it's still hard**

**I've grown with my grief
and now it's become a more
manageable part of my life**

Do I have to let them go?

No. We have continuing bonds with our loved ones.

Our loved one may have died, but the relationship, memories and love hasn't. Relationships do change with death, but they do not end and maintaining connection after loss is healthy.

We can remain involved and connected with our loved one through:

- * Rituals and remembrance
- * Communication
- * Everyday messages and thoughts
- * Actions
- * Activities
- * Values

These continuing bonds can be like a living legacy. They can provide comfort, continuity, guidance and meaning as we navigate our new identity.

“Every time I see, even the tiniest peak of sun coming through the clouds, I know he is letting me know that he is still here and is part of my life”

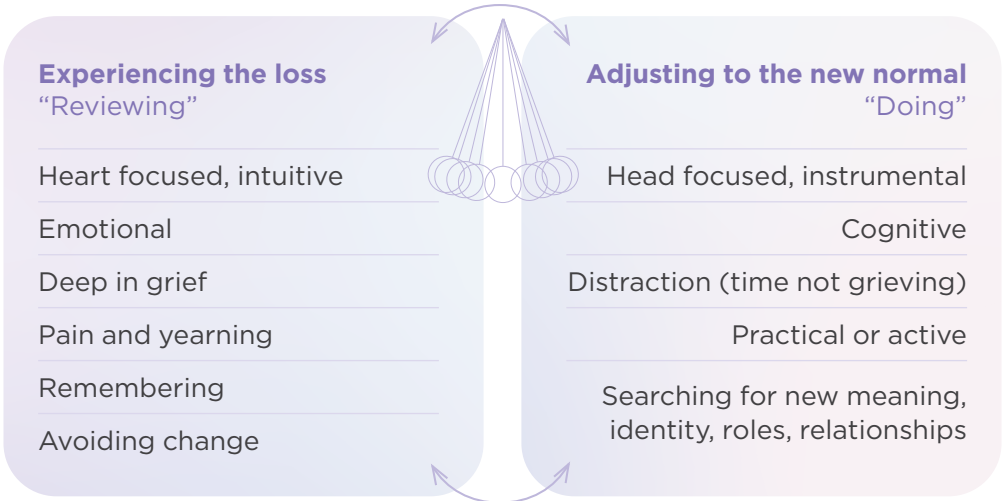
“Often our friends & family choose not to mention the one who has died for fear of ‘upsetting’ us but many of us look forward to being able to talk about the one whose loss is still so much a part of our consciousness”



Why am I grieving differently from others?

We each have our own ways of coping. Grief is not static. Some days you will be occupied with overwhelming feelings of loss (reviewing), other days you will be able to distract yourself and engage with life (doing). Finding a balance between these different ways of grieving can be helpful.

Oscillating and Blending



Based on Strobe and Schutt, 1999

There are no right or wrong ways to grieve and your experience of grief depends on many things, including:

- * Who the person was to you
- * Your personality and traits
- * What the illness and care was like
- * How the death happened
- * Your supports

Will I feel like myself again?

Carers have some opportunity to prepare for a loved ones death, but death can still come as a shock. Intensive caring often results in multiple losses whilst our loved one is still alive. Bereavement after caregiving can be a continuation of a grief process that started long before losing a loved one. This is known as anticipatory grief.

In bereavement, we might keep going over the 'shouldas, couldas and the wouldas'. Were there things we could have done differently, or things we got wrong? A lot of reviewing is needed. Feelings of guilt and regret are common and normal in grief. Sometimes difficult memories and trauma occurs.

Finding positive and reassuring thoughts to balance the reviewing is helpful. Practice gentle forgiveness, and maybe consider what your loved one would say to you. This is called self-compassion in grief.

The reality is you will always carry the carer experience with you and the challenge is to incorporate this into a life which is ever evolving, and from which we are learning and growing.



How can you be more self compassionate in your grief?

With self-compassion, we give ourselves the same kindness and care we'd give to a good friend.

— Dr Kirstin Neff



Why?

Making sense of what has happened and finding new meaning.

Making new meaning doesn't require understanding, or acceptance. It is not necessary to understand why someone died to find meaning in life again. The question may not be why your loved one died but why are you here. What's the point now? One task of grief is to discover what meaning you can find to bring to the rest of your life and to help you live on.

These questions may help you find meaning in life when you're grieving:



How would they like to be remembered?



How can you honour them as you live on?



What were their values?



How will those values live on?



What was it about them that you are grateful for?



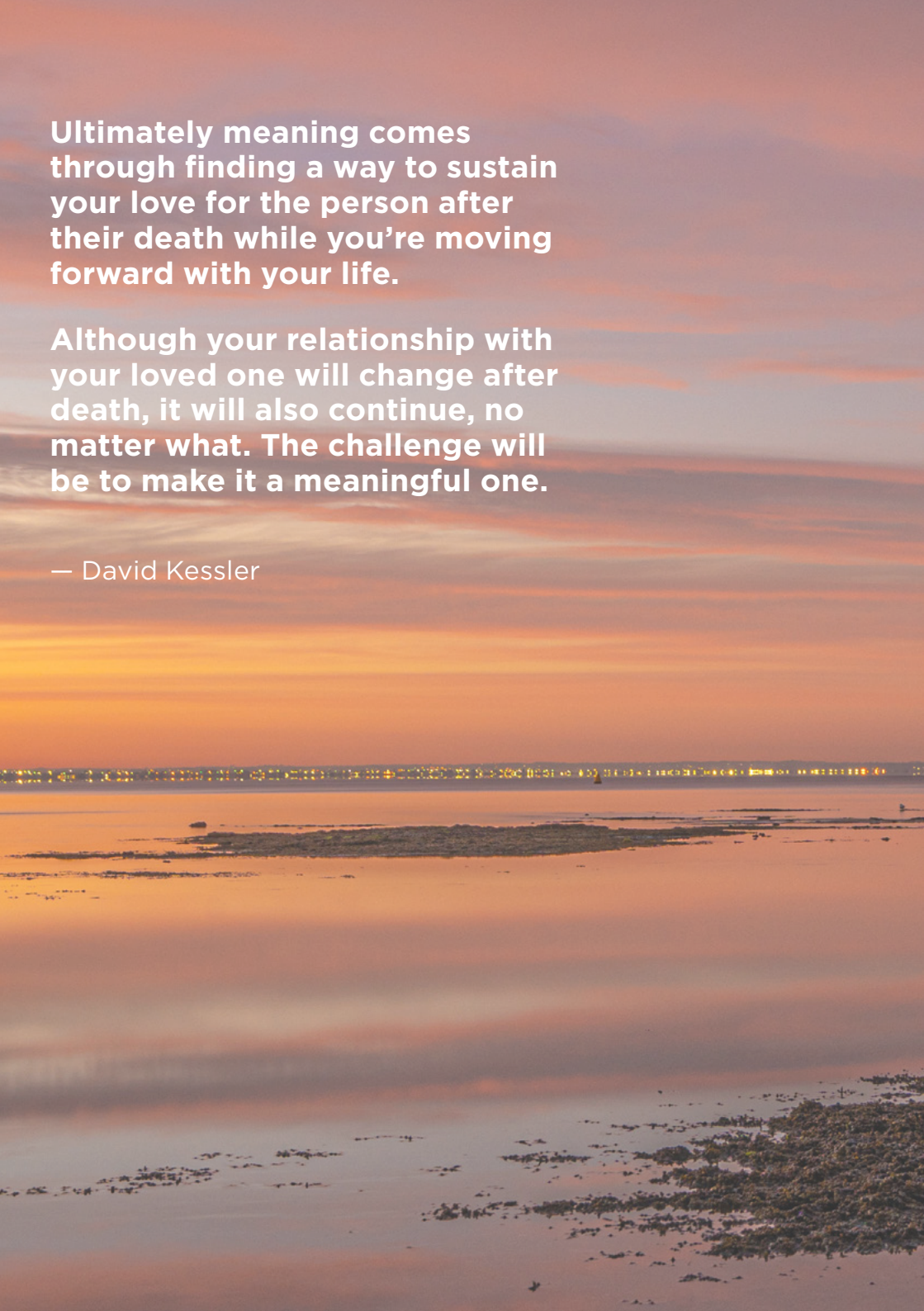
How will you carry that appreciation into the future?



What has their death taught you?



How can you live differently with that wisdom?

A serene sunset scene over a large body of water. The sky is filled with soft, horizontal bands of orange, pink, and light blue. The water below is calm, reflecting the colors of the sky. In the distance, a small, low-lying island or peninsula is visible, with some lights or structures that appear to be glowing. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

Ultimately meaning comes through finding a way to sustain your love for the person after their death while you're moving forward with your life.

Although your relationship with your loved one will change after death, it will also continue, no matter what. The challenge will be to make it a meaningful one.

— David Kessler

When might I heal?

Adjusting to grief is different for everyone. Finding activities that help our brain to soothe, that distract us or give us comfort is part of healing.

Things that can be useful in early grief:

Breathing exercises	Exercise
Mindful exercises	Massage
Podcasts	Striding around the block
Baths	Caring for pets
One task a day limit	Gardening
Writing lists	Setting reminders
Achieving small things	Being in nature

With time, learning and adaption, grief becomes part of who we are. We are changed but this change becomes familiar.

We find peace, a 'new normal,' a reason to live again, a balance, more stability, and more satisfaction. After a while we don't feel like we are 'faking it' or living two lives. Grief becomes integrated into who we are. We may never 'get over it' but we do find ways to live with grief.



What are the things that nurture you and bring you peace?

It can take time for the heart and the brain to heal. You might need to persevere or try things again a bit later, before you feel a shift.

What supports are out there?

If things feel they aren't improving, or you feel you're going backwards it's important to get more support.

Don't expect to feel exactly like you did before the loss. Sometimes it's hard to see progress in the first months. It takes time to feel more at peace. It's OK to reach out for reassurance and grief support from a GP or a counsellor, especially if it's impacting your sleep, appetite, ability to leave the house or engage in essential things.

At times, some bereaved people feel it's too hard to keep going without their loved one. This can be part of the early phases of grief when you are in deep despair. You do not need to grieve alone, and you don't have to be at rock bottom to reach out for reassurance. Other signs for seeking more support may be:

- * When you feel anxiety or depression is settling in
- * When your self-care or practical everyday tasks are being impacted
- * At points of health changes or new symptoms
- * If your support network changes
- * If you feel you don't want to live (this can be common)

If you are suicidal, act and share these feelings – ring a helpline, see a doctor, tell a friend, seek counselling.

“Talking honestly with a counsellor about how I am coping, or not, and how I am handling the situation has helped”

“Exchanging stories and experiences with other carers helped me realise that I wasn't alone in my grief”

“Getting out of the house and being with other people helps me see things in a broader light”

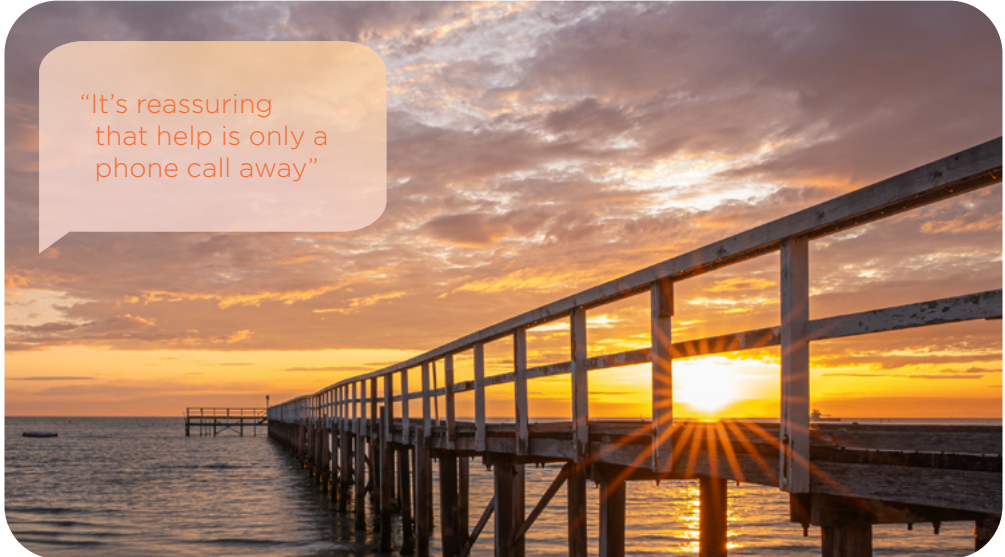
“I now know that 'not coping' isn't unique to me”

Support and resources

There are many types of support available. You might consider support via your palliative care service or talking to your doctor about finding a counsellor who specialises in grief. Looking for a support group or activities in your local area that connect you with others can help. Try saying “yes” when you’ve got the energy. Helping others through volunteering can also be very positive.

Bereavement support through Melbourne City Mission Palliative Care is available free of charge for individuals and families who have been connected to our service. This includes a monthly walking group, a monthly cuppa and check in group, a quarterly bereavement education session, or support from our trained counsellors.

You can access these support by calling Melbourne City Mission Palliative Care bereavement team on **(03) 9977 0026** or by visiting our website, **mcm.org.au**.



“It’s reassuring
that help is only a
phone call away”

Community supports for people who are grieving include:

Griefline

Dedicated grief helpline providing free counselling support to individuals & families.

1300 845 745 (8am-8pm,
Mon-Fri)
griefline.org.au

Lifeline

A national charity providing access to 24-hr crisis & suicide prevention support.

13 11 14 (24-hr service)
lifeline.org.au

Switchboard Victoria

Phone and web counselling information and referral for LGBTQI community.

1800 729 367
switchboard.org.au

Grief Australia

Australia's peak body for grief support. Good information and tip sheets for the bereaved.

(03) 9265 2100
grief.org.au

Victorian Aboriginal Health Service

VAHA offers free counselling for families within the Aboriginal community.

(03) 9403 3300
vahs.org.au

Refuge in Grief

Web-based support including podcasts and grief education.

refugeingrief.com

What's Your Grief

Web-based support, offering grief education in practical and creative ways.

whatsyourgrief.com

The National Centre for Childhood Grief

Not-for-profit organisation providing resources and support for bereaved children.

1300 654 556
childhoodgrief.org.au



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