

HOLD OUT A HAND

'Hold out a Hand' is a Newport-based charity set up to provide support and finance to organisations and charities involved with bereavement. All profits made by the charity go to further its aims - to provide bereavement support

'Hold out a Hand' has two areas of business:

- Providing offices and support to organisations throughout Wales providing bereavement support
- Running commercial businesses such as charity shops and cafes - community-based social enterprises that will meet local needs, be part of the community, and concentrate in particular on assisting the bereaved to donate items belonging to the deceased - often a difficult stage in loss

The charity plays an active role in the community through support of schools and activities for the young - bereavement affects everyone in the community at some stage in their lives and by bringing the subject of loss into the open, together with early involvement with the young in this sensitive area, we hope for major long-term benefits

Hold out a Hand - and help the bereaved

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Hold out a Hand and Help the Bereaved

A Helping Hand

when you are bereaved



**Hold out a Hand
And Help The Bereaved**

Allowing ourselves to move naturally in and out of pain, instead of forcing artificial controls on our feelings, enables us to go through and complete the grief process more quickly. In order to mourn completely, we must realise our needs. We need, first of all to take time to grieve. We need to talk and to cry as much as we can. We need an environment or people around us that support our grieving rather than inhibit us. We need to be free from major decisions if we feel unsure or unready for them. It is important that we honour our needs and know that we are being not self-indulgent but instead self-supporting.

Ultimately the greatest honour we can do those we love who have died is to take the best of what they gave us and carry it forward in to our future with respect and appreciation. If we are monitoring ourselves carefully then we will recognise when we reach a point when we need to give ourselves permission to move forward, away from the past and our grief; a time when it is right to take on new responsibilities, make new relationships and create the new future that belongs to us. To do so is not a denial of the importance of the person who has died but rather a celebration of their life and the rich inheritance of learning thoughts and memories they gave us. Experience of loss can make us aware of the preciousness of life and our need to make the most of what we have.

Death teaches us a great deal. Perhaps its greatest lesson is the fact that nothing lasts forever. Not even sadness and grief.



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GRIEF

Grief is a complex process, which we undertake in the weeks, months, and even years following the death of someone important to us. It encompasses a wide range of physical and emotional reactions, as slowly and painfully we attempt to adjust to life without that person.

Each of us will grieve in our own unique way for the unique loss that we have suffered. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. If we listen carefully to our own inner voice it will provide us with a very basic guide to what is best for us. It will tell us when we need to rest and when to exercise; when it would be better to talk things over, or best to remain silent. We will sense when we are becoming too inward looking or when we are pushing ourselves too hard and fast.

Grief is immensely hard work. A major bereavement shatters the very structure on which our life is based. It will destroy many of the patterns, routines and assumptions that form the basis of how and why we think and act as we do. We will need to work out many of the daily actions we have been used to doing automatically. It is not until we lose our 'automatic pilot' that we realise just how much of our existence is under its control - without it, we find we quickly become exhausted. This learning to form a new set of routines is an often-unrecognised part of the work of grief. The fact that someone we know has died can be hard to take in.

DENIAL

Dead of course she's not dead I only saw her yesterday. How can she be dead? There must be some mistake. Death is something that happens to other people not to us or to those we love. Our brain can refuse to accept information, which appears so unbelievable and impossible – perhaps if we deny it enough then it will make the death go away and everything will be alright once again. Part of us knows that this is not possible. Even as we speak, the knowledge descends and we know deep inside that nothing is ever going to be the same again. The world has changed and it is not going to change back however much we cry or demand or scream or deny what has happened.

SHOCK AND NUMBNESS

Even if there is forewarning of death, it can still surprise and shock when it comes. The differences between life and death are so great, it is impossible to be totally prepared for it. With death there can be no tomorrow, no more hope, and no opportunity to pass on that last message. Death draws a line between that which was and that which is, and there is no way we can cross over the gulf that exists between the past and the present. Our inner world may have changed, but the world outside carries on much as it did before. We still get up in the morning, there are people to see, things to do, and life

goes on in spite of what has happened. It is not unusual for people to describe themselves as feeling like a robot in the early days of bereavement.

THE PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF GRIEF

The death of someone who is an important part of our life can affect us physically. Sadness and unhappiness can be experienced physically, as a gaping hole in the pit of our stomach, tightness across the chest, as sickness, shaking, sweating hands, headaches and a hundred other symptoms. A major bereavement can upset our sleeping and eating patterns. We become over-tired and irritable; we may lose weight or put it on if we eat for comfort. We find that we cannot concentrate, think clearly or remember things after bereavement.

ALTERNATIVE ENDINGS

Part of the intensely hard work of grief is the need to explore the events leading up to, and surrounding the death. In some ways this is rather like constructing a video, which contains all the relevant details, the first signs of ill health, the last time we saw the person alive, the things we were able to say, the things that were left unsaid. The video is an alternative happy ending to our story. This is impossible, but we need to go on and on until the work is finished, and we are free to move forward once again. The more complicated the manner of the death, the greater our need to try and understand the reason for it happening: The greater then, our search into those important final events.

This is a time when we are most likely to feel either anger or guilt. Our mental video has to contain villains, someone who carries the blame for the tragedy. We cast ourselves in that role, or there may be an obvious character just waiting to play the part. Our video might also possess its heroes, those that can do no wrong. Sometimes we cast the dead person in this role and they become everything that is good. In reality, few people are completely perfect, or all bad – and as time passes we are usually able to see a more balanced picture.

ANGER

In the search to reach an understanding of the death and why it happened there are times when we look for someone or something to blame. We can be angry with your God for allowing such a thing to happen. Why did He ignore our prayers, let us down when we most needed Him? It can be hard to reconcile the thoughts of a just and good God with the seemingly senseless suffering and death of someone who is very much loved and needed on earth. When we knew of the illness or accident we may have tried to strike a bargain with God – if he lets the one we love live, then we will do whatever is required in return. If the person dies, what then? Where do we go, in our relationship with your God? When our feelings are at our lowest, there is nothing which escapes our anger. The flowers that bloom seem to be deliberately provoking us by contrasting their colour and life with our sadness. The fact that the sun shines is an insult to the loss we have suffered. We are angry at a world in which bad things happen to

FACTORS AFFECTING GRIEF

How long am I going to feel like this? It is impossible to predict the length of Grief. We know that it does not last forever, and we know that a major bereavement cannot be 'got over' or recovered from in a matter of weeks or even months. The effects of the death of someone we love will be with us in one way or another for the rest of our life. This is not to say we will grieve forever – because we won't. It may seem impossible to believe in the early days of grief, but we will learn to laugh again and love again and we will not always feel as we do now. How we will cope with our grief will depend partly on our own history. Our history will include our previous experiences of loss, and our experiences of love and security – for out of both of these have developed the inner strengths and personal resources we are able to draw upon at times of crisis and need. The nature of the relationship between oneself and the person who has died will help to determine the length and depth of the grief we experience. What has gone out of our life because of that loss will influence our feelings and indicate just how much we will need to reconstruct our life after the death.

The circumstances leading up to and surrounding the death will have an influence on our feelings and us. How a death occurs is important. The impact of a sudden death will be different from the anticipated loss following a long illness. The amount of support and help we have around us at the time of death and in the months following it will also affect how we grieve. The mourning period is really a time of convalescence. It is a time for facing the loss and all the feelings that the loss evokes in order at least to begin to heal the great wound created by the death of one we love. This is a time when every aspect of our relationship with the deceased our attachment, feelings, thoughts, and memories, as well as our past, present, and future is examined and re-examined over and over again. The purpose of this mourning period is for us to heal, to recover, and to regain equilibrium and our capacity for living fully once again.

Where our life was connected to another's there is a huge gap when the other is gone. This great loss creates smaller painful everyday losses. Wounds do not heal without time and attention. Yet too many of us feel that we don't have the right to take time to heal from emotional or physical wounds. Ideally we should not push ourselves too quickly back in to our regular routine lest we accentuate our pain. However, most of us do not have the luxury of withdrawing from our responsibilities, so it is essential that we do not expect too much of ourselves. Since loss makes life feel abnormal, trying to resume 'normal' routine too quickly after death can be a very difficult endeavour. Emotional pain is not constant, even though we sometimes think it is. Emotional pain feels constant only when all our energy is going into suppressing those feelings that are so hard to suppress. We cannot tolerate the continual onslaught of emotional pain. The natural process in grieving involves experiencing times of intense feeling and then following them with periods of quiet.

desperately worried that their remaining parent might also die. Our fear may focus itself in a wish to stay indoors. The home is seen as the only safe place and the longer we stay within its walls the harder it can be to venture out again. Alternatively there can be a constant, restless desire to get out into the open. There can also be a fear that we are going out of control, fear that we are mad, or well on the way to becoming mad. The symptoms of extreme grief can be very close to the symptoms of mental illness, but there the similarities end. The vast majority of people do not go mad with grief and such distressing feelings do not last forever.

Fear can exist simply as fear, a general sense of unease and threat hanging over us, from the moment we wake up in the morning to the point when we try to sleep again at night. Fear is a natural component of bereavement, we may feel it only for a moment or it may come and go for a week or so before disappearing. Sometimes it may remain with us for some time. It helps to understand that fear is natural. It is important to hold onto the belief that we are not going mad, but reacting perfectly normally to one of the most demanding and distressing crisis situations we will ever be asked to undertake. By consciously trying to relax tensed up muscles, can help and there are some excellent cassettes and books giving relaxation techniques.

PATTERNS OF GRIEF

Grief comes and goes, it flows in and out like the tide. Even within the space of a day it is possible to see a pattern emerging in our grief. There will be a time in the day when the sadness seems greatest, and then times when it can be put to one side as the work of life goes on. Then there are weekly patterns, particular days, perhaps the weekends that begin to emerge as the 'bad' times. As time passes it is possible to go a few days without feeling overwhelmed by the sadness. Then, down we go again and the pain seems to have doubled because now it is less expected and because we have grown to hope that we might just be over the worst. There are high and low tides, some days we are strong and positive looking, other days we can only look back at the past and focus on the loss we have suffered. Some tides are so powerful that it feels as if we might be swept away and carried far out to sea. However, we are in no real danger of drowning. Trying to swim against the tide and fight our way back to the shore is simply a waste of precious energy. Better to accept the validity of our own feelings, however sad and lost we may feel, and let ourselves drift, knowing that at such times we are engaged in the work of grief itself. Sensible too, to accept the better times and not feel guilty that we have been allowed a moment of pleasure, of a day of forgetting. This temporary respite is essential to the work of grief, it help's us cope with the bad times. We need them if we are to go on and find a way of reconstructing our life without the person we have lost.

good people. Angry even, at the one who has died for being dead, for letting us down and abandoning us when we most need them. Or we may not feel angry at all. The range of emotions is so wide after a major bereavement. All of us will experience different feelings. Each of us will grieve in our way for the unique loss that we have suffered.

ANGER AT OURSELVES

There is also anger we direct towards ourselves. Why didn't we see what was happening? Why didn't we say what we wanted to say? Why did we behave as we did? In looking for cause and effect we cannot dismiss our own actions. This is guilt anger turned in upon ourselves. It is possible that we have been guilty of neglect or selfishness or even worse. There may well have been times in the past when we actually wished the deceased dead – and the closer we were, the more likely this is to have been true.

GUILT

Guilt places us at the centre of the picture. We might not like the role we have given ourselves, but at least it is a main part-starring role. We tell ourselves if we had not done this or that, or if we had done such a thing then the one we love would still be alive. This is very different from recognising that in reality we are pretty powerless in the face of death. Whatever we did or said was really quite insignificant compared to a terminal illness or a tragic accident. Guilt can be a way of clinging onto the idea that we are in control of everything in our world. To admit the fact that we are without the power to change events can be very frightening indeed. Sometimes it is easier to feel guilty than to move on and begin to understand the full impact of what we have actually lost from our life forever.

GUILT AT CONFRONTATION

Long term relationships between people nearly always contain confrontation and anger as well as commitment and caring. It is impossible to live our lives as if they are about to come to an end at any moment. We seldom stop in mid-sentence, bite back the criticism just in case they or we should die and we never get another chance to tell them that we really like them, even if we do disagree with them on some issues and this is one in particular.

GUILT AT WHAT WE DID OR DIDN'T DO

So often a death is not foreseen, and we are never given the opportunity of making amends. Death can come when we least expect it. Perhaps in the middle of a period of quarrelling and argument, which, if we were given time would have been resolved. But we have not been given time. There can be no resolution, no coming back together. This is intensely sad because we

have been deprived of a proper ending and are left to cope with difficult and distressing emotions.

REGRET

Superficially regret and guilt seem remarkably similar. Both can be expressed through sentences beginning with the words 'If Only'. Both contain the wish that things should be different, that, if we had control over life events and could travel back in time, there would be things that we could change. There are differences between guilt and regret. Often guilt is an inappropriate but inevitable temporary stage in the struggle to understand why a death has happened. Regret is a natural reaction to loss. Because we can never do everything perfectly or anticipate the future there will always be a sense of regret when life is cut short. There may be regret over the death itself which we will have to go on in life forever without the person at our side. The loss of someone we care for deeply will leave us with such regrets. These will fade in time.

MEMORY

In the process of investigating the past we draw heavily upon our memory. It is not unusual for the shock of hearing about the death to temporarily block our ability to recall. In vain we search our minds for pictures of the deceased, we try and remember what they looked like or things they said but there is nothing there. Alternately, our memory becomes distorted and we are only able to remember certain scenes perhaps the bad times, or the pain of the illness. As the shock fades it becomes easier to focus on the past and travel back in time. Having others around us prepared to talk over the past and remember parts of it with us will help. We may find that everyone's memories are distorted for a while, perhaps one person idealising the dead person and only remembering the good times; others recalling a very different picture of events. Eventually a more comprehensive, truthful picture emerges. Major changes in our life can trigger memories, which may have been hidden for many years. Loss can bring back long-forgotten earlier losses. Inevitably, this can increase our sadness for a while.

CONTROL

Death is outside our control. It strikes when we least expect it. Even if there has been an illness and the end of life seems near, death can steal those we love away from us prematurely so that we have no chance to say that final goodbye. Death can come to those we love in the night when we sleep or when we have slipped from the room for a much-needed rest. Yet when we wish for death to come and put an end to the pain and suffering of the one we love, then it stays away, day after day and month after month, refusing to bring release. Nothing we do in our life can fully prepare us for the sense of helplessness we feel when confronted with the death of someone we love. Nothing we can do can bring back the dead. We are forced to accept the unacceptable.

If we are the kind of person who thrives in a controlled environment, who is used to being seen as competent and in charge, then the greater our confusion and sense of bewilderment when we are bereaved and discover that whole areas of our life slip out of our control.

SLEEP

So often sleep is disturbed in the early weeks and months following a major bereavement. At the very time when we long for a good night's sleep, when we slip exhausted into bed and just want to drift away from the sadness and problems, sleep eludes us. We may drop off for a couple of hours, but find ourselves wide-awake at two in the morning. Then we lay there worrying until it is nearly time to get up and then fall into a deep sleep. The permutations of a bad night's sleep are endless.

TEARS

It is not unusual to cry a great deal. The fact that this is natural doesn't make it any easier when one finds oneself in floods of tears on a bus or in front of complete strangers. Other people find that they cannot cry at all. They feel like crying, they can identify the sadness like an ache inside but it will not come out. Crying too much, or not crying at all, leads to a sense of being out of control of oneself and behaviour and to the feeling that somehow one is not grieving properly. At such a time it is best to hold onto the fact that we can only grieve and express our grief in our own personal way.

FEARS AND PHOBIAS

The death of someone we love shocks and deeply disturbs us. It will force us to confront our own mortality and that of others we love. It is hardly surprising that we may be subject to high levels of fear. Everything in which we have placed our trust has been disturbed and will remain disturbed until we form a new basis of trust again and regain confidence in life again. Some people are frightened of death itself either because death seems to offer only nothingness, or because life-after-death threatens pain or punishment. In the early days of bereavement there can be the primitive fear of being sucked towards death, perhaps even pulled there by the one we have lost. It may feel as if they are exerting an influence on us to follow them. Part of us may even be tempted to go with them; another part fighting to remain here. Usually these dark feelings vanish quite naturally in a week or so, and it is possible that they stem from our pain in living on without that person, or from our guilt at still being alive and able to enjoy life. We can fear for those we love, terrified that if we let them out of our sight they too may be lost to us forever. Children losing a parent can be