

Bereavement and Loss: A Self Help Guide for Volunteers

Although it is fairly rare that the people we work to support as volunteers pass away, sadly this is a reality we must face when working with people who suffer extreme deprivation. When someone we have worked with and established a relationship with passes, it is important to acknowledge your feelings and try to cope with the sense of loss as best you can with the support of fellow volunteers. It can be particularly hard to overcome a bereavement if the person who has died lived in institutional care as often it is the case that they experienced loneliness in life. It may help you to talk about that person with other volunteers who knew them, so you can keep their memory alive, focus on the positive times you shared with them, and find comfort in the kindness you showed them. Whilst it is a tragedy when anyone dies, it can be particularly painful if a child or young person leaves us.

If you are working with individuals who generally do not experience much kindness or love during their lives, you may find that you experience a sense of loss when you return home from volunteering. This is perfectly normal as you may miss a relationship you worked hard to establish, worry about their welfare following your departure, or question whether you could have done more. These are emotions we have all experienced as volunteers working to support hard to reach groups of people. It is important that you act on these feelings by talking to other volunteers who may work with that person to reassure you of their welfare, and remember that just as you contributed positively to that person's life, so will other volunteers who follow in your footsteps.

This document looks at some of the emotions you may feel as a result of bereavement or loss, and some simple things you can do to try to make you feel better.

How might I feel?

Everyone's response to a loss is different depending upon individual characteristics and previous experiences. However, there are some common symptoms many people experience in one form or another.

- Immediately following bereavement or loss you may feel numb, panicky, teary, or unable to cry at all. You may find your sleep is interrupted or even have physical symptoms such as heart palpitations or chest pain (heart-ache). This is a difficult phase and you may need a lot of support. Don't be afraid to ask for help and support from anyone around you. Tell them how you feel and ask that they listen.
 - Conversely, you may find that you feel surprisingly 'unaffected' at first and feel guilty you are not experiencing stronger symptoms. Please ensure you give yourself time to grieve, it may not come all at once. You could be experiencing symptoms of shock which often manifest in initial numbness. If you find that you start to experience stronger symptoms of extreme

sadness a while after the event, seek help! It is never too late and you shouldn't try to deal with profound sorrow on your own.

- After you have coped with the initial stages of grief, you may find you experience other symptoms over the following days, weeks, or even months. You may experience a sense of agitation, panic, and anxiety such as breathlessness, palpitations, a dry mouth, tingling or dizziness. These symptoms may encourage you to be more active than usual. You may develop an urge to clean or turn to substances which can calm you such as alcohol. This is also the stage where many volunteers feel the desire to undertake tasks to help the beneficiaries of projects they have worked to support. Whilst we would never discourage you from undertaking supportive tasks, it is important you recognise the motivation for your actions and put your emotional and psychological well-being first.
 - You may also have experiences where you feel a closeness to the person who has passed on a subconscious or spiritual level. This is completely normal and will pass in time.
 - These experiences may interchange with feelings of depression, weepiness, tiredness and low mood.
 - You may also feel guilt (could you have done more?); you could feel angry (why him/her? Why now?); you may even turn to black humour. Everyone copes with loss differently and it is important to be sensitive around others who have experienced the loss but also to recognise that people's coping strategies do not dictate the strength or depth of the grief they are feeling inside.

Coming to terms with a death or loss is a gradual process. You are likely to find that day by day the grief occupies your thoughts less and less, although you are likely to have good days and bad days. Don't feel guilty when this happens, this is a natural process which needs to take place for the benefit of those left behind. Recovering from the loss does not in any way reduce your feelings for the person/people you are grieving for.

What can you do to help yourself?

- **Prepare** – If you are volunteering with a particularly high risk group of people such as the very young, very frail, or people living in hostile environments such as large residential institutions it would be advisable to prepare for experiencing bereavement or loss at some point (especially if you plan to stay involved for a long time). It is important emotionally and practically to talk about concerns you have and consider how you may cope. Will you have time to take some time out to grieve properly? Have you briefed your friends and family about the support you may need?
- **Stability** – Try to avoid any major life changes shortly following your return from a trip. If you have unavoidable changes such as starting a new study course or job, try to plan this so you have at least a week or so to emotionally recharge. You will need to adjust.

- **Health** – Whether you are coping with a bereavement of sense of loss following leaving a project, this is a crucial time to look after your physical as well as your emotional health. Eat and drink properly and regularly (avoid foods/drinks which can give you unnecessary highs and lows such as caffeine and alcohol), rest and try to keep a stable sleeping pattern, and don't take on too much. You may wish to take vitamin supplements before, during and after your trip to boost your immune system and give your body a helping hand.
- **Talk** – Discuss how you feel with sensitive friends and family. Although it can be difficult explaining your experiences and then explaining your feelings, try not to bottle things up. Although your friends and family will be able to sympathise and offer support, you may find you need the empathy of your team so speak to them!
- **Relationships** – You are likely to find that you established stronger relationships with your team mates than you perhaps expected. Now is the time to use those relationships to support you. If you know a young person who has passed away, this is likely to be particularly traumatic. You may find that meeting up with your team mates on the anniversary of the death, that person's birthday, or date of your trip will help you in the long term and consolidate your support network.
- **Socialise** - You may well find that socialising with all friends and family helps you recover also.
- **Ask for help!** - If you find that you aren't coping with a traumatic event and your symptoms are ongoing, consult your GP or see a counsellor.

What can friends and family do to help you?

- **Spend time** with the grieving person if they want you too.
- **Talk and listen** to them without necessarily trying to find solutions or *fix* them. Don't be afraid to say you don't know what to say if that is how you feel. Show them you are there for them by holding their hand for example.
- Don't be surprised if the grieving person wants to **discuss the same thing** several times. This is normally a sign that they are trying to clarify the situation in their minds so they can start to recover.
- If you find the grieving person exhibits **anger** don't take it personally, it is a natural and common response to trauma.
- Ensure you say out loud to the grieving person that **you are there for them** any time they need you. They may need to hear you say it.
- **Offer practical help** such as cooking, shopping, caring for dependents, or extending deadlines.
- Try not to expect the grieving person to recover too quickly. This is not the time for the "**pull yourself together**" attitude.
- **Include** the grieving person in events; don't assume they're not up to doing things.

Based on information from Manchester Public Health Development Service. If you have serious concerns about your mental well-being please call [NHS Direct on 08454647](https://www.nhs.uk). Please contact your Project Co-ordinator if you have any general worries or concerns. (Written and compiled by Sarah Parry for L.I.F.E.)

- **Discourage** the grieving person from making **major decisions**. Encourage them to think through their options carefully and make a decision when their mind is clear.
- **Encourage them to seek professional help** if they do not seem to be coping.

Useful Contacts

- **CRUSE Bereavement Line – helpline for people and those caring for bereaved people (24 hour helpline) 08701671677**
- Please also contact your Team Leader(s), Project Co-ordinator, or Regional Representative if you would like to talk about your experiences. You may find it helpful to write about your experiences so you can make sense of your feelings.