

Bereavement and grief after stroke

Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100
or email: helpline@stroke.org.uk

This guide looks at the emotional impact of bereavement when someone you know dies from a stroke.

When you lose someone to stroke, it can be a very emotional time, as well as a time of great change. It can be very difficult for family members and friends to cope with.

Sometimes a death from stroke is very sudden, but even for those who know their loved one is dying, it can come as a great shock when the end comes. There might not be time to say goodbye, and you might not get the chance to say the things you wanted to say.

When someone has a stroke, the medical teams work hard to help them recover, but it's not always possible to prevent another stroke or serious illness affecting them. Stroke and other illnesses like infections can be very sudden and have a serious impact. So you might not get much warning before someone becomes very unwell or dies.

If you would like to find out more about treatments and care after a severe stroke, read our guide 'When someone is seriously ill after a stroke' on stroke.org.uk.

The grieving process

When a bereavement happens, everyone experiences the loss and grief in their own way, and in their own time. Even if you had a difficult relationship with the person, you might still have a strong reaction to their death and go through a grieving process.

After someone dies, your experience of grief will be unique to you. Our rituals for grief and mourning differ between communities and cultures. But there are some thoughts and feelings that have been identified as common in any experience of grief. These don't necessarily happen in a particular order. They may overlap, and you may not experience any or all of them.

The feelings you have while grieving may include:

Shock and pain

The pain of a bereavement can be very powerful or overwhelming. It can take some time to acknowledge what has happened. You might carry on as if nothing has happened, or avoid doing things that refer to your loss. You might feel disorientated, or as if you've lost your sense of purpose. This can last a short time, or carry on for a longer period.

Anger

Feeling angry is natural, whether it's anger at the unfairness of death or feeling angry with the person who has died for leaving you, or with people you might blame for their death. You may also feel angry with relatives and friends for not doing enough.

Longing

You might think about the person who has died, imagine you see them or have dreams about them. You could think about things that have happened in the past and what you should have said and done.

Guilt

It's common to have feelings of guilt, and some people worry that they should have done more to help or feel bad about something that happened in the past. Try to be kind to yourself and give yourself time.

Sadness and low mood

Sadness is a natural response when someone dies, but it might not happen right away. For some people feeling sad might come some time after the initial shock has receded. If feelings of sadness are affecting your mood and your ability to enjoy life, it could be a sign of low mood or depression. Things to look out for include sleep problems, tearfulness, loss of appetite, losing interest in things you enjoy, or trouble with concentration. If you feel that low mood or depression are affecting you, contact your GP for help and treatment.

Physical symptoms

Problems with sleeping and eating, chest tightness, fatigue and trouble with concentration. If this happens, it's a good idea to contact your GP who can check you for any physical illness and give ideas for finding emotional support.

Coping with grief

Everyone grieves in their own way. You might experience emotions like sadness, sorrow, anxiety, fear, regret or guilt. You might cry all the time, or not be able to cry. You might feel lonely or isolated.

If you had a difficult relationship with the person who died, or were estranged, your reaction could be complex. For example you might not miss someone you haven't seen for years, but still have a strong reaction to their death. It could bring up regrets and longings, anger or even relief.

The pain of loss should lessen over time, but it can be a very gradual process. Eventually you may begin to move towards recognising that life won't be the same without them there. But there will be new ways of living life.

Nobody can tell you what to feel. But there are some practical things you can try.

- Talk to other people. Be open about your feelings and share memories with family and friends.
- Try to take extra care of yourself by eating good food, getting some sleep, and staying active.
- Be kind to yourself. Give yourself time to grieve, and seek help with things like housework and childcare if you need a break.
- Keep their memory alive by writing down stories or making an album of photographs. Visit somewhere meaningful to them, or hold a celebration of their life.
- Commemorate the person by dedicating a park bench or naming a new rose, or making a memory quilt using fabric or photographs. Some people decide to raise funds for a cause or donate to charity in the person's name.

You may begin to move towards recognising that life won't be the same without them there. But there will be new ways of living life. Remembering the person or doing something in their memory may help to make this easier.

Should I get professional help?

Painful feelings can sometimes come back, even after you have come to accept your loss. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and no set timetable. But some people can feel like they have become stuck in certain feelings over a long period and it's affecting their daily lives. Or grief can be buried or delayed, and emerge as low moods or depression months or years later.

It can be helpful to get professional support such as talking therapy. In England you can refer yourself to an NHS talking therapy. To find a service near you, visit [nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health). In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland you can ask your GP to refer you for help.

Your employer or place of education may offer some support such as a health insurance scheme that provides free counselling or therapy. Counselling may take place on the phone or by video call.

For more ideas on how to get help, try the Stroke Association Helpline or contact an organisation dedicated to supporting people after bereavement like Cruse.

Carers and bereavement

Many carers find that their caring role is the focus of their daily life. If a carer has devoted their energies to a loved one over many years, they may also have become increasingly isolated, losing touch with their own friends or interests.

The loss for carers may lead to very mixed and conflicting emotions. Feelings of grief and sadness may be combined with guilt or relief. As well as trying to cope with the loss of their loved one, carers also face life without their role as a carer, with contacts or networks built up as part of their caring role also coming to an end.

A carer's bereavement may not only have a huge emotional impact, but may also result in significant practical and financial changes too. Carer support organisations can provide advice and support on the emotional and practical aspects of loss (see 'Where to get help and information' later in this guide).

Children and young people

Children don't always show their emotions in the same way as adults, and a sad child could show their feelings through angry outbursts, sleep problems or insecure behaviour. They can move quite quickly between extremes of emotion. A child can be very upset one moment, and seem completely fine the next. But like adults, they need time to go through the grieving process.

Younger children might believe that a death was their fault or that they can bring the person back. They might not say this out loud, but you can encourage them to talk about their feelings. Reassure them and answer any questions they may have. Let them know that it's ok to enjoy their usual activities and have fun with friends if they want to.

How you explain things and answer questions will depend on the child. You know your child best, so you'll know whether you can get them involved in discussions about a funeral or ways to celebrate the person's life. Let them express their feelings, and talk about the person if they want to. It's a good idea to be direct rather than using euphemisms like 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep', as this can be confusing.

Supporting a bereaved person

If you're supporting someone who has been bereaved, it's normal to worry or feel awkward about saying the 'wrong' thing. But someone who's been bereaved will almost certainly appreciate it if you acknowledge their loss, and won't mind too much how you say it. They may want to talk about how they feel and about the deceased person. Some people want company, while others may prefer some time alone, knowing that people are there for them. People have different needs, and it is important to ask them what support they want. Practical help like shopping, cooking, and childcare may be greatly appreciated.

Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Helpline

Our Helpline offers information and support for anyone affected by stroke, including family, friends and carers.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100**
Email helpline@stroke.org.uk.

Read our information

Get more information about stroke online at stroke.org.uk, or call the Helpline to ask for printed copies of our guides.

My Stroke Guide

The Stroke Association's online tool My Stroke Guide gives you free access to trusted advice, information and support 24/7. My Stroke Guide connects you to our online community, to find out how others manage their recovery.

Log on to mystrokeguide.com today.

Supporting in a loved one's memory

More information about supporting the Stroke Association in your loved one's memory can be found at stroke.org.uk/in-memory-giving.

Other sources of help and information

What to do when someone dies

Age UK

Website: ageuk.org.uk

Advice line: **0800 678 1174**

Advice and information about care, finances and emotional support.

Citizen's Advice

Website: citizensadvice.org.uk

Offers advice on what to do after a death, including help with financial matters and arranging funeral services.

GOV.UK

Website: gov.uk/after-a-death

Has information about what to do after someone dies, including details of how to register a death, understanding wills and probate, and claiming Bereavement Support Payments.

NI Direct (Northern Ireland)

Website: nidirect.gov.uk

The official government website for Northern Ireland citizens. Has a checklist of things to do when someone dies and information on registering a death in Northern Ireland.

Scottish Government

Website: gov.scot

Emotional support and counselling

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

Website: itsgoodtotalk.org.uk

Tel: **01455 883 300**

Email: bacp@bacp.co.uk

Sets standards for people working in counselling. You can use their website to search for a counsellor or therapist in your area and get more information about counselling and therapy.

Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland (COSCA)

Website: cosca.org.uk

Tel: 01786 475 140

Email: info@cosca.org.uk

Provides information about finding a counsellor in Scotland.

Cruse Bereavement Care (England, Northern Ireland and Wales)

Website: cruse.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 808 1677

Email: info@cruse.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care (Scotland)

Website: crusescotland.org.uk

Tel: 0845 600 2227

Email: info@crusescotland.org.uk

Cruse aims to enable bereaved people to understand their grief and to cope with their loss through support groups, one-to-one support, information and training.

Dying Matters

Website: dyingmatters.org

Promotes understanding of end-of-life care and bereavement. Visit the website for information about end-of-life care including hospices and advance decisions.

Good life good grief (Scotland)

Website: goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk/

Promotes understanding of end-of-life care and bereavement. Visit the website for information about end-of-life care including hospices and advance decisions.

Hope Again

Website: hopeagain.org.uk

A website designed by young people for young people and run by Cruse Bereavement Care. It features personal stories and creative work.

Samaritans

Website: samaritans.org

Tel: 116 123

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Offers 24-hour confidential emotional support.

Carer support organisations

Carers UK

Website: carersuk.org

Advice line: 0808 808 7777

Email: advice@carersuk.org

Provides information on the practical and emotional aspects of bereavement.

Independent Age

Website: independentage.org

Helpline: 0800 319 6789

Email: advice@independentage.org

Provides information and advice to older people, their relatives and carers.

For bereaved children

Child Bereavement Charity

Website: childbereavementuk.org

Helpline: 0800 028 8840

Email: support@childbereavementuk.org

Confidential support and information for anyone affected by the death of a child or who is caring for a bereaved child.

Winston's Wish

Website: winstonswish.org.uk

Helpline: 08088 020 021

Email: info@winstonswish.org.uk

Provides bereavement support, information, advice and guidance for children and young people, and advice to parents, carers and teachers on supporting bereaved children.

Young Minds

Website: youngminds.org.uk

Information and advice about children and young people's mental health, including a parents' guide to supporting children after a bereavement.

About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.

How did we do?

To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk.

Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.

Always get individual advice

This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don't control the information provided by other organisations or websites.

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Every five minutes, stroke destroys lives. We need your support to help rebuild them. Donate or find out more at stroke.org.uk.

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