

Living Alongside Grief: Working Through the Stages of Grief

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An Introduction to this Self-Help Guide

This self-help guide has been created to support people grieving the loss of a loved one, whether that's a family member, friend, colleague or a beloved pet. As humans we feel the loss of our companions deeply. The emotional impact of a bereavement can be overwhelming. Sadness, grief, depression, low mood, feeling disconnected from the world, anger and anxiety are all common emotional responses. Many people find that they hide themselves away from the world for a period, whilst others may go into over-drive, keeping themselves busy and distracted.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. The thoughts and feelings we experience after the loss of a loved one can vary from day to day and from person to person. There may be difficult days, where leaving the house can feel too much. There may be days that are a little easier- you may not cry as much, you may feel like you are able to manage daily life a little bit easier and that you are able to do things that you enjoy. However these moments can be accompanied by guilt, or the belief that we are letting our loved one down, being disrespectful to their memory, or feeling as though we are forgetting them and moving on. Of course, this is not true.

Grief is a complicated experience. Depending on the circumstances surrounding the loss of your loved one, there may be a mixture of different feelings such as anger, a sense of injustice, sadness or even fear. For some people there is a lack of closure. This is often the case when we have lost someone unexpectedly or in a sudden way, for example in a car accident or by suicide. It is important to remember that whatever your experience, your thoughts and feelings are normal, common and understandable.

This self-help guide may help you to process some of the thoughts and feelings you are experiencing after the loss. It aims to provide a self-help approach to working through the grief cycle that many people may need to work through after the loss of a loved one. Please do work through this self-help guide at your own pace- being patient and gentle with yourself.

Further Support

If you feel you require more than a guided self-help approach to working through the grief cycle please consult the options below for further support.

CRUSE BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT:

www.cruse.org.uk

RSPCA:

www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/bereavement

BLUE CROSS:

www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-bereavement-and-pet-loss

THIRD WAVE PSYCHOLOGIST:

www.thirdwavepsychologist.co.uk

Overview & Contents

PART ONE: Understanding Bereavement & Grief

Part one of this booklet provides an overview of grief and how it is commonly experienced. It also talks through typical and complex grief responses and helps us to think about how we personally are experiencing and impacted by the loss.

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PART TWO: Living Well with Grief

Part two of this booklet provides an overview of how to live well alongside the grief of losing a loved one. It talks through strategies and techniques to help us cope with the emotional distress we can experience and strategies to manage unhelpful or distressing thoughts about the loss.

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PART THREE: reflections- Where Are You in Your Journey Now?

Part three of this booklet provides a space to reflect on your grief journey. It provides a space to continue thinking about and writing about your thoughts and feelings around the loss.

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PART ONE: Understanding Bereavement & Grief

Bereavement & Grief

A **bereavement** is the loss of someone we love and care about such as a family member, friend, colleague or pet. Bereavement is one of the most painful aspects of the human experience. Following the loss we often experience **grief**, a collection of painful thoughts and feelings about the loss of our loved one. Grief is a very personal experience. It can be hard to predict the thoughts and feelings we may experience after we lose a loved one, even if the loss was expected.

Some of the common thoughts and feelings that can occur after losing a loved one include:

- • • • •
- Sadness, low mood & depression
- Anger, a sense of injustice or unfairness
- Guilt or remorse
- Lacking closure
- Shock, denial, disbelief
- 'Why them'
- Intrusive thoughts, memories regarding the death
- Reliving & flashbacks
- Distressing thoughts about the death process
- Sense of overwhelm
- Anxiety, panic & fear
- Numbness
- Relief
- Confusion & feeling lost
- • • • •

Grief: What is Normal?

There is no normal when it comes to grieving. Everyone grieves differently and in their own way. Carrying on with life without your loved one is difficult- but it can be done. Over time, as we move through the grieving process and we start to grow around the loss, we can and do start to reconnect with our life again and find a 'new normal'.

Whilst there is no set timeline to move through the grief cycle, intense emotional reactions (for example emotional responses that interfere with our daily life and routine activities) that are still present six months after the loss may require some support to process. Further, painful or intrusive thoughts, feelings & memories can heighten distress, making the loss even more painful or difficult to process.

Complicated Grief is a term used to describe a reaction to the loss of a loved one that persists several months or years after the person's passing. This reaction is often intense and can result in a preoccupation with the loved one, a sense of feeling stuck or not being able to move on or feeling like life has lost its meaning, joy and fulfilment. It can also be dominated by painful intrusive thoughts about the person, their death & the events surrounding it. Some people experience a 'reliving', particularly if the death was due to a traumatic incident or following a long battle with an illness such as cancer.

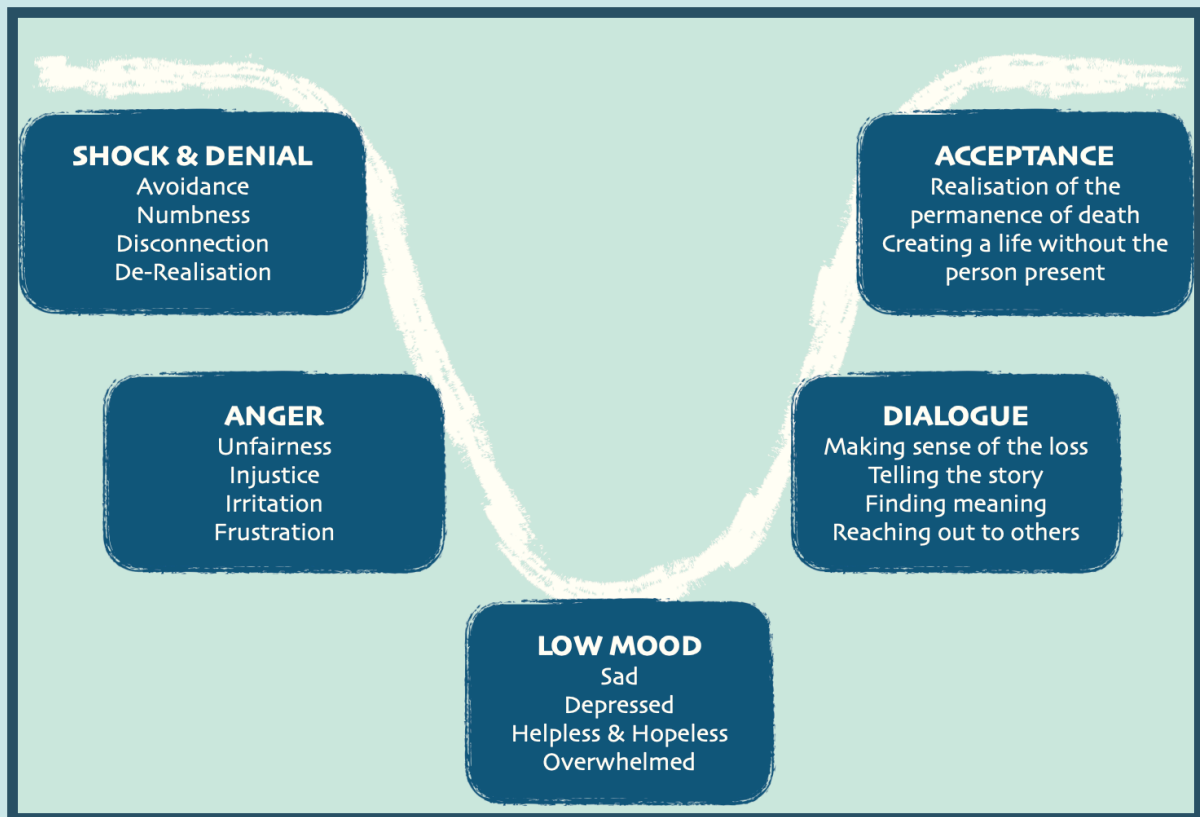
You may find that you experience some or all of these thoughts and feelings. It is common for our experiences to vary from day to day, or even hour to hour. Complicated grief reactions are more common when the death was unexpected, or the cause of death was complex (for example the person died following an assault or attack, or by suicide). Complicated grief reactions can also occur when multiple losses occur at once or in a short period of time, or when something has hindered our progression through the grief cycle.

In the case of complicated grief, some people may need slightly more than a self-help approach to support them through the grieving process. It is important to seek professional support if you feel that your grief is extreme or overwhelming. However this self-help guide may have some practical strategies that you can draw from to help with reducing the distress and suffering you may be feeling.



The Grief Cycle

We typically move through a number of stages as we process the loss of a loved one. All of these responses are normal & natural, and are experienced by most people who have lost a loved one.



Initially we may experience a sense of **shock** or **denial**. This reaction often exists on a continuum, from complete denial that the loved one has gone at one end, to expecting our loved one to walk through the door at any moment. We may not connect fully with the reality of the loss or fully accept the permanent loss of that person. We may feel numb or empty. This is often a protective response, acting as a defence mechanism to help us cope with any overwhelming emotions & feelings. It also helps us to function in the first few days or weeks after the loss, helping us to get through all the practical tasks we may need to do such as sorting out funeral or childcare arrangements.

As the reality of the loss sets in, strong emotions such as **anger** & feelings of injustice are common. There can be thoughts and feelings about the death being unjust or unfair, leading feelings of anger and resentment. These can be focused towards a specific person or organisation such as the healthcare system. Sometimes the anger can be directed towards nothing in particular, for example there can be a general anger towards the world or others.

As the anger passes feelings of **low mood** and depression can develop. The full realisation of the loss and the permanence of it may be realised at this point. It is common to feel very overwhelmed by emotion at this time and you may find that you feel tearful or very distressed at times. Lowered energy levels or fatigue may also be present. Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness & immense sadness may

also be present, and for some people they may experience thoughts of suicide. If this is the case it is important to reach out and access support from others about these thoughts and feelings.

Intrusive thoughts and memories regarding the death and events surrounding it may surface during this stage. Some people experience traumatic thoughts about the events leading up to the death. Some people worry about whether their loved one suffered or feel distressed about the challenges the person faced in their final weeks or hours. These thoughts can fuel difficult and painful feelings.

Over time, we start to form a **dialogue** about the loss. We may talk about the loss, the person or our experiences with others or we may journal our thoughts for our own processing. This helps us to process the loss and to start to accept the reality of our future without our loved one. We may start to make sense of our life now without the person present and what this means for us and our daily life.

We may start to accept the reality of the loss at this point. **Acceptance** does not mean that we feel ok or happy about the loss. Rather, acceptance in this respect means that we are at peace that our loved one will no longer be present in our life. At this point we are open to continuing our life in meaningful ways and continuing our relationship with that person in a different way, without them being physically present in our lives.

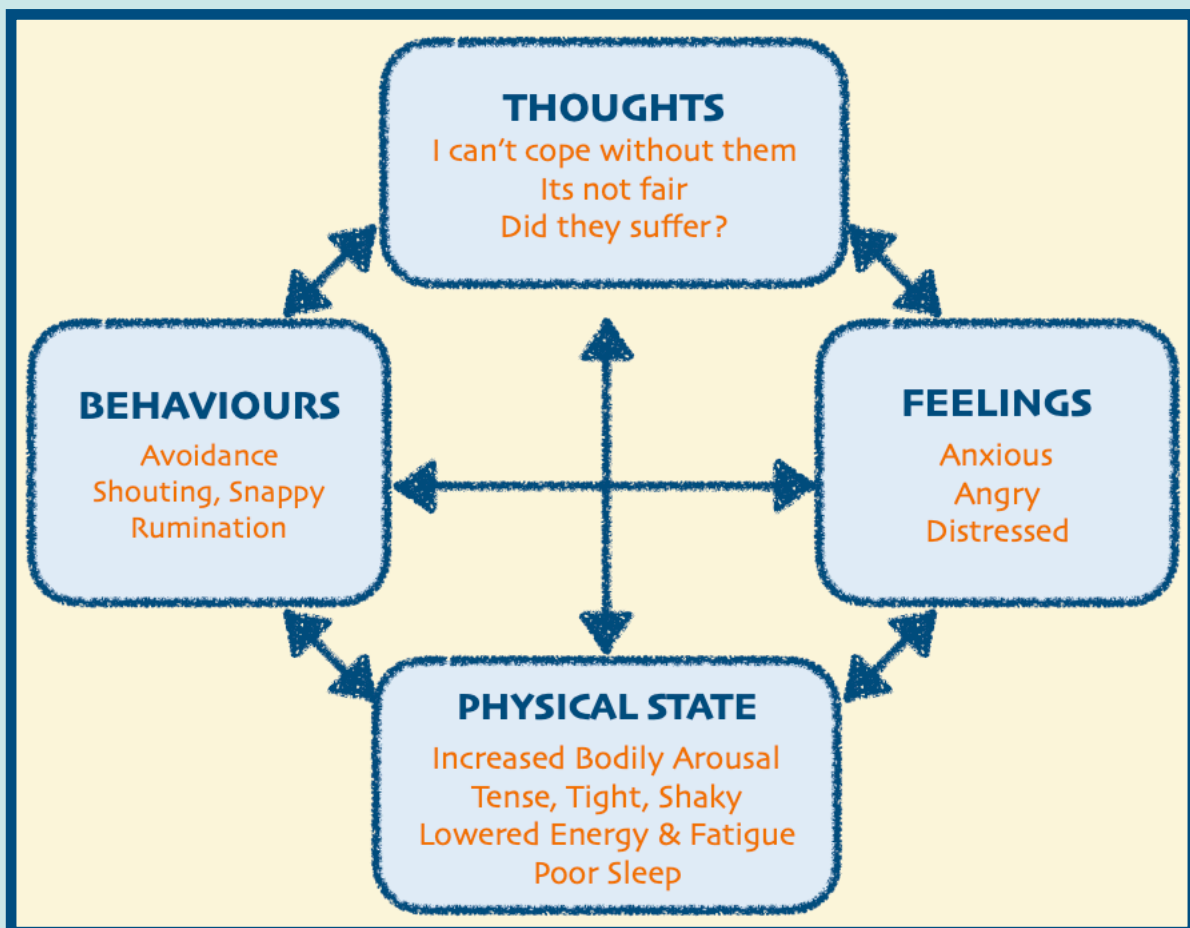


REFLECTIONS: What stage of the grief cycle are you in?

How Does Grief Affect Us?

Grief can be all consuming. It affects our thoughts, our emotions, our actions as well as our physical state. These areas are inter-connected - they all interact with each other. Our thoughts shape our actions and how we feel (emotionally and physically), whilst in turn our thoughts are influenced by our physical state, feelings and actions.

For example, if we experience the *thought* 'I can't cope without my loved one' then we may *feel* anxious and low in confidence and our *behaviours* may include avoidance of certain places, people or activities. If we experience the *thought* 'it's not fair, why them?' then we may *feel* angry and our *behaviours* may include shouting or being snappy at others. And if we experience *intrusive thoughts* and *memories* regarding the death and events surrounding it then it can lead to *feelings* of distress and *behaviours* such as rumination.



Intense emotional experiences and a change in our activity levels can also affect our overall physical state, general health and body conditioning. *Pain, aches, fatigue, exhaustion and tiredness are common during the grieving process.* This is because our feelings are experienced both **emotionally** and **physically** – we often experience tension, heart palpitations, rapid breathing, concentration and memory issues and other unpleasant physical symptoms as part of these feelings.

The inter-connected nature of our thoughts, feelings, actions and physical state means that if we make changes in one of these areas we can alter all the others.

As we start processing the thoughts associated with grief and loss, we may start noticing a positive impact on how we feel, both emotionally and physically. This improvement in our emotional state means that we are more likely to engage in daily activities that we enjoy. Further, as we start doing more and reconnecting with everyday valued or meaningful actions and activity then we may notice a helpful shift in our thoughts as well as how we feel.

For example if we were to face a situation that we felt anxious about, for example shopping alone, then this helps us to challenge the thought 'I cannot cope without my loved one', and we learn that we can manage and cope. This then helps us to feel less anxious and more confident. Over time, as we face more and more situations, or engage in more and more activities, our anxiety starts to lower and our confidence and mood start to increase.

This process of challenging and changing our thoughts, actions and feelings typically occurs naturally over time as we work through the grief cycle. However, sometimes people need help to move through the grief cycle or they need support and guidance to make changes to their thoughts and actions to enable them to process the loss and move forward.

PART TWO: Living Well With Grief

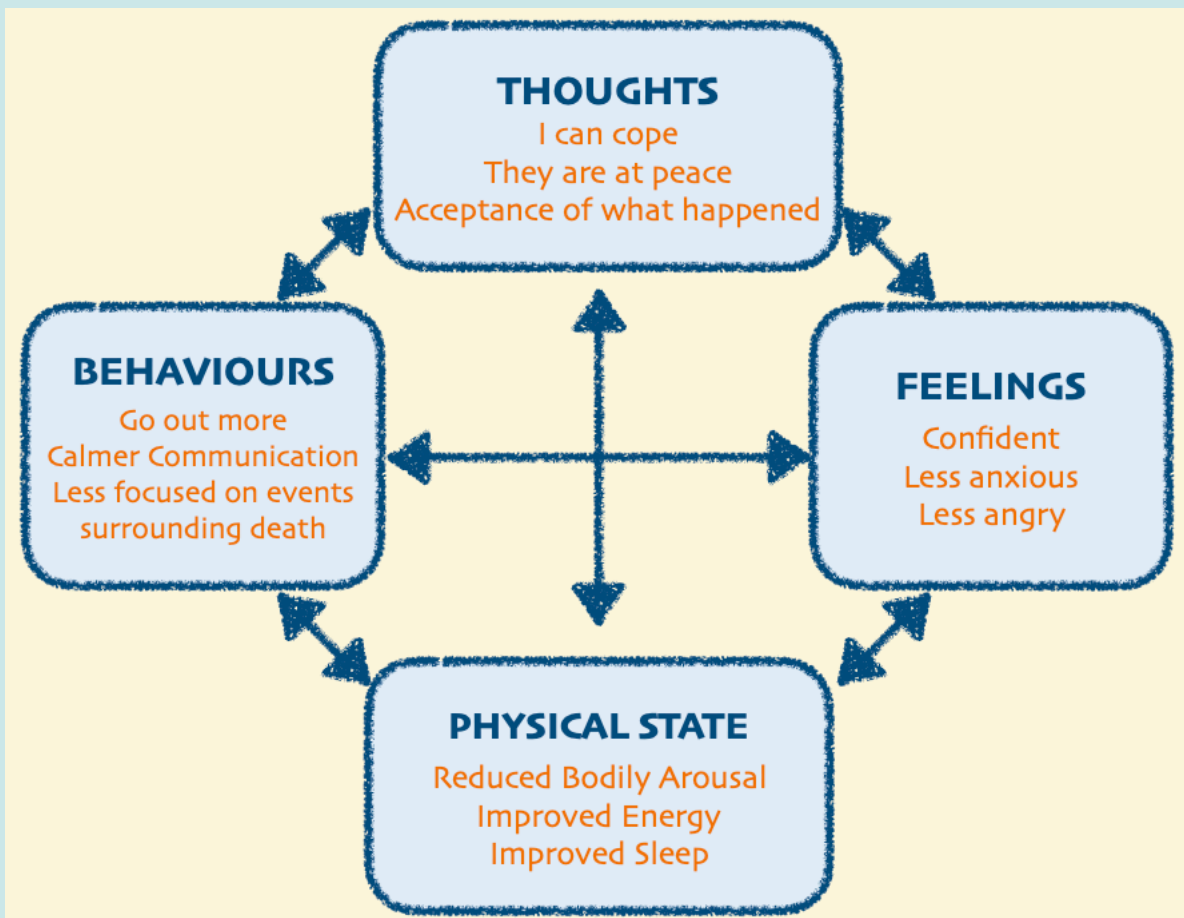
Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a talking therapy and counselling approach that supports us to make helpful changes to our thoughts and behaviours to improve how we feel, both emotionally and physically.

This self-help guide is based on this approach, supporting you to:

- ◆ Explore helpful **actions** that you can take to improve your mood, lower distress and increase your wellbeing
- ◆ Explore ways to manage your **thoughts** to prompt helpful behaviour change and improve your mood
- ◆ Explore ways to improve your physical and emotional **feelings**

Drawing on techniques to make positive changes to the above areas can help you to move through the grief cycle and process your loss.



1. Processing Our Thoughts & Feelings:

There are lots of things that we can do to process our thoughts & feelings to help us to move through the grief cycle. Different approaches work for different people, so it is important to trial a variety of strategies to find something that works for you.

REFLECTIONS: Give yourself space to identify, acknowledge & connect with the difficult thoughts & feelings associated with the loss:

What **thoughts** are going through your mind connected to the loss?

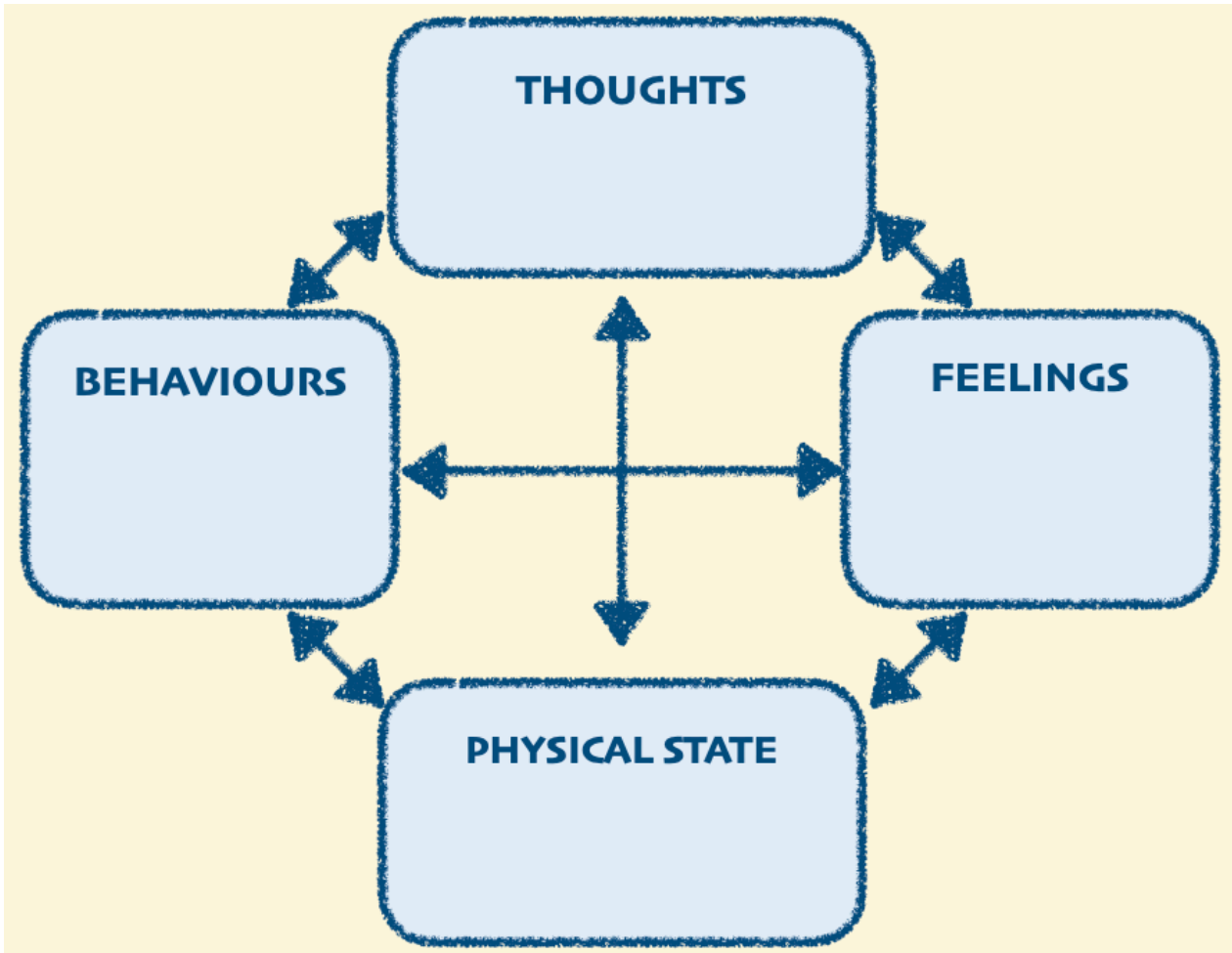
What **feelings (emotional & physical)** are you experiencing?

What **behaviours or actions** are you engaging in (not not engaging in)?

This exercise can help with **identifying & processing** any difficult or unhelpful thoughts, feelings & behaviours that you may be experiencing. Keeping a journal can also help with this process, or using the expressive writing sheets at the end of this booklet.

This exercise can also help with identifying any unhelpful patterns or cycles that you are caught up in & help you to starting to **softening, challenging or changing** any unhelpful thoughts & behaviours that may be maintaining such cycles.

REFLECTIONS: Plot any key thoughts, feelings & actions from the previous exercise into the cycle below:



Perhaps think about what you could **do** differently to help with starting to improve how you think & feel.

2. Talking to Others

Talking to others about how we think & feel can help with processing difficult thoughts & feelings about the loss. This could be a trusted friend, family member, partner or other person in your life, for example a teacher, colleague, boss or healthcare worker. However communicating with others can be hard for many reasons:

- **Your family and friends may not know what to say**
- **They may want to help but have developed unhelpful ideas about how to do so**
- **There may be serious conflict in your family**
- **You may never have asked directly for help before**
- **Power imbalances with bosses or healthcare workers can make it feel difficult to ask for help or to make requests**

In these cases it may be helpful to talk to a bereavement helpline or organisation, particularly if you feel that you are not able to talk to those in your life about the loss or if you find it hard to talk to those closest to you.

During a bereavement, there may also be things that we need practical help or support with. Communicating our needs can feel overwhelming, especially at such a difficult time. However communicating our needs can help us to get both the

REFLECTIONS: List helpful friends, family, colleagues or organisations you can turn to below:

emotional and practical support that we may need from others such as friends, family, employers or healthcare providers at this difficult time.

Getting the Support You Need:

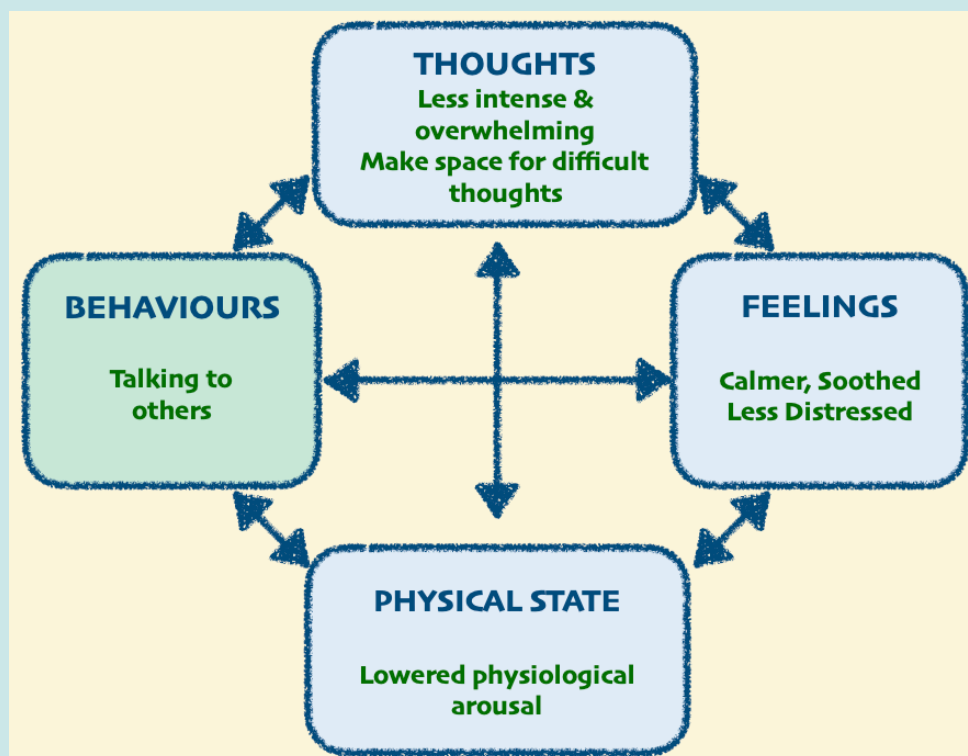
If you feel ready and able to, starting a discussion with trusted others about your loved one can bring comfort and help with processing the loss. Sometimes it can be helpful or easier to talk to someone that is a trained professional in supporting people through a loss. Cruse Bereavement Support have some really great resources and a helpline that you can contact to speak to someone if you feel this would be helpful.



WWW.CRUSE.ORG.UK

If you feel that you would benefit from further, more intensive support, it may be beneficial to explore 1:1 counselling and therapy options local to you.

The impact of talking through our thoughts & feelings can start to create more helpful cycles, reducing the intensity of the thoughts and lowering the emotional overwhelm and physiological arousal associated with the loss.



3. Self-Care

When we go through difficult or distressing times in our lives it is really important to look after ourselves. Showing ourself kindness and care whilst we grieve helps to give us the space we need to process difficult and painful thoughts and feelings. This can help us to manage and reduce our distress as we move through the grief cycle, helping us to cope with the overwhelming feelings that we may experience.

The aim of self-care is to soothe and nourish the mind and body. This may look like different things to different people. Some people need 'me-time', which is time to do things that help them to relax and switch off alone. Others may need to be around people or places that bring them comfort. Self care is about finding your own strategies to calm and relax the mind & body, boosting feel good feelings and overall wellbeing.

Ensuring we practice self-care helps to reduce the emotional arousal and intensity that we often experience after a loss, as well as helps to reduce the physical arousal that accompanies heightened emotions.

Self-Care Strategies:

1. Deep Breathing
2. Muscle Relaxation
3. Visual Imagery
4. Grounding & Anchoring
5. Calming Activities & Me-Time

1. Deep Breathing

Breathing techniques are a great way to manage the physical stress response and increased emotional arousal. Deep calming breathing strategies help the body to feel physically calm and lower physiological arousal, helping to slow the mind & body down. This helps us to feel soothed and safe, particularly when emotion feels heightened and intense.

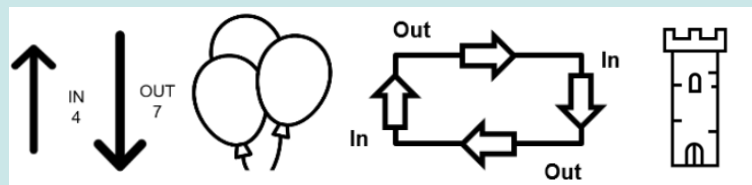
Breathing techniques to practice when feeling stressed, overwhelmed, worried or anxious:

★ 4/7 breathing

★ Balloon breathing

★ Box breathing

★ Castle breathing



When we breathe deeply and calmly, we breathe in for the count of 4 and out for the count of 7 (4/7 breathing)- ensuring that the in breath is shorter than the out breath (box breathing). We breathe deeply down into the tummy (balloon breathing), allowing the tummy to rise and fall as we breathe in and out. Sometimes people like to imagine a castle's turrets as they breathe in and out to help them to pace the breath (castle breathing).

2. Muscle Relaxation

Working through the body, tensing and relaxing each muscle in turn is another helpful approach to calm the mind & body.

Follow the approach below to help reduce tension & tightness in the body:

1. Calm the mind and body by focusing on the breath and then gently slowing it down.
2. Bring your attention to the body. Focus on each muscle group of the body in turn, starting with the feet.
3. Gently tense and tighten your feet as you breathe in and then relax the feet as you breathe out.
4. Repeat this with each muscle group, moving up the body through your legs, buttocks, tummy, chest, shoulders, arms, hands and face.

3. Visual Imagery

Creating a safe, calming space in our mind can be a helpful way to reduce arousal in the body, whilst also directing our attention away from unhelpful, painful or difficult thoughts & feelings.

Follow the approach below to develop a safe, calming place for you:

1. Calm the mind and body by focusing on the breath and then gently slowing it down.
2. Bring to a mind calming scene or place, such as a beach, waterfall, field, park or garden.
3. Use all of your senses to imagine this place - imagine what it smells like, looks like, feels like, sounds like etc.
4. Spend as much time as you need to in this place, imagining yourself walking or resting there.



4. Grounding & Anchoring

Grounding and anchoring ourselves back to present moment can be helpful when we experience lots of difficult thoughts & feeling about the person, their death & the events surrounding it or if we are experiencing nightmares or intrusive thoughts & memories. Using an 'anchor' can help to ground us back in the here & now, helping us to stay connected to the present moment. This can help with stepping back from painful or unhelpful thoughts related to the our loved ones passing. It can also help to soothe & ground us when the emotion feels overwhelming, helping us to make space for the feeling & sit alongside it.

Anchoring Techniques:

- Focusing on the breath
- Carrying a sensory object such as a soft, fluffy toy on a keyring, a pebble
- Stroking your clothes
- Connecting with your feet on the floor or your body in the chair / on the bed
- Using smelling salts or other smells such as clothing
- Placing your hand on your heart and feeling it beating



Grounding Techniques:

- 54321 - using your senses to connect with the environment around you - bringing you back into the here & now

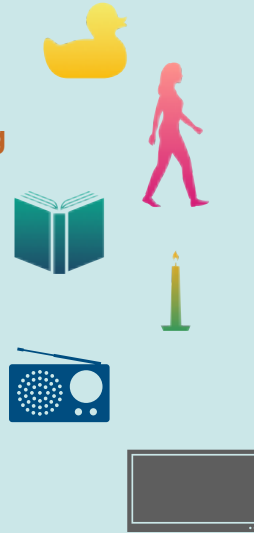


5. Calming Activities & Me-Time

Engaging in calming & relaxing activities is another helpful way to reduce worry, anxiety & stress. Calming & relaxing activities can also help with progressing through the grief cycle, providing us with downtime to relax & process all that is happening. They can also help us to re-connect with our identity and sense of self.

Gentle calming activities may include:

- * Having a bath or shower
- * Gentle exercise e.g. stretches, walking
- * Reading
- * Lighting candles
- * Massage (self or professional)
- * Listening to music
- * Watching comfort TV



Managing Our Stress Beaker:



The stress beaker represents our capacity to hold a certain amount of stress. Stressful events in our lives are like drops of rain coming into the beaker. There is a limit to how much our beaker can hold before we “overflow”. Signs of overflow include feeling stressed, overwhelmed, tearful, anxious, irritable & short-tempered. Bereavements are a big stressor & we can constantly feel overwhelmed - with our stress beaker constantly overflowing.

Whilst we cannot always stop stress from coming in & filling up our stress beaker, we can put a tap on it to let some of the stress out. You can do this by building stress-releasing activities into your life. Make some time for yourself on a regular basis. You might like to use a diary to plan in some stress-releasing activities into your schedule.

REFLECTIONS: Note your stress busting activities below:

5-A-Day for Our Mental Health:

Engaging in a balance of activities each day can help to improve our mood and wellbeing. The 5-a-day rule for our mental health helps us to connect and engage in a variety of different types of activity that have been shown to be important for our emotional health and wellbeing.

The MAGIC 5:

5 ways to well-being: engaging in a small amount of each of these areas every day can help to boost our wellbeing & lift our mood. It also helps us to connect with things that are important to us.

Mindful: Taking time to pay attention to your feelings, thoughts & surroundings e.g. meditation exercises or bringing your attention to the present moment



Active: Being active, moving your body e.g. gentle exercise, a short walk, walking the dog, taking up a sport, gentle stretches, walking up & down the stairs

Generous: Doing something for other people or giving your time to others e.g. helping out friends & family, volunteering, supporting the community, helping a colleague at work, supporting others emotionally



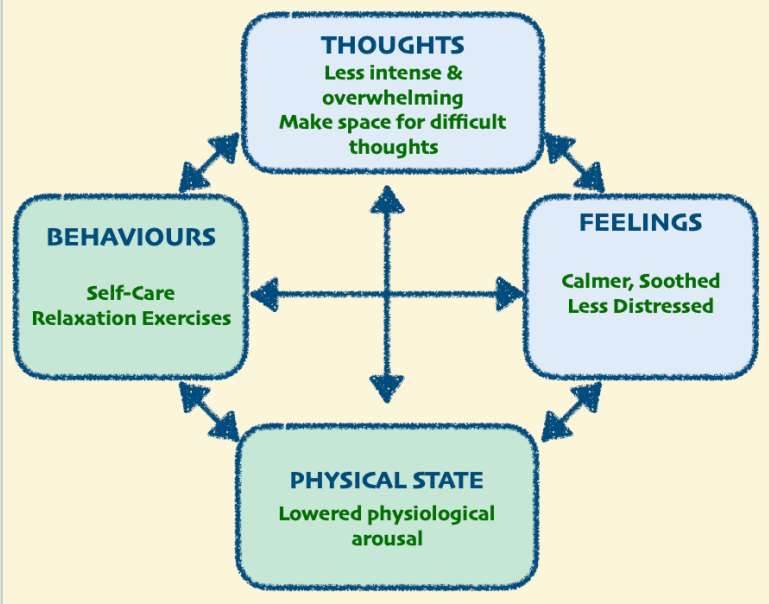
Interested: Being curiosity about the world around you e.g. learning something new, reading, studying or taking a course, engaging in a hobby, watching a film

Connected: Spending time or communicating with others e.g. texting or emailing others, speaking on the phone with friends, meeting up with family, friends & people within your community, date nights



REFLECTIONS: Use the space below to note helpful activities for you:

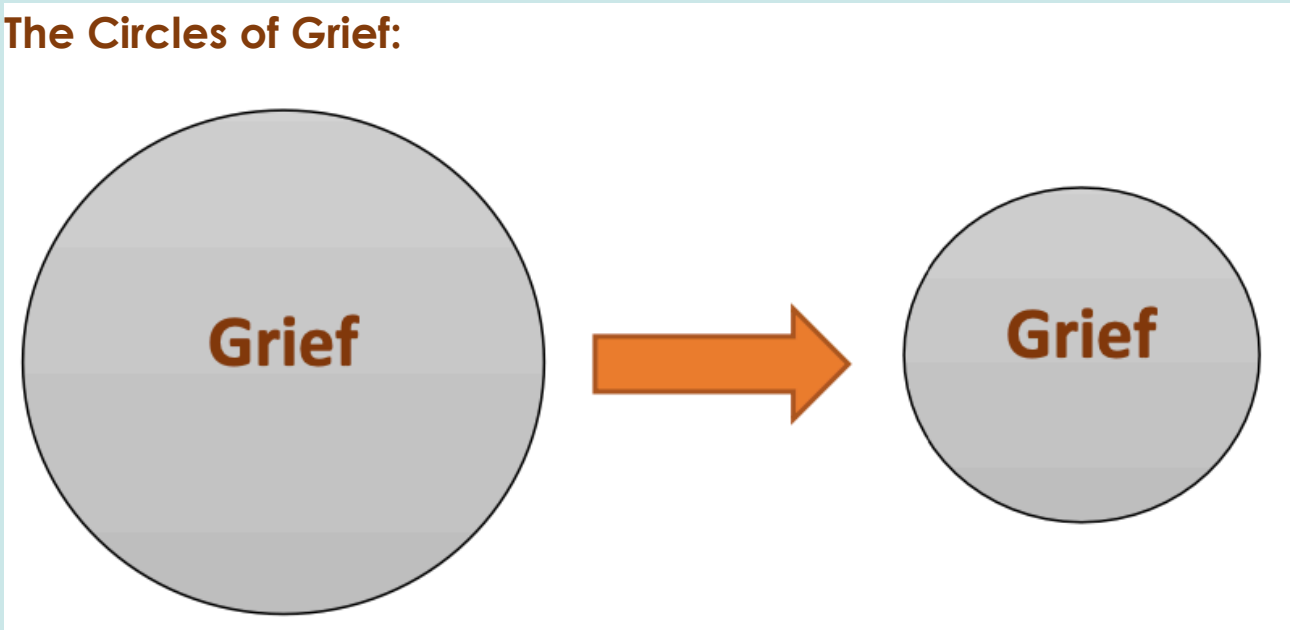
The impact of practicing self-care, engaging in relaxation and me-time activities can start to create more helpful cycles, reducing the intensity of the thoughts and lowering the emotional overwhelm and physiological arousal associated with the loss.



4. Reconnecting with Our Identity

When we lose a loved one our world can feel turned upside down. It can be an overwhelming time. As a result we can stop doing things that we once enjoyed. We may take time off from work, or spend less time with our friends & family. We may stop valued hobbies, sports or activities. However when we stop doing these things we can lose touch with who we are. We can lose our sense of identity, and the grief can further consume us, which further affects our mood & wellbeing.

The Circles of Grief:



We often assume that overtime our grief & sadness regarding the loss of our loved one will get smaller. However this is typically not the case. Our grief often remains with us, and we will always feel a level of sadness regarding the loss. What changes, over time, is that we learn to grow and evolve around the grief. We begin to reconnect with activities, people & the wider things that we value, enjoy & find fulfilling in life. This helps to lift our mood & start to move us through the grief cycle.



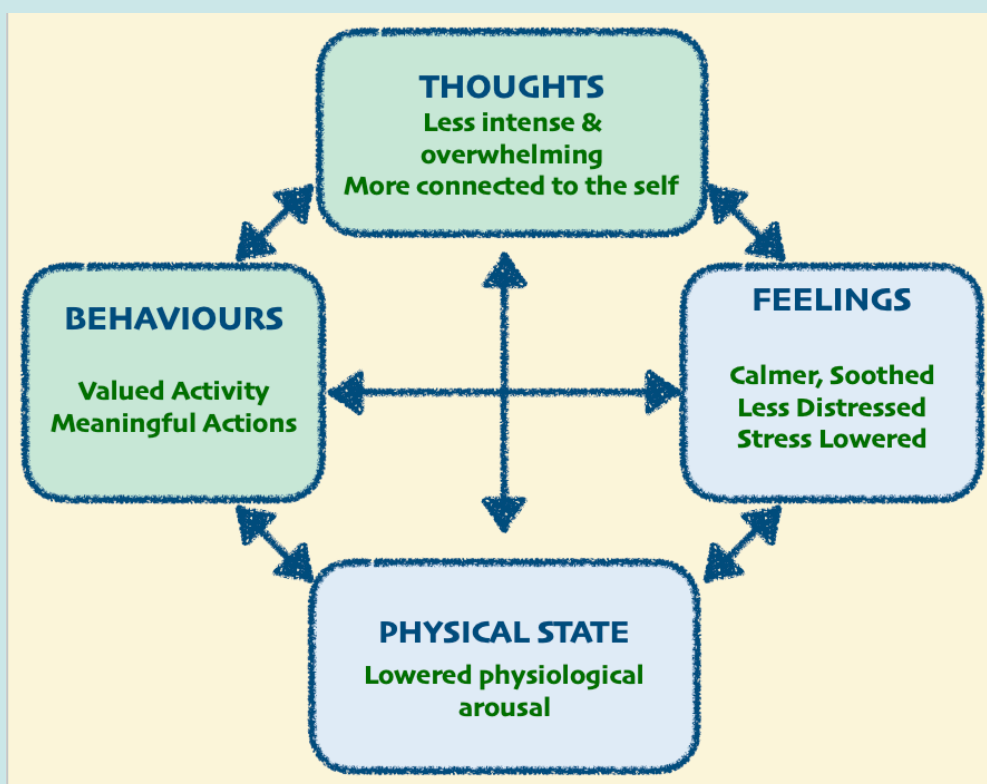
At this time, it is not uncommon to experience conflicting feelings about experiencing moments of joy, fun, laughter or enjoyment. Some people report that they feel disrespectful to their loved one or that it means that they do not care about or love them any longer. This is not true.

Remember, as humans, we have a rich internal world full of different thoughts and feelings. We can experience many different and contrasting thoughts and feelings at the same. For example we can be both happy about a holiday trip we are taking, whilst sad and missing our loved one at the same time or we can fall in love with another partner, whilst continuing to love and hold a place in our heart for our lost loved one.

Try to hold the above picture in your mind. This can help with challenging unhelpful thoughts about not being able to engage in valued or enjoyable activities following the loss of a loved one.

Remember that grief and a focus on living a fulfilling life can exist at the same time.

The impact of reconnecting with our identity and sense of self helps us to engage in valued and meaningful activities. This can help us to find a life that is fulfilling, alongside the sadness & grief that we will continue to feel beyond our loved ones passing.



5. Continuing Bonds

Finding ways to continue our relationship and bond with our loved one now that they have passed can help them to live on in our memory & in our lives. Although the person may not be physically presenting our lives, there are lots of ways that we can connect with the memory of that person and continue our bond with them.

This may include:

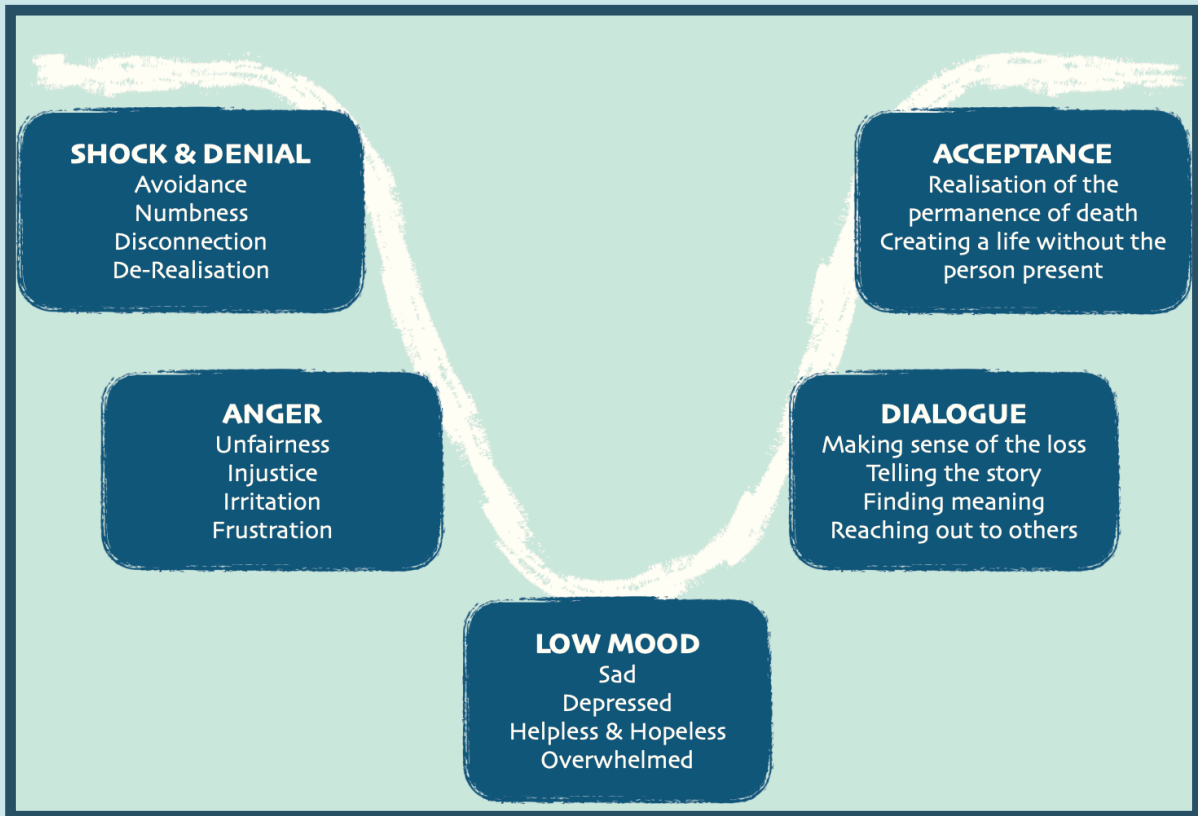
- ❖ Visiting a place of shared importance (e.g. a park, bench, walking place, resting place)
- ❖ Looking through photos & videos
- ❖ Connecting with a special object (e.g. a piece of their jewellery or clothing, an item of significance)
- ❖ Talking to the person, either at their resting place or imagining they are sat in an empty chair
- ❖ Writing to the person

Scheduling dedicated time to remember them or to engage in activities that help us to feel connected to our loved one can help us to keep them present in our lives & continue our relationship with them.



PART THREE: Reflections- Where Are You in Your Journey Now?

Now you have worked your way through this booklet it may be helpful to consider where you are in your grief journey now:



REFLECTIONS: What stage of the grief cycle are you in?

You may have noticed that you have progressed through the cycle to the next stage, or even completed the cycle & feel that you have reached acceptance. Or you may feel that you still have a little way to go in your grief journey. That's ok. The journey takes time- it is common to move backwards & forwards through the different stages. Keep drawing on your coping skills & with time you will find a way to grow around the grief.

If you feel you would benefit from further support then please do reach out to your GP, local Cruse organisation or grief counsellor.

Alternatively you can use the sheets overleaf to keep journaling and writing about your thoughts and feelings about your loved ones passing.

Expressive Writing

You can use the sheets overleaf to write or journal about any significant, difficult or distressing thoughts & feelings that you may be experiencing about your loved ones passing. Go in to as much detail as possible, including writing about the facts of the event, any thoughts surrounding the event and about your feelings around the event, as well as recording any new or modified thoughts and feelings that may arise as part of this process.

You can also use the space to relive pleasant, happy or cherished memories of your loved one.

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