

Someone significant  
has died:

## handling grief as a young person



**Treetops**  
Hospice

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**Part of the  
Little Gem  
series**

You are probably reading this leaflet because someone close to you has died, this is called being bereaved. A bereavement can leave you feeling lost, confused, and struggling to make sense of what has happened and how life has changed.

## Grief is unique to each of us



The range of thoughts, feelings, emotions and sensations we experience when someone close to us dies are normal, and is called grief.

Grief is unique to each of us, and it can take time for you to find a way to adapt to life without your loved one and learn to live alongside your grief.

We hope you find this leaflet useful in helping you navigate this difficult time.

## How do you feel?

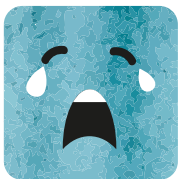
As a young person you may already feel there is a lot going on in your life; this could be things like friendship or family issues, school, exams, working out who you are and how to fit in. Experiencing a bereavement on top of this can leave you feeling overwhelmed and as if things are out of control.

It is not uncommon to feel anxious, angry, sad, confused, isolated, numb, regretful, down or scared to name but a few emotions. You may also feel sick, tired, headachy, tense or agitated.

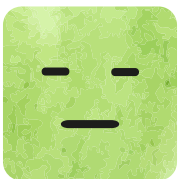
Common thoughts may include 'why did they die?', 'will I ever feel normal again?', or 'if only ...?'. A bereavement can challenge the views you previously held about the world, and you may find yourself questioning those things you felt were important or even asking 'what is the point to life?'. Some people may also blame themselves for the death, even if deep down they know the facts say otherwise.

As a result of all of this you may be less motivated to take care of yourself, become less interested in things you previously enjoyed and find it harder to go to school. Alternatively, you may feel guilty when doing something you enjoy, feeling it is 'not ok' to have fun.

## Your family



Each family member often experiences grief differently, and this can sometimes lead to disagreements within families. It can also happen that some people find it hard to talk about their grief, or they may be keeping their feelings to themselves, so they do not upset anyone else. It is not unusual for a grieving person to worry more about the safety and health of other family members than they did before.



Bereaved young people often report feeling like they have had to grow up too quickly, maybe you feel you have more responsibility now or as if you have missed out on parts of the childhood you might have had before your loved one died.



Sometimes other changes happen which also feel like losses such as friends who become more distant; changes in family circumstances or routines; or the absence of your loved one at important events.



Future developmental milestones or times of transition might re-ignite your grief and it can feel like you have been bereaved all over again.

# The River of Life

Some people describe bereavement using the image of a boat on a river. Before the death they were sailing happily along but when their loved one died, it felt like they had suddenly fallen over the edge of a waterfall. They liken their grief to being caught in a whirlpool at the bottom.

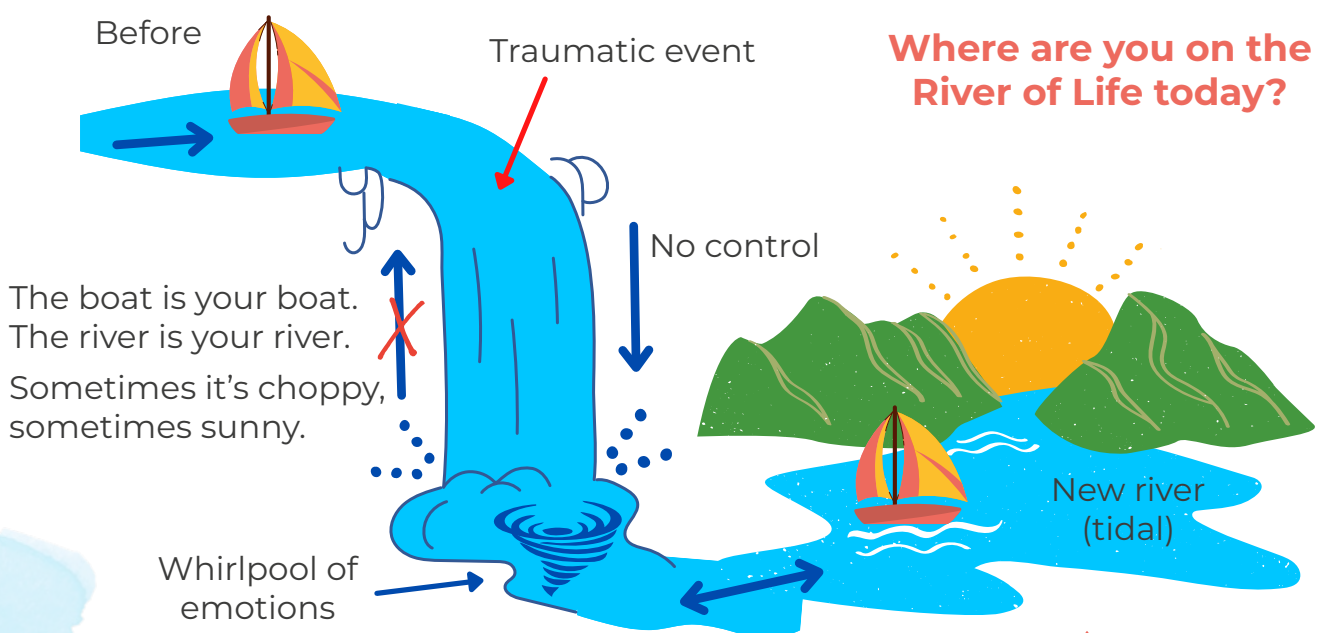
Here it can feel very turbulent, you may fear drowning or being dashed on the rocks. You cannot go back up the waterfall so eventually find your way out into a new, different river. This can feel like calmer waters, but the new river is tidal and sometimes you get washed back into the whirlpool unexpectedly.

It can feel very bleak in the whirlpool at times which may lead you to have feelings of wanting to deliberately harm yourself. You may have a strong desire to be with the person who has died or feel so overwhelmed that you can sometimes wish you were dead.

These are common experiences following the death of someone close and may sometimes be explained by the need for a break from the intensity of your feelings rather than because you want to be dead. It is possible to yearn to be with the person that has died and have a strong desire to live both at the same time, which can feel confusing. It can be helpful to share these feelings with someone you trust, you may find some helpful links in the resources section below.

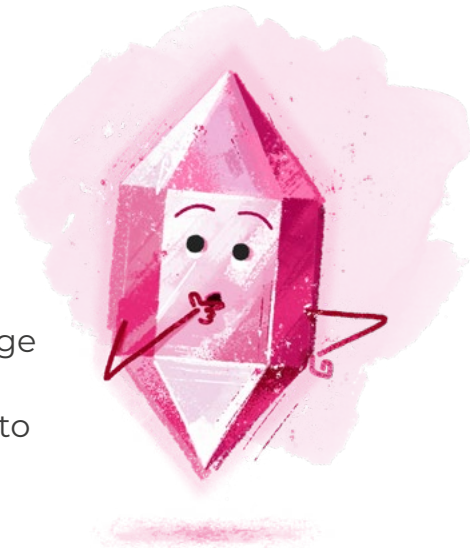
## The River of Life

Based on 'The Whirlpool of Grief' by Dr Richard Wilson



# Coping strategies

As you may be discovering, grief doesn't have a quick fix. Learning to live alongside your grief involves building a range of coping strategies that can help support you. It can be helpful to stick with many of the everyday things you used to do, even if you don't feel like doing them at the moment.



Going to bed on time, eating regularly and even going to school every day can be the first steps towards creating a supportive routine. All of these things may feel more challenging so be kind to yourself if things don't go to plan. Where possible, continue with any social activities and hobbies, even if you have to build them back up slowly. Alternatively, you may prefer to try something new.

## What might help at school



Whilst school might feel like the last place you want to be right now, keeping this routine going is often easier than trying to return at a later date. A change of environment can sometimes be helpful and being around friends can feel supportive and offer a distraction, even if you don't want to talk.

It can be challenging at times too, you may struggle with concentration, find it hard to get through the work, or fear becoming upset in front of others. These are normal worries and seeking out a trusted person to share these worries with can help you get through the day.

Schools often have special places you can go for a bit of time out if you need it, and particular staff that can help but starting with someone you already feel knows you well might be a first step.

It is likely your feelings about school may have changed, and you could feel quite different to those around you who are carrying on with life as before. You may have deadlines or exams coming up but notice that other things feel more important to you at the moment. If this happens, be kind to yourself, things often get easier as time goes on.



# What else might help

## Talk to someone

Family member, friend or professional

## Look after yourself

Eat sensibly, go to bed on time, be active, rest, stick to your routines, cuddle a pet

## Remember your loved one

Make a memory box or book, post an online tribute, plant a tree or flowers, dedicate a bench, write or draw a letter to them, share memories with family

## Express your emotions in positive ways

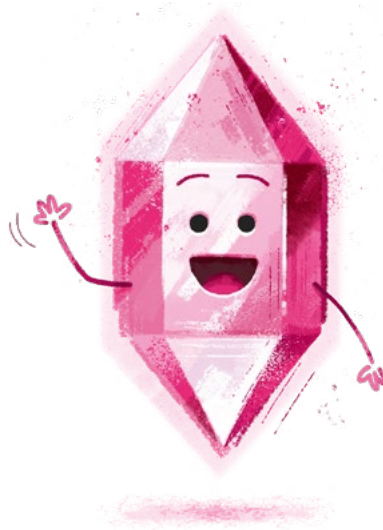
Do something active, be creative, love yourself, spend time alone or with others, talk about your feelings

## Sleep better

Get a routine, limit screen time, get help for nightmares

## Manage your feelings

Accept your feelings, express them in healthy ways, be tolerant of others' feelings, intense feelings can change



# Self-care kits

A self-care kit is a bag of useful items that help you calm yourself and distract you from difficult emotions such as those experienced when you are grieving. Over time it can help you to manage these strong feelings so that they feel less intense and overwhelming in the moment.

Typical items that go in a self-care kit might include stress balls, calming pictures, favourite music, pen and paper for colouring, writing or doodling, hard sweets or mints, or a favourite body spray.

## Creating a self-care kit:

- Choose a bag or container to hold your items that's small enough to take anywhere. Take it everywhere and you will always have it to hand.
- Think about the 5 senses of touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell to help you come up with ideas for items to put in your container. You will probably find you have one or two preferred senses.
- Practice using your kit to help you relax when you are not feeling anxious, stressed or overwhelmed as this will help you to use it when you are.

## Self-care kit ideas:



### Hearing

- Upbeat songs
- Calming music
- Rain sounds, bird song or sounds of nature
- White noise
- Voice note from a special person



### Sight

- Favourite photos
- Postcards from a favourite place
- Treasured objects
- Funny video clips



### Taste

- Boiled sweets
- Mints or chewing gum
- Tangy or sour sweets
- Liquorice



### Smell

- Scented lip balm
- Essential oil rollerball
- Scented gel pens
- Body, room or pillow spray



### Touch

- Stress ball
- Rough or spiky objects
- Smooth stone
- Slime or play dough
- Ribbon or felt

# Thinking about the future

Young people often say that finding a way to continue a relationship with their loved one has helped them adapt and even keep going at points when they have felt like giving up. This ongoing connection with your loved one might be expressed through a shared interest or career choice, upholding a value that was important to them, raising money in their name, wanting to make them proud or even something simple like wearing an item that used to belong to them. It really doesn't matter what you choose, the most important thing is that it is meaningful to you.



Experiencing a bereavement for the first time can be incredibly difficult but at some point, you may discover you are now sailing on those calmer waters. The river is different, but life feels less turbulent and chaotic than it did in the whirlpool. Over time, most people find a way to live that remembers their loved one, copes with the sad feelings and still has room to enjoy new experiences and have fun again.

## Resources

If you would like to talk to someone other than friends and family, Treetops offer counselling to young people and adults. You can visit our website for more details of both 1-1 counselling and the Mollitiam Project which involves group-based therapeutic activities: [treetops.org.uk](https://www.treetops.org.uk)

There are many sources of support which can be researched online, including:

Winston's Wish  
Grief Encounter

Childline  
Samaritans

Young Minds  
Kooth

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