

Remembrance
&
mourning



Booklet 5

Help in coping:

When someone dies in a road accident

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Australian Capital Territory Magistrates Court, Canberra, Australia

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In memory of Colin Rodgers.

To all those who have died on Canberra's roads.

For all those bereaved by a road accident in Canberra, and for those helping them.

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NOTE

The information in this booklet has been drawn from a number of sources. Some practices may vary within a religious community; many associated practices may have been omitted. No offence is intended to any religious community. The intention is to point out some of the common threads in religious practices, from many different cultural traditions, that can help people to grieve. It tries to do this in a way that acknowledges and affirms the wide variety of religious, spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices within the Canberra community.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF MOURNING

This booklet is especially intended for those who may feel a need to develop their own mourning rituals.

Most cultures in the world have developed rituals to help the bereaved. These rituals provide social support and structure for emotions to be expressed. Some of these practices may go back thousands of years.

Such supports and structures may sometimes be lacking in our society nowadays; our Western culture has lost many traditional practices relating to death and mourning. (For example, many people no longer expect that those attending the funeral will wear black, or that close family members will wear black clothes for a period of time. The custom of wearing a black arm band has virtually disappeared. Although some may be glad that such customs are no longer expected, these were effective ways of alerting others to the special, vulnerable state of the bereaved.)

Our modern society provides for funeral customs and expressions of condolence, and many bereaved people arrange for formal acknowledgment of the anniversary of the death. But there is little provision made for the extended period of mourning that continues long after the funeral.

Because of this 'gap' in our society, you may find it helpful to draw on some of the rituals practised by traditional religions, both Western and non-Western. Many of these are carried out by various communities in Australia today. You can borrow from these and invent your own rituals to help you express and channel your grief, and carry them out either on your own, in total privacy, or in the company of close family members or friends.

Here are some examples of practices taken from Buddhism, Greek Orthodox Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, with a few examples also from Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism and Sikhism, and Aboriginal Australian and Maori practices.

Some of these customs are also associated with taboos. In some societies close family members are sometimes not merely discouraged from doing certain activities or helped to do certain activities but are *not allowed* to do them (to touch food, for instance) because they are considered temporarily 'unclean'. An underlying taboo is perhaps universally associated with death, and a taboo or stigma (conscious or not) may be attached to a close association with a person who has died.

You may find at times that a similar sort of taboo or stigma is at work in some people's reactions to your circumstances, and in yourself. In our Western society, this may manifest itself in such ways as avoiding contact, keeping silent, denying grief.

Consciously or not, we all dread the prospect of our own death and that of someone we love. The prospect – and the reality – are 'off limits' to many of us; we simply don't want to think about it or know about it.

But a tragedy has happened and you have been thrown, unprepared, against the reality of death in your life. And yet somehow *you* must go on living.

At first the triggers, the reminders, the thoughts may be constant and the waves of intense grief overwhelming; you may be able to think of little else. And yet, some of the time at least, you will have to (and will be able to) temporarily 'put aside' your grief to do whatever tasks need to be done (in fact, you will probably be doing this from the very first, in all of the decisions you have had to make concerning the funeral, for example).

Later on, the pressures to 'get on with your life' become very strong. But your life has been changed by this tragedy; your intense grief over the loss you have experienced is still there, part of your new reality. It is futile to try and pretend it's not there or run away from it or 'get over it'; you must – and can – travel *through* it. Gradually, more and more of the time, you can have more control and choice, you can 'manage' your grief (although there will still be unexpected triggers that you may not be able to control). By accepting your grief, not denying it, you can allow it a place in your life, allow yourself time for it.

Allowing yourself the freedom to mourn (in a society that does not encourage it), developing your own mourning rituals, finding someone who will listen to you at least some of the time as you relive the experience and remember the person who died, seeking out support (possibly from new sources) may help you in surviving your loss and living with your grief.



RITUALS OF REMEMBRANCE

DEEP MOURNING

- seven days (no work, no cooking, etc.) (Hinduism)
 - seven days (family stays at home, visitors come; candle or lamp burns; prayers and readings – ‘shiva’) (Judaism)
 - ten days, followed by a ceremony (Sikhism).
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Traditional practices of deep mourning can provide a structure that allows the family to focus their emotions and thoughts entirely on the person who died, to give physical expression to their grief, protected from outside pressures, and to talk endlessly about the person who died.

In our society, bereavement leave from work is intended to allow for the funeral; however, the standard three days’ leave is hardly sufficient for deep mourning. You should not be expected (or expect yourself) to be ‘operational’ within so short a time. If you are employed, take as much leave as you can or feel that you need (both now and later on). Now is the time to allow yourself to weep (it’s the body’s natural way and allows certain chemicals to be released), wail, sob, scream, shout.

FREQUENT VISITS TO THE GRAVE AND/OR A CEREMONY OR SPECIAL PRAYERS

- during the first three days (Buddhism)
 - on the third, ninth and fortieth days, and then after three, six (or nine) and twelve months (Greek Orthodox)
 - on the third, seventh and fortieth days, and every week for the first 40 days (Islam)
 - prayers for one or two weeks; on the seventh day: collect the ashes and hold a ceremony; one month after the death: scatter the ashes over a river or lake and hold a ceremony (Hinduism)
 - mourning and ceremonies continue for two to six weeks (Aboriginal Australians)
 - person’s name included in prayers in a place of worship.
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These traditions can help the family to let the reality of the death sink in, through frequent visits to the cemetery, and to channel and express their grief through regular ceremonies and prayers or time spent focusing on the person who died. After cremation takes place, for example, a ceremony may be held when collecting the person’s ashes and when scattering (or interring) them.

MOURNING

- 30 days of gradual readjustment (Judaism)
 - 40 days, followed by a ceremony (Greek Orthodox)
 - seven weeks (49 days) (Buddhism)
 - 100 days of mourning, followed by a ceremony (Buddhism)
 - one year of grieving (healing, remembering, regular prayers) (Judaism).
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These traditions of mourning recognise that a period of readjustment is needed while a bereaved person is gradually able to return to everyday activities. The person is allowed time, and encouraged, to grieve and begin to heal. Setting aside special time for regular prayers or meditation or times of focusing on the person who died can help in grieving. A ceremony at the end of an extended time can help to mark a transition to an increased level of activity and a renewed realisation of the reality of the death.

The equivalent in our society might be periods of leave from work, or part-time duties. You may be experiencing difficulties in concentrating at work or on other tasks. This can be a period when you may begin to function well some of the time but not all of the time, and when you need time just to be with your emotions. Grief is exhausting, and you may experience great fatigue. Some people may be able to take some time off to go to a quiet place out of town, or simply to take walks or work quietly in their own garden.

After a sudden and unexpected death, healing may take longer than when there has been some expectation and preparation. Your body may need a prolonged period of relative peace and calm to recover from the shock, just as it may take a long time for your mind to fully take in the reality of the death. Support is available (> see *Contact information & resources (Booklet 8)*).

The period of waiting to know the results of the coroner's investigation into the death can be very hard.

You may find that your grieving takes longer because it is delayed or interrupted by not knowing the full circumstances of the death until after the coroner's inquest is finalised, or by a heavy load of paperwork and worry involved in insurance claims, compensation or criminal matters or settling an estate. You may be forced to put your emotions on hold, so to speak, for a time.

If this happens, it can be very helpful not to allow these distractions from your grief to become permanent but to allow yourself time to refocus your emotions so that you can fully work through your grief. You may feel the need to take leave from work at a later stage, too.

It may also be helpful to treat the end of the inquest (or the settlement of a claim or other matter) as the end of a stage, and to mark this with a 'time-off' period of emotional release and commemoration.

There is no time table for grieving. However, after a period of some weeks or months, some people may expect you to be re-adjusting faster than you are. (You may expect this of yourself, too.) Support from other people is likely to diminish, and you need to be prepared for this to happen. It may help if you can tell yourself that someone else can't really imagine what it is like for you unless they have experienced something very similar to what you have experienced, or have already had close contact with someone who has, or are exceptionally compassionate and understanding people. (Could you have imagined yourself what it would be like before it happened?) The level of knowledge and understanding in the community is fairly low about bereavement generally and about sudden, unexpected deaths and coronial procedures in particular. (This was probably the case for you, too, before the death.)

This can be a difficult time of transition. It may be the right time to reach out to new sources of support, such as a bereavement self-help group (where you can meet other people who have experienced a similar loss), or counselling, or books about bereavement (> see *Booklets 8 and 6*). Or perhaps it's the right time to begin to work on a scrapbook of memories. Or to keep a journal where you write down your thoughts and feelings and struggles (this might even be in the form of letters to the person who has died). It can be helpful simply to give yourself permission to grieve in your own way and your own time, and you may find some of the traditional practices discussed here can help you in this.

SPECIAL PLACE OR SHRINE

A place at home for silent prayers and remembering, with photos, candles, flowers, and incense or crucifix or statues (many Roman Catholics, many Asian religions).

A special place or shrine can be very helpful in providing a concrete focus for your thoughts and emotions. You can hold 'conversations' with the person who has died and pour your heart out. You can light candles every day or on special days or whenever you feel the need.

FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH

- erect headstone or plaque and unveil it in a service of remembrance (Judaism, Maoris)
 - commemorative service (Roman Catholicism, Greek Orthodox).
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Traditions commemorating the first anniversary of the person's death are still commonly practised in our society. Bereaved families frequently place a notice in the newspaper and take flowers to the grave or memorial site. Some people plant a tree.

It is very common to have a 'first anniversary reaction' about a year after the death and in the time leading up to it. The reality of the death may hit you again very hard and you may relive in your mind, in a very vivid way, the events connected with the death, almost as if they were happening again. This is a normal part of the attempts of your mind and emotions to deal with the reality of the death.

Again, give yourself permission to grieve in your own way. Writing down your feelings and talking to others can help, too. Preparing to commemorate the first anniversary of the death may help you to channel some of the anxiety and other emotions that you may be feeling.

YEARLY COMMEMORATION OF THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH

- special ceremony or offering in a place of worship (Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholicism, Buddhism)
 - candles lit at home and memorial prayer in a place of worship (Judaism)
 - person's name included in prayers in a place of worship (Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism).
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Yearly commemoration of the anniversary of the death is still commonly practised in our society. Bereaved family members also frequently place newspaper notices and take flowers to the grave or memorial site. This can be a special time to remember the person who died and to reflect on the changes in your own life.

YEARLY COMMEMORATION OF THE DEAD

The Christian church has traditionally celebrated All Saints' Day (November 1). All Souls' Day (November 2) is also celebrated by some branches of Christianity. These are special days for prayers in a place of worship and for tending the grave site and placing flowers.

In Canberra a yearly commemoration is held at Norwood Park on the first Sunday in November. Some funeral directors also hold an annual commemoration, often around Christmas time.

