

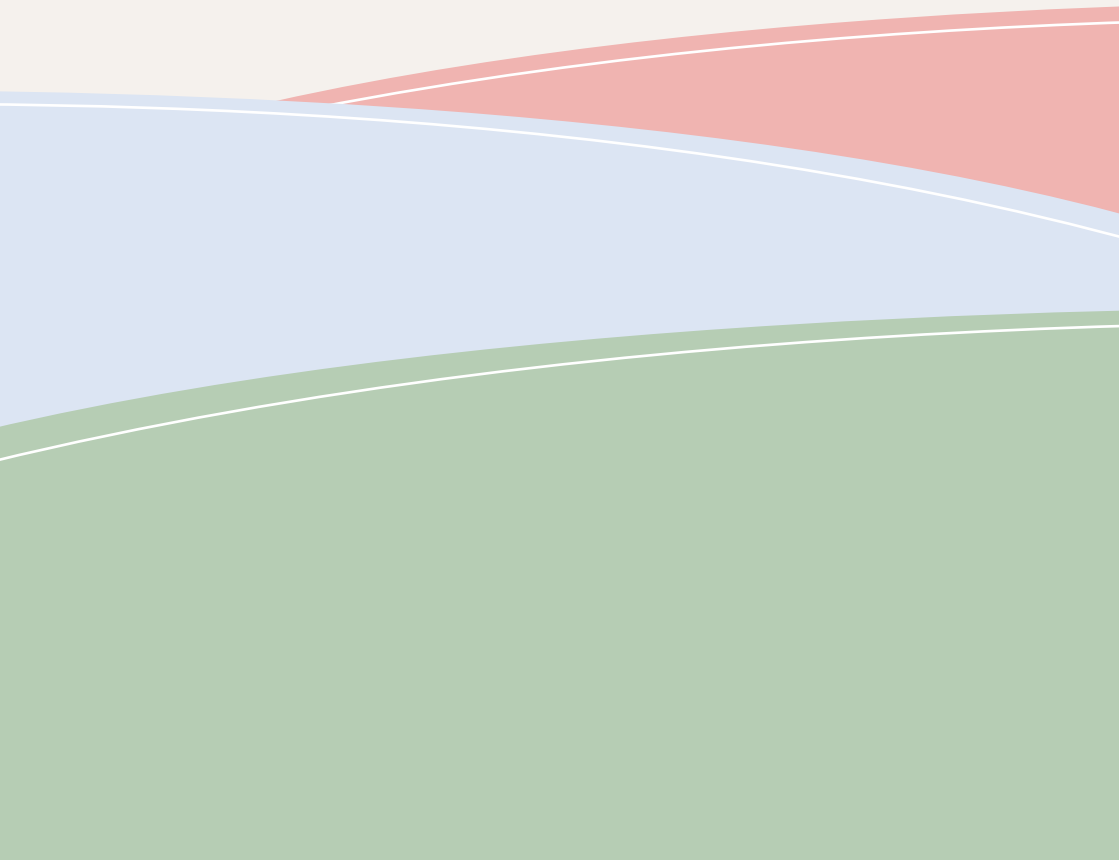


st michael's  
hospice

# Living with grief.

## Understanding bereavement.

Helping the community of Hastings and Rother  
live through bereavement.



When someone significant in your life dies, it can be incredibly devastating and overwhelming. You, your family and friends might have lots of questions about your loss.

It's important to remember that every person responds in different ways. Through this journey, you might instantly relate to and recognise some things, but others might not make sense to you.

The grief you experience following a death is not an illness, but a normal human response whilst you adapt to this change. All of your feelings are valid and understandable.

## Living with grief.

There is no right way to grieve. You'll likely experience many different emotions. Some of which can be confusing.

You might struggle to concentrate. Or you might feel some immediate relief.

There will be both good and bad days, ups and downs. All are normal responses.

## It doesn't feel real.

Even when you've known for some time that someone's going to die, there's still a sense of shock and disbelief when it happens.

You might feel numb or have trouble believing what's happened. This feeling of shock usually starts to fade in a few days or weeks. Although it can come back from time to time.

You might think you can still hear or see the person who's died. Or you might have vivid dreams or pictures of them in your mind, particularly of the last few days and weeks of their life.

Some of your dreams may be disturbing as your mind tries to take in what's happened.

All these feelings, while not being the same for everyone, are normal.



## I can't focus.

It can be really difficult to concentrate on anything at the moment. Even simple tasks can seem exhausting.

You might catch yourself staring into space or wondering what the point of anything is. When someone important dies, it's natural to question life and its meaning.

Some people have strong spiritual experience. Others find they've lost all faith. These reactions are part of grief.

With time and support, many people find their sense of meaning slowly reshapes in ways that feel steady again.

## I don't feel well.

Grief can be exhausting. You might feel unusually tired or low, yet still struggle to sleep.

Your appetite may change, and food might not feel enjoyable for a while.

It's important to look after yourself during this time. Try to eat and drink regularly to keep your energy up.

Bereavement can be a shock in many ways, and it's common to be more vulnerable to minor illnesses or infections. Please see your GP if you're worried about how you're feeling.

Grief is a very stressful experience, and these reactions are a normal part of adjusting to loss.

## Am I going mad?

Grief can cause intense, strong and often unfamiliar emotions. Some of which might be new to you.

It can feel like these emotions are taking over and you might find yourself behaving differently from usual. Though this can feel scary or overwhelming, it's important to remember that this is normal.

Many people try to avoid these emotions by keeping busy, moving house, or clearing out possessions. But this isn't the best time to make major life changes. What feels right now may not feel right in a few weeks or months.

If you need to make important decisions, talk them through with someone you trust, who can support you and help think through your options.

## Why me?

Feeling angry after a significant loss is very common. But it can also feel unsettling or confusing.

You might be angry at death itself, at being left alone, or even angry at the world.

You may find yourself feeling angry with people close to you, or with the professionals involved in the care of the person who died. Sometimes there are understandable reasons for this, and talking it through with someone you trust can help you make sense of what you're feeling and how to respond.

Anger is a normal part of grief, and for many people it softens over time.

## If only.

It's very natural to wish you could have done things differently. You might regret things you did or didn't say, or things you did or didn't do. Everyone has misunderstandings and disagreements with those close to them, it's a normal part of relationships. But when someone dies we lose the opportunity to change things with them, and that can sometimes lead to feelings of guilt.

You might also find yourself feeling guilty simply for being alive when they are not. This is a common reaction, but it's not true, and for most people it fades with time.

If these feelings continue or become overwhelming, talking them through with someone you trust can help you understand where the guilt is coming from.

## I don't think I'll ever be happy again.

It can be really hard to imagine yourself ever feeling better. It's true that life will never be exactly the same again. But the pain you feel now will change and soften over time. It can help to take things one day at a time and try not to think too far ahead.

Even in the midst of your sadness, you may find yourself laughing at something. Or feeling moments of joy and excitement. It doesn't mean you've forgotten or don't care about the person who died. It simply means you're beginning to adjust to your changed life.

Some people find it helpful to return to old interests and, in time, explore new ones. Feeling both sad and happy can be confusing and difficult to manage.

Special dates, like anniversaries, birthdays and Christmas can be particularly hard. So, take extra care of yourself around those times and reach out for support if you need it.

## **I always want to talk about them.**

It's very normal to want, or need, to talk about the person who has died and about their illness and death.

Often the most helpful thing family and friends can do is simply listen and share in the remembering. But for some people, listening can be difficult. It may stir up their own uncomfortable feelings, or they may feel unsure of what to say.

You may find that those around you are really supportive early on, but less so as time passes. It's important to remember that people don't always know what you're thinking or feeling unless you tell them.

If talking to close family or friends feels hard, it may be easier to speak with someone you trust outside of your immediate circle.

## **I can't face people yet.**

There can be a time in the early days of your grief when you feel as if the rest of the world is carrying on but you've been left behind.

This can be very lonely and can make it hard to relate to people or to everyday life.

For a while you may not want to see anyone or go out. Even small tasks, like shopping, feel exhausting.

Try not to worry if you feel this way, withdrawing for a short time is a normal response to loss.

As time passes, you may feel able to reach out to people again or accept an invitation to do something.

## **Sometimes I can't remember.**

You may find it hard to remember all the things you did together, the good times or the difficult ones. Especially when your mind's filled with the more recent upsetting pictures of illness and death.

Over time, those memories usually return more easily, including the small details like their smile, laugh, strengths and quirks.

If you notice gaps in your memory, try speaking with someone who can help fill them in with their own recollections.

You might also worry that if you're not thinking about the person constantly, they'll be forgotten. This is an understandable fear, but it's rarely true. So take as much time as you need.

## **No one understands how I feel. They tell me I should move on.**

People who tell you not to get so upset might mean well, but don't realise that your distress, which may continue for a very long time, is natural when someone close to you dies.

Try to speak to someone who will understand your need to be upset and grieve.

Many people find it helpful to talk to someone outside their circle of close family and friends. Someone with time to listen, who won't judge, and whose feelings you don't have to worry about.

Our Bereavement Service offers a safe, confidential space where you can explore your thoughts and feelings at your own pace.

## How can I help myself?

Although this may be one of the hardest experiences you'll ever face, there are things you can do to help yourself through the lows. These suggestions, from the experiences of others, may help:



### Remember other difficult times you've faced.

Think about how you managed them and what helped you cope. Focus on what gives you strength or a sense of purpose. While you had no control over the death, you can take small steps now to regain a sense of control in your own life.



### Cherish your memories of them.

Continuing to live your life doesn't mean you've forgotten them, it means you keep connected to people and places you love. Some people find memory boxes or time capsules helpful and comforting.



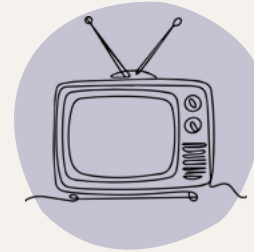
### Make sure you rest.

Grief uses a huge amount of emotional energy which can leave you feeling exhausted. It can affect you like a bad illness or operation, so be gentle with yourself. Your energy will return in time.



### Try to eat regularly.

If you've lost your appetite, it's easy to ignore your body's needs. Small, nourishing snacks can help. Eating regularly, even when you don't feel like it, will support your strength and wellbeing.



### Find small ways to distract yourself.

On days when you can't face company, gentle distractions can help. A good TV programme, a walk, cooking, reading, meeting a friend for coffee, or watching movie. Anything that gives your mind a little rest.



### Be creative.

Writing a journal, a letter, or an email can help organise your thoughts. Or maybe you could try something new like painting, drawing or gardening. Anything that helps you express your feelings or create something meaningful.



### Move your body.

If you feel physically tense, exercise can help you relax and lift your mood. Try a short walk, a swim, yoga, or the gym. Everyday activities like walking the dog, going to the shops, mowing the lawn or hoovering also help.



### Draw on your spirituality or faith.

This looks different for everyone. Some people pray, meditate, or attend services. For others it will mean being in nature, listening to music, or quiet reflection. Choose whatever brings you a different perspective of a bigger picture.



### Go at your own pace.

Avoid making big decisions in a hurry. This isn't the best time for major life changes, so give yourself time and space before committing to anything significant.

## What about children?

Children also grieve, but sometimes find it hard to understand or describe their feelings. Talking to children directly about how they're feeling, or explaining what emotions they might experience, can help them make sense of what's happening. With very young children, it can be easier to do this through play.

Children show their feelings in many different ways. If they're upset, but can't explain it in words, they may act younger than their age, struggle to sleep, or develop physical symptoms such as tummy aches.

They might become clingy, or worry that you might also die, even if they can't say this out loud.

Some children express their grief through behaviour; being rude, getting into fights, having outbursts or tantrums.

While others become very quiet, act very grown up, or be extremely well behaved. Quiet behaviour doesn't mean a child isn't feeling deeply.

When you're grieving yourself, it can be hard to see things from a child's perspective.

Children also understand the world more literally than adults. They rely on the adults around them to explain what's happened.

Many adults try to protect children by avoiding conversations about death or by hiding their own emotions. But this can leave children feeling confused, isolated or unsure of what's going on.

It's also very normal for children and young people to revisit and re-experience their grief as they grow up and develop.

## How can I help them?

### **Be honest, keep it simple and be direct.**

Explain clearly what happened, using words they'll understand.

Avoid long, confusing explanations, and don't be afraid to use words like death and died. Phrases like 'gone to sleep' or 'lost' can sometimes cause confusion or worry later on.

### **Encourage your child to express their feelings.**

Listen to what they're trying to say, through words, behaviour or play, and respond to their needs.

Try not to tell them how they should feel. Acknowledge all their emotions. They may cry for a while, or they may quickly return to playing or laughing. This can be hard to witness, but it's normal and often helpful for them.

Share your feelings with them, and allow them to comfort you too. This helps them feel included, and talk about their own difficult feelings.

### **Give them physical affection and support.**

Children experience things very literally, so lack of contact might feel like abandonment. At the same time, some children may need a little distance for a while.

Their repeated questions may feel tiring, but this is how they make sense of difficult situations. Be patient and take their questions seriously.

Children also need reassurance about myths and fears they may not be able to express. That death isn't contagious, that not everyone is going to die soon, and that nothing they said, thought or did caused the death.

We have some Bereavement First Aid resources, one of which is designed to help you support children following a bereavement. You can access them on our website [stmichaelshospice.com/bereavement-services](http://stmichaelshospice.com/bereavement-services)

### **Keep routines as consistent as possible.**

Familiar routines help children feel safe during a time of huge change. It can be tempting to give extra treats or give in to demands, but consistency and fairness will help them feel more secure.

### **Include children in funeral plans and decisions.**

Children are often excluded from what happens after a death. But being involved, even in small ways, can help them feel connected and supported. Prepare them for what to expect and explain things step by step. Talk about the person who has died; children often wait for adults to lead these conversations and may need help recalling memories.

Simple collections of personal items, photo albums, or a piece of clothing to cuddle can be very comforting. Creating a memory box together can also help, especially as you prepare for the funeral.

### **Work with their school.**

Children often use school as a distraction, so staff may not realise they're struggling. Letting teachers know what happened can help them offer support and understanding.

### **Look after yourself too.**

If you're finding it hard to cope, getting support for yourself can make it easier to support your child.

### **What support is there for me?**

In the weeks and months after a bereavement, you may need help and support from others. Grieving alone can be very hard, and many people find comfort in the support of close family and friends. You may also find it helpful to talk to someone outside your immediate circle.

If, as time goes on, you're finding it difficult to cope, please contact our Bereavement Service. It's available to anyone across Hastings and Rother who needs extra support during this difficult time.

## **How to access our services.**

Our Peer Support Groups don't require an assessment. Call **01424 456361** or visit our website by scanning the QR code below, to find out when these groups meet.

### **How can I be referred?**

Anyone living in Hastings and Rother, over the age of 18, can access support. Email us at **bereavement@stmichaelshospice.com** or call us on **01424 456361** to find out more.

We also take referrals from medical professionals, Hospice employees, mental health services and social services either by phone, letter or email (**stmichaelshosp.referrals@nhs.net**).

### **What happens next?**

After we get your referral, you'll be invited to meet with a qualified counsellor. It will be either in person or over the phone. It's an opportunity for you to talk about the impact of your loss, and for us to explain the support we can provide.

### **What happens after my assessment?**

If you want to have one-to-one or group therapeutic support, you'll be placed on our waiting list.

We aim to start your support as soon as possible, but this depends on, both your, and our availability. Please note, waiting times can vary.

Activity Groups, like the Walk and Talk group, will be available for you to join straight after your assessment. If you'd like to join a group, our Clinical Admin Team will support you with details.

For further resources to help you cope with loss, visit, **stmichaelshospice.com/bereavement-services** or scan the QR code below.



## A bit more about the Bereavement Support Team employees and volunteers.

Our Bereavement Support Service is supported by employed qualified counsellors, volunteer qualified counsellors, volunteer counsellors in training, and volunteer bereavement supporters. Our Bereavement Team follow a comprehensive training programme. All bereavement employees and volunteers receive regular supervision to maintain a high standard of service.

St Michael's Hospice is an Organisational Member of BACP (British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy).

## Cost of the Bereavement Service

There is no charge for any of the services we offer at the Hospice. The majority of our funding comes from generous donations, legacies and fundraising from our community. If you'd like to find out how you can support our services, visit [stmichaelshospice.com/donate](http://stmichaelshospice.com/donate) or call **01424 456396**.



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Registered charity no. 288462 LAB001