Age UK is the new force combining Age Concern and Help the Aged.

With almost 120 years of combined history to draw on, we are bringing together our talents, services and solutions to do more to enrich the lives of people in later life.

The Age UK family includes Age Cymru, Age NI and Age Scotland. There are also more than 160 local Age UKs.

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This guide was first published in March 2011 and updated in January 2012. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained in this guide is correct. However, things do change, so it is always a good idea to seek expert advice on your personal situation.

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AGE Concern and HELP THE AGED WE WILL
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Introduction

You are probably reading this guide because someone close to you has died recently. Although bereavement is a highly personal and often distressing event, many people go through a range of recognisable reactions and emotions when someone they are close to dies.

Sometimes people are shocked and upset by their changing and powerful emotions when they are bereaved. Realising that these feelings are quite normal may help. This guide gives you some idea about the range of experiences many people go through. If you want practical advice about the things that need to be done after a death, see our free guide When someone dies.

Throughout this guide you will find suggestions for organisations that can offer further information and advice about your options. Their contact details can be found in the ‘Useful organisations’ section (see pages 20–22). Contact details for organisations near you can usually be found in your local phone book. If you have difficulty finding them, your local Age UK should be able to help (see page 20).

As far as possible, the information given in this guide is applicable across the UK.

Key

This symbol indicates where information differs for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This symbol indicates who to contact for the next steps you need to take.
Grief

Grief knocks you off-balance emotionally, physically and mentally. If the death was expected, you might be telling yourself you should be able to cope, yet you can’t. Perhaps you think you should be over it, but you aren’t. Or you think you should feel all right because you have family and friends looking out for you – but you don’t, because no one can replace the person who has died.

When you’re bereaved, you have to cope with a world that can feel as if it’s fallen apart. In practical terms, your life may have changed dramatically. You may have less money, and have to eat, sleep and live alone for the first time, or be faced with household tasks that you haven’t done before. Losing a close family member or old friend can mean that you don’t have anyone to share childhood memories or family jokes with.

The biggest changes are probably the emotional ones. It can seem that everything you took for granted has gone and you’ve lost your sense of identity and self-worth. You may feel that you’ve lost almost everything and haven’t much left to fall back on or look forward to. And you may feel like this even if you have loving friends and family around you.

Grief can make you feel many different things. It’s important to remember that these feelings are not bad or wrong. They are simply how you feel.
Your feelings

At first you may be too shocked to feel anything, even if the death was expected. Many bereaved people say that, initially, they felt a sense of numbness and disbelief.

As you get over the shock and start to grasp the reality of what’s happened, you may go through some of the most powerful feelings you’ve ever had – perhaps high or excitable one minute, and in despair the next. You may feel that you can’t control your emotions or manage to carry out simple tasks such as making a phone call or a cup of tea. It may seem as though everything you knew has gone and nothing will ever make sense again.

You may feel that you don’t care whether you live or die, because you can’t imagine living without the person who died. Your loss may feel overwhelming and you’re likely to be reminded of it constantly.
Your thoughts

Many bereaved people find it hard to concentrate, and feel confused and forgetful. Your thoughts may constantly return to the person who died, with painful questions and fears running through your mind. Alongside this, you may have a sense of relief if they died at what seemed to be the right time for them.

As you think and talk more about the person and listen to what relatives and friends say, you’re likely to start building a fuller picture of them than you had before. As it grows, you’ll probably find that this picture becomes a part of your life and a source of comfort.

For help and support to deal with your bereavement, contact Cruse Bereavement Care (see page 21). You could also contact your local Age UK to see whether it offers a befriending service. This can provide one-to-one support for people who feel lonely or isolated.
Take extra care of yourself – try to eat well and get some rest even if you can’t sleep. Be kind to yourself – don’t try to do too much while you’re grieving.
Your body

Physical changes after a bereavement can include difficulty getting to sleep, vivid dreams and long periods of wakefulness. You may lose your appetite. Some people feel tense and short of breath, or edgy and restless. Others feel slow and lethargic.

You’re likely to feel exhausted, especially if you were caring for the person who died or had been through an anxious time before their death. Strong emotions and dealing with all the things that need to be done after a death can also make you tired and drained.

The stress of grief can make you more susceptible to colds or other infections, or make you more accident-prone. Take extra care of yourself – try to eat well and get some rest even if you can’t sleep. Take gentle exercise if you can. Be kind to yourself – don’t try to do too much while you’re grieving.

You might find it helpful to read our guides Healthy living and Healthy eating for tips on keeping yourself in good health.
Coping with the death

Getting used to a death is gradual and happens differently for everyone. It is often not as simple as it sounds, especially if the person who died was your partner or a childhood friend. Or you may have lost a younger relative, perhaps your son or daughter, or grandchild. When a young person dies, it reverses the natural order of life and death and can seem particularly unjust.

Allowing your feelings to come out can help you get used to your loss. Talking about the death and the person who died, dealing with the practicalities of your new situation, and trying to think of the present as well as the past can all help you take in the reality of the death and get through some of the anguish you feel. You will slowly begin to find a way of living without the person alongside you, but very much with you in your thoughts and memories.

Allowing your feelings to come out can help you get used to your loss.
If you’ve lost your husband or wife, the National Association of Widows (see page 22) has local branches in some areas that you can join for support, and a national confidential telephone service, which connects you to another bereaved person. If you’ve lost your partner and you are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual, you can call the London Friend LGBT Bereavement Helpline (see page 22).

The Compassionate Friends helps people who have lost a child or a grandchild (see page 21). They are a self-help organisation – parents who have been bereaved themselves offer friendship and support to other bereaved parents, grandparents and their families.

If your grandchild has lost a parent, you may want to contact Winston’s Wish. They provide support to bereaved children, young people and their families (see page 22).

If you were acting as a carer, see our guide Advice for carers, which has a section on what to do when the person you cared for dies.