Understanding Grief and Support

Understanding grief

Many people think grief only happens when someone dies. Grief is more complex than this.

Grief is a natural response to loss or major change. People may experience grief themselves, or support someone who is grieving. Grief is not limited to death alone.

Grief can affect the body, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and social life.

People may grieve after:

- The death of a person
- Changes in relationships
- Loss of a job
- Moving home
- Changes in identity
- The death of a pet
- Expectations that were not met

There is no right or wrong way to grieve.
There is no set time for grief.
Grief is different for every person.

Grief may be shaped by:

- The relationship with the person who died
- How the death happened
- Cultural or spiritual beliefs
- Past experiences of loss
- Support from family, friends, or community
- Personality and current life situation

What can I do to support someone?

For many people, having someone to talk to is very important. Grief can be hard to talk about. Simple actions can make a big difference.

Helpful ways to support

- Acknowledge the loss
- Be kind and be present
- Let the person know you are thinking of them
- Show support through actions, not only words

If culturally appropriate:

- Use the name of the person who died
- Ask gentle questions
- Share memories with care

Remember important dates

- Birthdays
- Anniversaries
- Cultural or religious days

Grief may continue after the first year. It can return at unexpected times. It is okay to check in without a specific reason.

Let their experience lead

- Focus on the grieving person, not yourself
- Avoid sharing your own story unless they ask
- Let them know their feelings matter
- Reassure them you are there to support them

If you are unsure what to say, honesty helps:

"I do not know what to say, but I am here with you."

Silence can increase loneliness. It is often better to say something simple than nothing at all.

COMMUNITY Care & Wellbeing

SMCT respectfully acknowledges the Bunurong and Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which our beautiful cemeteries and memorial parks are located. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

Avoid pressure or expectations

People grieve in different ways.

Do not expect:

- Grief to look a certain way
- Someone to "move on"
- Someone to be ready by a certain time

Allow the person to decide:

- When to return to work
- What help they accept
- How they want to grieve

Gentle support and regular contact are helpful.

Helping vs supporting

Both matter.

Supporting grief

- Long-term presence
- Listening and validating feelings
- Not trying to solve or change grief

Helping grief

- Practical support
- Preparing meals
- Childcare
- Running errands

What can I say?

Helpful things to say

- "I'm really sorry this has happened."
- "I am here to listen or to sit with you."
- "I will leave some food at your door."
- "When you are ready, we could go for a walk."
- "I can help with your dog this afternoon."
- "Would you like to share a memory?"
- "I will check in from time to time."

These statements help because they:

- Do not try to fix feelings
- Allow choice and control
- Reduce pressure to ask for help

Things to avoid saying

Even when well-meant, these statements may cause pain:

- Statements that begin with "At least..."
- "I know how you feel."
- "They wouldn't want you to be sad."
- "Everything happens for a reason."
- "You're not the only one."
- "It's time to move on."
- Religious or spiritual explanations.

For miscarriage or stillbirth:

- Avoid calling the baby "it". Use the baby's name or pronoun if known.

Grief should not be rushed, silenced, or corrected.

Grief in children

Children grieve too, but often differently from adults.

Age	How children may understand death
Up to 5 years	May think death is temporary or reversible
5–9 years	Understand death happens but may not see it as universal
9+ years	Begin to understand death is permanent and happens to everyone

Children may move between sadness and play.
This is normal and healthy.

Talking to children about grief

- Use clear, honest words
- Use "died" or "dead"
- Avoid phrases such as "gone to sleep"

Example: "Grandma has died. This means her body has stopped working, and we will not be able to see her again."

Additional guidance:

- Follow the child's pace
- Allow questions
- Offer choice about participation in rituals
- Explain what will happen before it occurs
- Help children name their feelings
- Reassure them that all feelings are okay

When adults show emotion, children often feel safer to express their own.

When to seek professional support?

Grief support can help at any time.

Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust partners with organisations offering:

- Counselling
- Peer support groups
- Resources and support services

Visit:
smct.org.au/grief-support

Disclaimer: *Developed by Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust (SMCT) with Grief Talks, as part of the Community Care and Wellbeing Program. This information is for education only. It does not replace advice from a GP or qualified mental health professional.*