

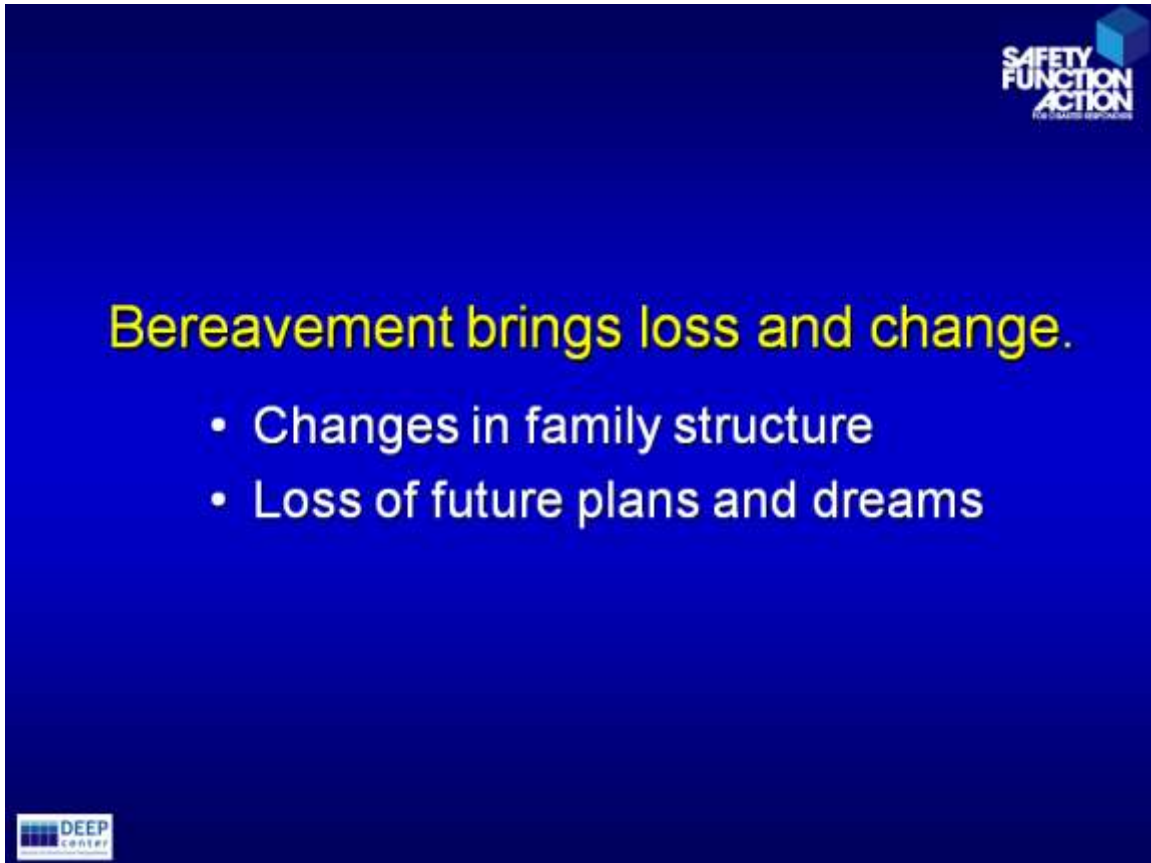
Special Topic: Bereavement



Bereavement is the experience of a loss of something an individual values. “It is a loss, particularly loss through death, but also the loss of, for example, a limb, partner, strength, health or independence. Grief can be defined as the psychological reactions to that loss and mourning is the particular form of grief which is experienced when the bereavement is the death of a personal intimate such as a spouse, family member or friend” (Charlton & Dolman, 1995). Throughout this special topic area we will focus primarily on bereavement following a loss through death.

Charlton, R. & Dolman, E. (1995). Bereavement: A Protocol for Primary Care. *British Journal of General Practice*.

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**Bereavement brings loss and change.**

- Changes in family structure
- Loss of future plans and dreams

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A death of a loved one can impact individuals in a variety of ways. Often we think of a death as the loss itself, however, there are other losses and changes that can be experienced after a death. If the person who has died is a family member, the family structure itself has been altered. For example, a dual headed household has now become a single headed household. Roles and expectations of each family member will change now that the family structure has been impacted. Many people will experience this particular change as a loss in and of itself.

With the loss of a loved one, there is also a change in what the bereaved individual can expect in the future. There is a loss of future plans that have either been made with the deceased or were unstated but expected. These expectations may in fact be hopes and dreams that the bereaved individual had for their loved one. For example, if a young child dies, you may find that parents not only mourn the loss of that child but also the hopes and plans they had for them. College, marriage, grandchildren, these unspoken dreams and plans are also lost. These changes and additional losses could impact the bereaved survivor and their reactions to the loss of their loved one.

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The slide features a dark blue background with the title "Grief Reactions" in large yellow font at the top center. In the top right corner, there is a logo for "SAFETY FUNCTION ACTION FOR SAFETY OPERATIONS" with a blue cube icon. The main content consists of two columns of bulleted text. The left column lists Physical, Emotional, and Cognitive reactions, while the right column lists Behavioral, Spiritual, and Social reactions. A small DEEP center logo is located in the bottom left corner of the slide.

## Grief Reactions

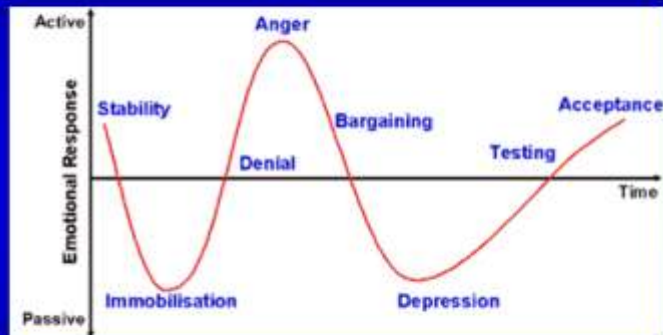
- **Physical**
  - Nausea
  - Headaches
  - Fatigue
- **Emotional**
  - Sadness
  - Anger
  - Guilt
- **Cognitive**
  - Forgetfulness
  - Disorganization
  - Preoccupation with event
- **Behavioral**
  - Crying
  - Angry outbursts
  - Refusal to eat
- **Spiritual**
  - Questioning beliefs
  - Increased reliance on beliefs
- **Social**
  - Isolation
  - Ignoring other loved ones
  - Clinginess to other loved ones

Reactions to grief can be physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, spiritual, and/or social. Listed above are a number of common grief reactions. People may experience any combination of these reactions following a loss. They may also experience different reactions at different points of their grieving process. For example, a father whose daughter died in a wild fire may at first be angry at his daughter for not leaving the house when the fire drew close. After several months, this same father may feel guilt for not being home when the fire happened. Both of these reactions are common and show that there is no “normal” way to grieve. Instead there are stages to the grieving process.

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## Kubler-Ross Grief Cycle

- **Shock stage:** Initial paralysis at hearing the bad news.
- **Denial stage:** Trying to avoid the inevitable.
- **Anger stage:** Frustrated outpouring of bottled-up emotion.
- **Bargaining stage:** Seeking in vain for a way out.
- **Depression stage:** Final realization of the inevitable.
- **Testing stage:** Seeking realistic solutions.
- **Acceptance stage:** Finally finding the way forward.



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Changing Minds.org  
[http://changingminds.org/disciplines/change\\_management/kubler\\_ross/kubler\\_ross.htm#gri](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/change_management/kubler_ross/kubler_ross.htm#gri)

The Kubler-Ross stages of grief are a commonly referenced cycle of phases that individuals move through following a loss. Although, as seen above, there is a series of stages through which individuals progress in the time following a loss, these are not set in stone. You may find survivors begin grieving in any one of these stages, they may pass through the stages in a different order than is listed, or they may skip steps altogether. This again indicates that grief reactions are unique and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. You may wish to share this point, that grieving is different for everyone, with survivors. This will help to validate and normalize their grief reactions.

Validation is recognizing, understanding, and acknowledging individuals experiences and communicating that understanding to the individual. When working with a survivor who is grieving, you will want to not only accept their unique reaction but also express that acceptance to the survivor. Normalization is a statement or process that explains to an individual that their reactions are common, understandable, and expectable. You will want to tell survivors that since grief effects each person differently, their reactions are not abnormal. Refrain from using the word normal, but instead let them know that their emotions and responses are common, expectable, and understandable.

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Think back to the father from **page 2** who had lost his daughter due to a wild fire. An example of a validating and normalizing statement you could use when working with him could be: "It seems you feel guilty for not being home when the fire occurred. I want you to know, it is very common for people who have lost a loved one to feel guilty. So your reaction is understandable."

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## Consoling Bereaved Survivors

- Be present, respectful, and empathic when talking to bereaved individuals.
- Listen actively and supportively.
- Don't advise or lecture.
- Let individuals know that continued help will be available to instill hope.



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The above listed information is provided to help guide you when serving bereaved survivors. As is noted in the Approach section of unit 3, presence, empathy, and respect are key to all interactions. Active listening and supportive communication are also major components to supporting individuals and to building rapport. You will find that bereaved individuals may possibly need increased levels of support. Through active listening you will increase your ability to find the type of support they need and either provide it or refer them to responders/agencies that can.

Part of active listening is remaining objective. Although, as a responder you are empathic, you do not want to judge, advise, or lecture the survivor you are working with. You may find that individuals experience grief reactions that you did not expect or that you do not personally agree with. Remembering that reactions are unique, will help you refrain from passing judgment on others' experiences. Avoiding lecturing or advise is also important, as the survivor needs support from you more than personal advise. However, you may be able to provide information instead of advise. One type of information that is helpful for bereaved individuals is the knowledge that there are resources available. Referring survivors to agencies that can provide grief specific support empowers them seek assistance and know that there is information and help available.

## Communicate Effectively

- Use open-ended questions.
- Reflect content and feeling.
  - Soft voice
  - Open gestures
  - Eye contact
  - Patience: don't rush



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While working with bereaved individuals, it is also important to be conscious of how you are communicating with them. As we mentioned previously, you will want to use active listening. To ensure you are fully understanding the survivor, it is beneficial to ask open-ended questions. This allows for the survivor to share as little or as much as they would like. It will also lower the potential for making inaccurate assumptions. In addition, you can communicate empathy, respect, and interest by using a few non-verbal tactics. These include, using a soft voice (speaking gently/comfortingly), using open gestures (i.e. not crossing your arms), using comforting eye contact (not staring, but showing you are involved in the conversation), and practicing patience (allowing the survivor to go at their own pace). Aside from these non-verbal tactics, many people want to know exactly what to say, the following two pages will offer some guidance along those lines.

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## Communicate Effectively cont.

- Don't say "I'm sorry" more than twice.
- Don't start sentences with, "At least..."
- Take the bereaved individual's lead.
- Don't ask too many questions.
- If in doubt, don't talk...LISTEN.



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Although it would be comforting to have a pre-created list of exactly what to say when working with a bereaved survivor, that is not possible. As stated previously, each individual will react differently and everyone will be in a unique situation. Instead, what we can do is think in general terms of what to say across situations.

First and foremost, in the United States, an "I'm sorry for your loss" is expected after someone has experienced the death of a loved one. This communicates empathy, sympathy, and connection to the survivor. However, saying "I'm sorry" more than twice becomes too much. The survivor may begin to feel uncomfortable and the attention is now placed on the person expressing sympathy. When working with someone after a loss, you want to maintain the focus on them and their needs. Also, try to avoid sentences that begin with "At least...". These types of sentences frequently do not end well. When using "at least" sentences, you are making an assumption that is not necessarily accurate. "At least you're alive." – The survivor may tell you they would give their life up instead of their loved one's in a heart beat. "At least they had a long life." – Perhaps the survivor is wishing for nothing more than one more hour with the deceased. Avoiding "at least" statements lowers the possibility of saying something that you may later regret.

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In general, follow the bereaved individual's lead. Let them start conversations about their grief or the deceased. Allow them the opportunity to discuss their reactions but also allow them the ability to not talk about their loss if they do not want. To do this, do not ask too many questions. Avoid prying and give the survivor space to speak instead. Finally, if you are in doubt about what to say, just listen. As was mentioned in the Approach section of unit 3, sometimes a physical presence is enough. It is not what you are saying but the support you are offering.

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## Refrain from Saying

- *I know just how you feel...*
- *It's a good thing it happened fast...*
- *You have to move on...*
- *It was his/her time to go...*
- *Let's talk about something else...*
- *Be grateful that you are alive...*



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Although it is difficult to have a pre-created list of things to say to a bereaved survivor, it is possible to know what **not** to say. You may note that the above list of what not to say is related to some of the information explored earlier in this special topic. Many of the statements are making assumptions about the survivor's experience. They also have a lecturing and advising tone. Refraining from statements based on assumptions, personal beliefs, and judgments will enable you to communicate effectively with grieving survivors.

*\*For more information regarding bereavement, grief, and grieving please see the resources below.*

Helpguide.org Coping with Grief and Grieving: [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/grief\\_loss.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/grief_loss.htm)

Hospice: <http://www.hospicenet.org/html/knowledge.html>

Changing Minds.org:

[http://www.changingminds.org/disciplines/change\\_management/kubler\\_ross/kubler\\_ross.htm](http://www.changingminds.org/disciplines/change_management/kubler_ross/kubler_ross.htm)