



JewishCare Chessed
Bereavement Service
Understanding your grief

*A luminous light remains where a
beautiful soul has passed*

Antoine Boveua

Life can change in an instant. Grief is a place that none of us know until we reach it and the emptiness that accompanies it.

JewishCare's Chessed Bereavement Support program provides free professional grief and bereavement counselling, together with trained volunteers who offer support for those in the Jewish community who have suffered a loss and are grieving.

When experiencing grief it is common to be faced with many feelings. The intensity of these feelings can leave one feeling overwhelmed and unable to manage everyday life. Sometimes it is helpful to talk to someone outside your normal circle of family and friends about the feelings and thoughts you are experiencing.

What is the purpose of bereavement counselling

Counselling is a non judgemental process. It helps us:

- understand, identify and express feelings
- identify associated losses
- access our own resources, strengths and coping mechanisms
- adjust to life without the person who has died
- maintain a continuing bond with the person who has died

We understand that people grieve in many different ways.

In designing this booklet, we hoped to be able to relate in some way to a variety of people. Part of this information may be relevant to you while some may not fit for you. This booklet contains information that we hope may be useful to you, both now and in the future.

JewishCare Chessed Bereavement Service

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*For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under
Heaven, a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant,
a time to uproot, a time to weep, a time to laugh,
a time to grieve, a time to dance.*

King Solomon Ecclesiastics

What is Grief

“Grief is the reaction people have to any loss in their lives. It includes a wide range of responses which vary with each person, the type of loss and its meaning to them, and their particular circumstances and experiences” (National Association for Loss and Grief)

When you experience the death of someone close, you may feel loss at a number of different levels. Including; loss of companionship, the future, sense of security, sense of self or hopes and dreams.

Grief can be quite overwhelming and may affect social relationships, thoughts, feelings, spiritual beliefs and a person’s health. You may find it hard to relate to relatives and friends in the same way as you did before the person died. Many people comment that they feel more vulnerable and experience loss of confidence and low self-esteem.

Our experiences of grief are unique and personal; there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Many bereaved people tell us that things start to feel worse before they feel better. There is also no time frame in which your grief must be ‘over’. There will be milestones that will remind us of aspects of the lost relationship. Some people may try to tell you what you should or shouldn’t be doing in your grieving. Try not to let others ‘police’ your grief. Only you know exactly how you feel and what you need.



The body's response to grief

The death of someone can physically impact on your body, emotions and thoughts.

Physical responses you may experience while grieving include:

- loss of appetite
- dry mouth
- unable to sleep
- gastro-intestinal upsets
- fatigue and lethargy
- loss of sexual drive

Thoughts and feelings you may experience include:

- sadness **“We’ll never get to retire like we planned...”**
- despair **“There’s nothing to look forward to...”**
- abandonment **“She wasn’t just my wife, she was my best friend...”**
- hopelessness **“I don’t know how to go on living without them...”**
- anger **“It’s not fair...he was such a good person...”**
- loneliness **“The night times are the worst...the house is so empty...”**
- guilt **“If only I had done more...”**
- irritability
- difficulty in concentrating
- you may have trouble thinking and making decisions
- confusion
- forgetfulness
- lower tolerance toward family and friends **“Everything seems so trivial”**
- having a sense that no one understands what you are going through
- the need to continue to have a relationship with the person who died **“I still talk to him when I am on my own...”**

Not everyone will experience all of these reactions; you may only experience a couple of them. At different times you may experience an emotion or physical reaction more intensely than at other times.



How long does grief last – A Jewish perspective

Grieving cannot be ordered or categorized, hurried or controlled, pushed away or ignored. Mourning may be postponed but it will not be denied.

Rabbi Maurice Lamm

The process of mourning is not easy, and the Jewish way provides a structure to let mourners feel their aloneness, separating them from the outside world and then gradually reinstating them back into society.

When people are in a state of grief, they physically feel a vacuum within them. This is the most painful state, because the essential drive of every person is the drive for fullness and completion.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

The different stages of mourning Aninut, Sitting Shiva and Shloshim allow us to come to grips with the loss. Eventually we realize that the empty hole is not nearly as deep or as vast as we initially felt.

Time does heal. But not because we are busy and the memories fade. With time comes objectivity. We realize that the person we are now is the result of the loved one we lost. The elements of our character, actions and values all result from this special soul and the experience of loss.

The body, being finite, does die. Jewish beliefs are that the soul, the essence of our loved one, is eternal. The connection between us lives on. This reality begins to slowly fill the vacuum, but not completely. We can never fully grasp the eternity of the soul. There will always be that space inside. We are human beings who are limited in our capacity to truly understand the ways of God and the afterlife.

Why is this not getting easier

Your initial reaction following the person's death may be shock. You may also experience feelings of numbness and disbelief, even if you felt you were prepared for their death. It is not uncommon to start feeling worse 4–6 weeks after the death or at the end of Shloshim (30 days), and as you try to go back to your usual routine and your body's protective devices start to wear off.

For some people the reality that the person is not coming back is very strong six to eight months after their death. They realise that "...this is as good as it is going to get...". This may leave you with deep feelings of sadness.

You may find that as it gets closer to the Yahrzeit (the anniversary of the death), you start to replay in your mind the events leading up to the time of death. You may start to intensely feel some of the reactions you had earlier.

It is important to note that everyone shows their grief in different ways. It may appear that family and friends are not sad or missing the person who died. But each person shows their grief in their own way.

During the months following the death you may experience "waves" of grief without warning. You may have good and bad days. Slowly time begins to lengthen the space between the pain and the feelings lessen in intensity or you become more familiar with the intensity. Memories may also become more bearable.

Grief is not about moving on and letting go of the person who died. It is about remembering the person in whichever way that feels right for you.

There are mechanisms through which spirituality contributes to down to earth healing, empowering mourners to reintegrate themselves into society after their loss, to regenerate their intactness, to reset their orientation, and to rediscover the meanings of their lives.

The Jewish process of mourning

The laws and rituals of mourning are intended to help the mourner focus on their own spirituality. We experience an overall feeling of physical discomfort as we totally focus on the soul of the deceased.

We de-emphasise our own physicality by not pampering our bodies, so what we are missing at this time is not the physical person who is gone but the essence of who that person was, which of course is their soul. "I am a soul, my loved one is a soul"

The 3 stages guide mourners gradually back into the world

- Aninut – (After death – before burial)
- Shiva – (7 days after the funeral)
- Shloshim – (Thirty days after the death)

Shiva

Shiva means seven, and is the name given to the period of strict mourning which the immediate family observes at home. Shiva starts on the first day of the burial. It is preferable that Shiva be held in the house where the deceased lived and died and where their memory is still fresh and "their spirit continues to dwell". The direct mourners; a parent, spouse, sibling and child are 'expected' to sit Shiva.

The Shiva period provides a very necessary 'time out' period to begin to adjust to new realities of one's life. In this time the mourners share memories and it is a time of personal reflection.

Some of the outward signs of mourning which symbolize the disregard for vanity and physical comfort include:

- Stocking feet or slippers not made of leather are worn
- Mourners sit on a low stool or cushion
- Mirrors are covered – to ignore our own physicality and vanity, to allow us to focus on just 'being a soul'.
- Bathing and or showering for pleasure is not permitted (only for cleanliness)

- No grooming – wearing make up, cutting nails/ hair
- No work
- Prayers take place in the mourners house so that the mourner does not have to leave the house

Shloshim

The week of Shiva is followed by a month of less intense mourning. Shloshim means thirty (this is counted from the date of the funeral and therefore extends for 23 days after the termination of shiva). It is customary to have a gathering to mark the end of Shloshim.

It is like the ‘gradual re-entry into the world’

Some restrictions are now lifted although the process of mourning is not over

- a mourner can leave the house, return to work
- Social engagements are limited
- Male mourners still do not shave

The end of the Shloshim marks the conclusion of the official mourning period for children, siblings and a spouse.

The one year period

The one year period is just for mourners of a parent.

This is based on the belief that our parents represent the essential relationship that defines who we are. We are psychologically and spiritually more connected and therefore the loss of this relationship has deep spiritual ramifications which may necessitate a longer period of adjustment.



Yahrtzeit

There are different customs to mark the anniversary of the death.

Traditionally one lights a Yahrtzeit candle at home the night before (Jewish day begins in the evening) the anniversary of a loved one's passing. It is also customary to give Tzedakah (charity) in memory of the person who has died. The belief is that this helps elevate the person's soul.

Unveiling of the tombstone

The custom is to erect the tombstone at some time within the year of the death, as no tombstone is placed at the time of death. The belief is that this is a way of giving honour to the body that housed the soul.

There is usually a small ceremony for the unveiling of the stone

- Family and friends are invited to the grave site where the mourners unveil the stone covered by a cloth
- Psalms are recited
- Thoughts and memories are shared about the deceased

Yizkor

Yizkor means a time to remember. A special prayer is said on behalf of family members who have died. This memorial prayer is recited in the synagogue on significant holidays including:

- Yom Kippur
- The last day of Passover
- The last day of Shavout
- The eighth day of Sukkot (Shmini Atzeret)


Some common experiences on the journey of grief

“Grief is like the weather, you don’t know how it will be on any one day. Some days may seem so overwhelming with sadness and distress, that you wonder how long this is going to last and if it will ever end. The pain never goes away completely, but it seems that slowly time begins to lengthen the space between the pain and the feelings lessen in intensity.”

A bereaved client

Grief is a very individual and unique experience. The following are a few common responses to grief. You may relate to some and not to others.

- It is often a popular belief that grief is something that you can ‘get over’ after a period of time. You may notice that family and friends may make comments (in an attempt to be helpful) – “snap out of it, it has been 4 months...” or “move on...”. Go at your own pace, there is no right way. It takes time to adjust to life without the person.
- Difficult days or times may be, after ending the restrictions of Shiva and or Shloshim, on the Yahrtzeit (anniversary of the death each year), each time Kaddish is recited, Yizkor and or at the time of the unveiling of the tombstone. On these days/times you are reminded of your loss, by the painful absence of the person who would usually be with you. This may set off the ‘intense’ pain again. Planning ahead for anniversaries, holidays and other special days may help you get through these tough times.
- Other things that will remind you of the person may be songs, significant places, movies, mail, “I was alright until last week when a movie we had seen together came on TV...”.
- Your grief utilises more energy than you can imagine. You may notice that you feel more drained and fatigued. Everything may seem to take more effort.

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- Some people find it helpful to visit the grave and place stones on the grave. Tzur (stone) represents the eternal devotion to upholding the memory of the person who has died, like the cornerstone of a building, placed to last for all time.
 - Death often leads to a reassessment of how you see life; searching for new meaning and questioning old ideas is normal.
 - Your spiritual beliefs may be a support to you or you may feel distanced from them. Cultural and religious rituals may or may not be helpful at this time.
 - Many people find rituals, either traditional or new ones, are helpful in dealing with loss and grief. For a ritual to be useful it needs to be meaningful to those who participate.
 - Often family and friends avoid talking about the person who has died in an attempt 'not to upset you'. You may want people to talk about the person. If this is the case, let them know you want to talk about them.
 - There can be good days and bad days. It is important to laugh or enjoy things again, this is not a sign that you are not sad or missing the person who has died.
 - The many changes you are experiencing can cause you to feel confused about your identity. Old feelings from the past, you thought were long resolved, may surface.
 - You will receive a lot of advice from family and friends about what you should be doing. Adopt what feels right for you and ignore the rest.

Looking after your health

What can I do to care for myself

- **Allow yourself to grieve in your own way and in your own time.**
- **Try not to isolate yourself.** Accept help and support from others and tell family and friends what you need and how they can help you.
- **Take time for yourself to do things that you enjoy or will help you express your grief.** For example, write a journal, express yourself through art, music.
- **Recognise that your grief will be unique.** Don't let anyone tell you what you should be doing. Listen to yourself.
- **Give yourself permission to grieve.** Experience and reflect on your emotions as they arise. It is OK to cry, feel angry or relieved.
- **You may want to talk to someone.** If this is the case it is important to identify family, friends or a counsellor who you can do this with. It needs to be with someone you can trust.
- **Don't let anyone minimise your loss.** Your understanding of what has been lost is what matters.
- **Be aware of advice givers.** Only adopt advice if it is right for you.
- **Just try to get through one day at a time.**
- **Initially, think small in terms of progress and goals.** It may be hard to see progress on a day to day basis, so evaluate your progress over a longer period of time.
- **If possible, avoid making major life changes or decisions for a while.** For example changing jobs or moving house.
- **Expect to have less energy.** Allow yourself to slow down and let go of some responsibilities for a time.
- **Take time out to pamper yourself.** Have a massage, go for a walk, read a book, listen to music.
- **Try not to neglect your physical wellbeing.** Do some gentle exercise, get plenty of rest and eat regularly.

- **Avoid overuse of drugs and alcohol as a temptation to ease your pain.** This will not take away the grief you are feeling, it may only postpone it.
- **Take care whilst driving – poor concentration can make it hazardous.**
- **Tell yourself everyday that you are going to make it, even though right now it might seem impossible.**



Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the bereaved clients whom we have learnt so much from.

Other acknowledgments

Calvary Bereavement Service

National Association for Loss and Grief

Sacred Heart Bereavement Service

Sydney South West Area Health Palliative Care Bereavement Service

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*For every age, at every stage
JewishCare is here for you*



The flame of a candle is the symbol of JewishCare's Chessed Bereavement Service. In Judaism the soul is often compared to the flame of a candle.

Each person brings light into the world and just as one can take from a flame to light more candles without diminishing the original flame, so too can a person give of themselves without ever being diminished.

People who have died and have touched our lives, their light goes on forever – as we the living, keep their flame alive.

FirstCall 1300 133 660

JewishCare relies on financial support from the community. To find out how you can help call Maureen Mendelowitz on 9302 8003

Designed by



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