



# When someone close to you dies

Practical information, guidance and support



We would like to offer our sincere sympathy to you, your family and friends who are affected by this sad loss. We acknowledge the pain and distress that people feel after the death of a loved one.

Death can happen at any time of life. Sometimes it is expected, because of illness or ageing. Sometimes it happens suddenly without any warning.

This booklet outlines practical information and guidance following death that is relevant for everyone and also procedures specific to certain circumstances. Information on grief and bereavement is included, which we trust will help you in the weeks and months ahead. You will find contact details of local bereavement support within this booklet should you need further guidance and help.



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## Practical information and guidance

### People who can help

When someone dies, there are many decisions and arrangements that need to be made and dealing with the practicalities can feel overwhelming. You might find it helpful to seek support from someone else like a family member or someone outside the family whom you trust.

If your loved one has died at home, there are a number of people who will be able to give you the help and information you need, for example your GP, district nurse, social/community worker, or church/faith representative.

If your loved one has died in hospital, you will be able to avail of various support services, including social workers and chaplains. The social work department can offer practical advice and support. Chaplains offer counsel, comfort and prayerful support to relatives as well as patients. These services are confidential, non-judgmental and available to everyone. Chaplains can also make contact with patients'/families' own faith communities if requested. Staff members will contact the social worker or chaplain before you leave, if required.

### Verifying and certifying death

When your loved one died, a GP, hospital doctor or trained nurse told you (verified) that death had occurred.

If the doctor knows the person's medical history, a medical certificate of cause of death can usually be given immediately, however, there may be a delay in receiving this due to:

- The death occurring at the weekend, overnight or on a bank holiday and the doctor on-call not knowing your loved one
- The doctor needing to seek guidance from the coroner



Deaths in certain circumstances are reportable to the coroner and a post mortem may be required. Go to 'If the coroner is involved' on page 9 for more information.

You need the medical certificate of cause of death to register the death. It is advisable to check the details on it to make sure the name, date of birth, address etc. are correct, as this prevents a delay at the registrar's office.

## Cremation

Please let medical staff or your funeral director know if you are planning to have a cremation. This requires a second doctor to confirm the cause of death and complete a cremation form. You will be advised of an additional cost for this. All cremations in Northern Ireland take place at Roselawn Crematorium in Belfast.

## Organ and tissue donation

Some people choose to join the donor register or carry an organ/tissue donor card. In the absence of this, the next of kin can consent to organs/tissue being donated when someone dies. If you know your loved one wished to donate their organs or tissue, or if this is something you wish to consider on their behalf, please inform the ward staff, GP or district nurse. The consent of next of kin is always required for organ/tissue donation. Sometimes a medical condition or cause/place of death will mean a person cannot be a donor.

In some hospital areas, for example, the Intensive Care Unit, you may be specifically approached about organ or tissue donation.

## Registering a death

When a medical certificate of cause of death has been issued, the death must be registered and a burial form collected at an office of the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. This has to happen within 5 working days and before the funeral takes place.



## **Where to register?**

Telephone numbers and contact details of local offices are listed in Yellow Pages under 'Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages'. You can register the death either at the office closest to your loved one's home or place of death.

## **Who can register?**

- Any relative who knows the required details
- A person present at the death
- A person taking care of funeral arrangements
- The executor or administrator of the estate
- A person living in or responsible for the dwelling where the death occurred
- A person finding the body, or a person taking charge of the body

## **What is needed to register?**

- The medical certificate of cause of death
- The full name (plus maiden surname and husband's full name in the case of a married woman or widow)
- Marital status
- Date and place of birth
- Date and place of death and usual address
- Occupation (and husband's occupation in the case of a married woman or widow)
- In the case of a child of married parents, the full name and occupation of the father. If the parents are not married the full name and occupation of the mother
- The name and address of the GP
- Details of any pension apart from a state pension that your loved one may have had.



Following registration the Registrar will give you:

- **GRO 21** – a form which permits burial or cremation
- **Form 36** – a form required by Social Security regarding benefits

There is no charge for registering a death but it is recommended that you buy a number of certified copies of the death certificate, as insurance companies, etc. will require one as proof of the death. See 'People/organisations to tell' on page 11.

## Funeral director

You will require the services of a funeral director. Most funeral directors are available 7 days a week and provide a 24 hour on-call service throughout the year. You may have already chosen a funeral director, if not, you will find details in Yellow Pages under 'Funeral Directors'.

Funeral directors will help you with many of the tasks you are required to carry out when someone dies. They will also help you to arrange the funeral.

They will transfer your loved one from the place of their death to the funeral home and then back home if that is your request. They will also help you if you need to buy a grave, make an insertion in a newspaper and organise flowers.

If your loved one died in hospital their body may initially be moved to the hospital mortuary. The funeral director will contact mortuary staff and arrange a time for release. This can only take place after the medical certificate of cause of death has been completed or the coroner has given permission.

## Arranging the funeral

If the death occurred at the weekend, over a bank holiday or if the coroner is involved, there may be a delay. Do not arrange the date and time of the funeral until you have either the medical certificate of cause of death or permission from the coroner.



You may have had a chance to talk with your loved one about their wishes for cremation or burial and the kind of service they would like. Alternatively their solicitor may have this information in a will or written separately.

Children and young people in the family who were close to the person may like to be involved in planning and taking part in the funeral.

If you have a minister, priest or faith representative they will help you plan and prepare for the funeral and provide you with emotional and spiritual support.

Funerals are costly and some people contribute to a payment plan to cover the cost of their funeral. If you are on certain benefits you might qualify for financial help. Ask your social worker or funeral director for more information.

### Consented (hospital) post mortem examinations

When the doctor gave you the medical certificate of cause of death, you may have been asked to consider a post mortem examination. This is not to discover the cause of death – that will already be stated on the certificate – but may help determine the nature and extent of the disease your loved one died from and increase medical knowledge about it.

The doctor will discuss what is entailed, answer any questions you may have and complete a consent form. You will also receive a booklet – ‘Information for relatives: Hospital Post Mortems’. The next of kin must give consent before this post mortem examination can take place. It will take place soon after the death and you will later be given an appointment to see the consultant or GP who will explain the findings to you.



## If the coroner is involved

There are occasions when, for legal reasons, a death needs to be referred to the coroner. For example when the death is sudden, when the cause is unknown or when it occurs immediately after surgery.

In some cases the coroner may decide to request a post mortem examination. This will take place soon after death. The family will be advised but their permission is not required. You will be contacted by a coroner's liaison officer or family liaison officer who will support you throughout the time of the coroner's involvement. You will be provided with the booklet 'Coroners Postmortem Examination: Information for Relatives'. Your GP will arrange an appointment to explain the findings to you.

Do not set the funeral date until you have permission from the coroner. You will be advised how to obtain the necessary form which permits burial or cremation.



## Property

When someone dies in a place other than their own home, for example a hospital or nursing home, there may be personal clothing and property to be collected. There may also be equipment to be returned from the family home.

### **Things to collect**

Collecting personal belongings can be a difficult experience. You may choose to take everything with you before you leave or to return at a later date.

Ward/care home staff will give you details of any valuables belonging to your loved one that are held securely by the Trust and, if applicable, the contact number of the cash office holding them.

Money is always returned as a cheque, usually through your solicitor. Each case is different and return may be delayed because of legal requirements, for example, where a will requires a grant of probate. The Trust will act as quickly as possible and your patience is appreciated.

### **Things to return**

The district nurse will arrange for the removal of equipment such as electric beds, hoists and patient records. He / she will also advise you about the safe return of unused medications to the local chemist.

Removal of other equipment such as wheelchairs, bathing and walking aids etc. can be arranged by contacting the occupational therapy department.



## People /organisations to tell

A large number of people and organisations need to be informed when someone dies. This list will help you determine the relevant people to notify – not all will apply in every case. A family member or close friend could help.

Early contact will help avoid the distress of letters, phone calls and supplies/equipment continuing in the weeks and months ahead:

- GP / district nurse / home help / day care centre
- Other health care professionals (eg. optician, dentist, podiatrist etc.)
- Provider of medical aids / equipment / supplies
- Any hospital the person was attending
- Solicitor – contact before the funeral to check if there is a will stating person's wishes about burial or cremation
- Social Security Agency – regarding attendance, disability living, incapacity, carer's, industrial injuries and maternity allowances
- Local social security office – regarding income support
- Department for Work and Pensions – regarding state retirement pension
- School / higher education institutions
- Employer / trade union / pension company
- Bank / building society / Post Office / Credit Union / credit card company / financial advisor
- Mortgage company / Housing Executive / landlord
- Insurance company (personal, household, vehicle – if you are 2nd named driver on the policy you will no longer be insured)
- Inland Revenue
- DVLNI
- Translink regarding travel pass / Passport Office
- Utilities – gas / electricity / telephone / mobile phone companies
- Season ticket issuers
- Catalogue companies



## Useful contacts

### Registrars' offices

The telephone numbers of local Registrars' offices are listed in Yellow Pages under 'Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages'.

### Funeral directors

Details of local funeral directors can be found in Yellow Pages.

### Benefits and pensions

All the telephone numbers of the benefits and pensions offices you will need are listed in The Phone Book in the Business Listings section under 'Government Offices - Benefits and Pensions'.

[www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk) is the official government website for Northern Ireland and has a very helpful section, 'Death and bereavement', which includes information on wills and probate; what to do after a death; and benefits, property and money. This bereavement section is within 'Government, citizens and rights'.

### Inland Revenue

The telephone numbers of local enquiry centres are listed in The Phone Book in the Business Listings section.

### Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland

County Hall  
Coleraine BT51 3HS  
Tel: 0845 402 4000



## Belfast Passport Office

Hampton House  
47-53 High Street  
Belfast BT1 2QS  
Tel: 0870 521 0410  
Tel: 0845 300 3939

## Citizens Advice Bureau

(for advice on bereavement benefits)  
Tel: (028) 9023 1120

Contact [www.the-bereavement-register.org.uk](http://www.the-bereavement-register.org.uk) to stop all unsolicited/junk mail.



## **Supporting yourself and others through bereavement**

Losing a loved one is one of the most difficult emotional experiences that we can have in life. The pain and grief that follows can seem, at times, totally overwhelming. Grief is often considered to be one feeling, but it includes a range of feelings and affects how we think and how we behave. Grief often continues long after the death that triggers it. Although extremely painful, grief is a normal response to any loss and is a way of helping us heal. While life may never be the same again, grief helps us readjust and cope with life without our loved one.

### What feelings and thoughts might you experience after the death of your loved one?

People who have experienced the death of someone close often describe experiencing some or all of the following feelings and thoughts:

- Shock, numbness or disbelief, especially immediately afterwards when people often report difficulty accepting or believing what has happened
- Anguish and despair, which can be accompanied by real pain and heartache as the reality of the loss sinks in
- Anger and irritability and the associated questioning of “Why did this have to happen?”
- Restlessness or agitation which are some of the typical physical side-effects of grief
- Longing or yearning for the person who has died. This normal part of grief is often associated with thinking that they have seen or heard the person who has died and while this can be an upsetting experience, it should not cause alarm
- Loneliness, even when surrounded by others
- Guilt, for things they may have/have not said or done. There can also be guilt that they are still alive when their loved one has died, or that they feel



relieved that a loved one has died after a long illness or suffering

- Worry or fear for what lies ahead
- Deep sadness as they miss the one they love.

## How might your behaviour change as a result?

How feelings are expressed varies from person to person, but it is very normal for feelings to change suddenly without warning. Some people liken this to being on 'an emotional rollercoaster'. Other people describe how their behaviour changes too. For example, people who are normally outgoing may start to avoid family and friends. The desire to talk constantly about the loved one may change to not being able to mention their name. Some people are comforted by being somewhere that they associate with their loved one, while others will avoid such places as they are too painful.

Grief affects not just our emotional wellbeing, but can have an impact on physical health as well. You may notice changes in your sleep and appetite. It is normal to feel tired, often simply because of the intense emotions and stress experienced. While this may increase your need for sleep, you may experience disrupted sleep and struggle to have an uninterrupted night's rest. Often people report a fear of sleeping because waking up is like being bereaved all over again. Your sleep should improve in time and of its own accord, but if it causes you concern, speak to your doctor or other health care professional who will be able to offer you further help and advice.

### **Other changes that you may notice include:**

- Fatigue or tiredness
- Being more prone to colds and minor illnesses
- Losing enthusiasm for your normal activities
- Forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating.



## How might you cope with bereavement?

Each person will cope in their own way and it is important to know that there is no 'correct' way to grieve: for example, members of the same family may respond to the same death in different ways. This can sometimes leave relationships within families tense and strained. People often want to know for how long they should grieve. This will differ from person to person and adjusting to bereavement may take time. Your feelings may also ebb and flow. You may find that you are initially kept busy with tasks such as arranging the funeral, meeting visitors or sorting out your loved one's legal and practical matters. After this, you may notice that you begin to feel worse instead of better. This is also very normal, as it may be that the full impact of the bereavement is only beginning to register.

Your experience and response to bereavement may be influenced by your culture, faith community or belief group. For example, you may believe in life after death and find religious or spiritual ceremonies comforting. Equally, you may have no religious beliefs and may want to mark the death in a very individual way, for example, having a remembrance gathering in a place that was special to the person who has died.

## What can help?

You may find that you can cope by yourself, however, you may need the support of others. This can come from your family and friends or from other sources such as your faith community or belief group. While you may appreciate some quiet time by yourself, it can be helpful to avoid withdrawing from other people. Keeping in contact can take many different forms, such as talking face to face or speaking on the telephone. Seeking practical and/or emotional support is not a sign of weakness.

It is important to make some time to care for yourself. Returning to normal activities can help you to re-establish your routine. It is important to eat regular



meals and take adequate rest so that your body can keep going. These steps will help you to feel more in control. Other activities such as taking some light exercise or doing something relaxing, such as taking a bath or listening to soothing music, may be beneficial.

**Some of the following suggestions may also help:**

- Allow yourself time to grieve. Remember that special times, such as anniversaries, birthdays or Christmas can intensify feelings of grief after a person has died. You may benefit from extra support at these times
- If you feel like crying, don't prevent yourself from doing so. This is a normal way to release your feelings and is not a sign of weakness
- It may be helpful not to rush into decisions about your loved one's possessions and personal effects
- It can be useful to delay big decisions, such as deciding to move house, so that you do not commit to a decision that you may not have had enough time or space to consider
- Try to avoid depending upon substances such as alcohol, medications or drugs
- As time passes, you will be reassured that any worries you had about forgetting your loved one are unfounded and that they will always be an important part of your life and memories. Keepsakes, such as photographs or other possessions, may be painful to look at early on, but can provide much comfort in the future
- If your feelings become unmanageable, do not wait to seek help. If you are in any doubt you should discuss this with your doctor or other healthcare professional.

## Supporting someone who is grieving

People frequently worry about saying the wrong thing to someone who has experienced a loss and can avoid mentioning the death or making any reference



to the person who has died. This often shows that a person is trying to be considerate, but it is important to remember that the bereaved person may be feeling lonely and your concern may help them to feel cared for. It can be helpful to pause before speaking and think about how the person who is grieving might hear what you are planning to say: for example, some people might find the phrase 'he has gone to a better place' more upsetting than comforting. It is often useful to remember that simply listening can be the most helpful thing to do.

**Other ways of being supportive may include:**

- Acknowledging the death, for example, by sending a card or letter, or by conveying your condolences in person
- Spending time with the person who is grieving, though remember to check with them if they need some time alone. The support that you may give can be emotional, for example, listening to any worries they may have or memories/stories of the person who has died, or practical, for example, you could offer to perform some tasks, such as cooking and serving a meal
- Understanding that if the person is expressing strong feelings, such as anger or irritability, they may not be intending to hurt your feelings
- Respecting that people may have particular cultural or religious beliefs and traditions that differ from those you hold
- Remembering significant events, such as birthdays or wedding anniversaries, may be comforting to the person who has been bereaved. Your thoughtfulness may be needed long after the funeral
- Following through with any offer of support, however, be aware that the support needed and your capacity to provide it, may change over time
- Being mindful about the impact that the bereavement may have had on you. Remember that it is okay to recognise and take care of your own needs.



## Local bereavement support

### **Cruse Bereavement Care**

Knockbracken Healthcare Park  
Belfast BT8 8BH  
T: (028) 9079 7975  
E: [northern.ireland@cruse.org.uk](mailto:northern.ireland@cruse.org.uk)  
W: [www.cruseni.org](http://www.cruseni.org)

A range of bereavement services including support and counselling from bereavement volunteers, support leaflets and telephone helpline.

Helpline: 0844 477 9400

Cruse Youth Services T: 0808 808 1677 and [www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk)

Remember our Child T: (028) 9079 7975 E: [rememberourchild@cruse.org.uk](mailto:rememberourchild@cruse.org.uk)

### **FAMILY TRAUMA CENTRE**

1 Wellington Park Belfast  
BT9 6DJ  
T: (028) 9020 4700

Specialist service for the psychological assessment and treatment of children and young people bereaved traumatically, and their families. Clinics provided regionally.

### **LIGHTHOUSE (Formerly PIPS Project)**

187 -189 Duncairn Gardens  
Belfast BT15 2GF  
T: (028) 9075 5070

E: [info@pipsproject.com](mailto:info@pipsproject.com)

Support for those affected by suicide and self harm.



## **LIFELINE**

T: 0808 808 8000

W: [www.lifelinehelpline.info](http://www.lifelinehelpline.info)

24/7 counselling helpline providing people in crisis or distress. Immediate access to free assessment, counselling and support. Lifeline also welcomes calls from friends and carers seeking help for loved ones and professionals making third party referrals.

## **SAMARITANS**

5 Wellesley Avenue,

Belfast BT9 6DG

T: (028) 9066 4422

E: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

W: [www.samaritansbelfast.org](http://www.samaritansbelfast.org)

24/7 confidential, non-judgmental, emotional support, for people who are experiencing feelings of distress, loneliness or despair.

## **WAVE**

5 Chichester Park South

Belfast BT15 5DW

T: (028) 9077 9922

E: [admin@wavebelfast.co.uk](mailto:admin@wavebelfast.co.uk)

W: [www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk](http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk)

Services such as befriending, psychotherapy/counselling, advice/welfare, training opportunities, complementary therapies for anyone traumatised through 'the troubles'.



## Belfast Health and Social Care Trust information

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has a bereavement page on the public website. It provides the information contained in this booklet and others in the series. The web address is: [www.belfasttrust.hscni.net](http://www.belfasttrust.hscni.net)

We, at Belfast Trust, are keen to understand and learn from the experiences of our patients and their relatives. If you wish to make a comment regarding any aspect of care received please forward your comments to:

Trust Bereavement Coordinator  
1st Floor, Bostock House  
Royal Group of Hospitals  
Grosvenor Road  
Belfast  
BT12 6BA

If you are unhappy about any aspect of care received and wish to make a complaint, please contact:

Complaints / patient liaison manager  
McKinney House  
Musgrave Park Hospital  
Stockmans Lane  
Belfast  
BT9 7JB



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## Notes

BT10-406

