

A guide for practitioners

# How to provide culturally sensitive bereavement support



Losing a loved one can be one of the most difficult things anyone has to deal with. The bereaved person might feel shocked, angry, sad, guilty or, in some cases, feel nothing at all. You can play a vital role in helping them come to terms with their loss and move forward.

As someone who provides bereavement support in a formal capacity, you will know there is no normal or 'right' way to grieve and how someone reacts often depends on who died and the nature of their death, as well as the bereaved person's age, experience and personality. Furthermore, there is no set time frame for when someone who is bereaved will start feeling better – it depends on the individual.

Culture, faith and religion can also have a significant impact on the grieving process. In difficult times, many people turn to their systems of belief to help make sense of what has happened. Certain traditions, rituals and ceremonies, such as funerals and wakes, allow them to pay their respects, take comfort and even find meaning in their loved one's death.

## Why is this guide necessary?

It has always been important to provide culturally sensitive bereavement support but, with COVID-19 having had a disproportionate impact on ethnic minority communities, the need is even greater now. Good Thinking, London's digital mental wellbeing service, has created this short guide to help you offer the best possible standard of care to people of all cultures, faiths and religions.

Compassion, empathy and respect always play an important role in the bereavement care you provide. But, when you're supporting someone from a culture, faith or religion that may not be your own, it is vital that you do not base your actions on your own assumptions and beliefs.

In line with one of the six ambitions of the [National Palliative and End of Life Care Partnership \(May 2021\)](#), the bereaved person should be viewed as an individual. That includes understanding what they believe in and hold dear, as well as taking into account their relationships with friends, family and wider community.

The distressing symptoms and rapid progression of COVID-19, social distancing, self-isolation and limits on end of life rituals have made the grief process more complicated than usual for many. Indeed, research by the [Universities of Leeds and Sheffield \(July 2021\)](#) found that grieving friends and relatives from ethnic minority backgrounds were "suffering from a lack of appropriate help to cope with losing a loved one, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic."

**We hope this guide helps you to provide more culturally sensitive support to those who have lost a loved one.**

## What will I find in this guide?

- 1 Prompts to help you find out more about the bereaved person's culture, faith or religion
- 2 Guidance on where you and your colleagues can go for support and training
- 3 Advice about directing a bereaved person to other support organisations
- 4 A checklist that focuses on grief through a culture lens
- 5 Useful resources (from Good Thinking and other organisations)

# Ask questions



**“The key to cross-cultural understanding of grief is to ask questions, and for these questions to inform the bereavement practitioner’s listening and observing... There may be divergences between your personal assumptions about grief, the assumptions of your culture, the assumptions of your client, and the assumptions of your client’s culture, so cross-cultural bereavement care needs to identify any such divergences.”**

**Dr Tony Walter BA PhD (2010)**

The grief process varies hugely between cultures, faiths and religions. The way people deal with death and mourning in Western cultures and Eastern cultures is very different, for example, and, there can even be differences within a single religion (e.g. Buddhism).

There might be certain ceremonies before someone dies, rules about cleansing the body after death and people of different ages and genders might be expected to mourn in different ways – in some cases, they might not even be allowed to talk about the deceased.

Whilst you can’t be expected to know every detail about the approach of every culture, faith or religion, the following actions should prove helpful:

- Talk to colleagues and friends from different cultural or religious backgrounds about the traditions and rituals that are important to them but remember that there can be differences within cultures and religions.
- Ask the bereaved person and their family how you can help them to address their cultural and spiritual needs and help with practicalities, such as registering the death – we suggest some conversation starters on the next page and there’s also a useful checklist at the end of this guide.
- Discuss the role of their family, friends, neighbours and other support networks, such as faith leaders and members of their faith community, in the grief process.

# Conversation starters

**“This is a safe space for you to talk openly about how you’re feeling and about the things you might not be able to talk about anywhere else.”**

**“Are there any practical issues you need support with?”**

(Note for practitioner: This might include providing guidance on registering the death or directing the bereaved person to financial advice)



**“Can you tell me a little about what will happen over the next few days/weeks (e.g rituals and ceremonies)?”**



**“Do you feel you’re getting enough support or would you like more?”**

**“Who are you getting support from at the moment (e.g. family, friends, neighbours, faith community)?”**

**“What kind of support are people providing (e.g. visiting, comforting, helping with funeral arrangements)?”**

**“Everyone grieves differently... but would you like to hear what many people go through?”**

# Get help

**“Each culture has its own rituals that influence the expression of grief. Carrying out these practices offers a sense of stability and security. Rituals can also help people who are dying and bring comfort to the loved ones who are preparing for their loss.”**

**Cancer.net (2018)**



If you regularly provide bereavement support to people from different cultures, faiths and religions, you don't have to do this alone. There are lots of individuals and organisations available to support you – from helping you to develop culturally competent skills to offering translation services for difficult conversations. Here are a few things you can do:

- Ask your employer if culturally sensitive bereavement training is available. For example, this [cultural competence e-learning package](#) developed by Health Education England and other key stakeholders is available for free to NHS clinicians.
- Call on faith leaders for advice and support – this could be someone the bereaved person knows (e.g. their priest, Imam or rabbi), a hospital chaplain or a local faith organisation.
- If English is not the first language of the bereaved person, try to work with an interpreter or a bi-lingual healthcare worker. If this is not possible, might a member of their family be able to help translate?
- Look after yourself too. You can only provide compassionate care when you are getting the support you need (e.g. through your manager or an employee wellbeing service).

# Signpost to support organisations

**“Although death is universal, the expression of grief varies greatly between different cultures and religions. It is important to acknowledge how this shapes an individual’s perception and experience of death. Cultural and religious beliefs help people cope with and express their grief, providing a sense of structure and routine at a chaotic and confusing time.”**

**Grief Encounter (2021)**



NICE recommends the following 3-tier approach to bereavement support:

- 1 In most cases, family and friends will provide much of the support the bereaved person needs, with information being supplied by health and social care professionals.
- 2 Where people need to reflect a little more on their loss, volunteer befrienders, faith organisations and self-help groups can provide non-professional support.
- 3 A minority of people will experience complicated grief and require specialist interventions (e.g. from counselling/therapy services or mental health services).

When directing people to support organisations, it’s important to remember the following:

- Ethnic minority groups are less likely to use mainstream bereavement services due to access issues or services not being culturally sensitive. Try to find a service that speaks to someone’s individual needs (e.g. BAMEStream, which offers COVID-19 bereavement support in over 20 different languages for people from BAME communities).
- Many bereavement support organisations are overwhelmed because of COVID-19. You’ll probably need to suggest online or telephone support rather than face-to-face for now and even these services might have long waiting lists.
- Whilst it is important to provide emotional support, some people might also need financial, legal and other practical support (e.g. if they need to transport a body to another country for burial).
- In communities where there is still stigma and shame around death (or a particular way of dying, such as by suicide), you might need to support the bereaved person through this.

# Checklist

You might find the checklist below useful when supporting someone who has lost a loved one. It is based on 'Grief and culture: a checklist' (Walter, T, 2010, Bereavement Care, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 5-9).

1	<b>What does the bereaved person value most and what obligations do they have?</b>	<p><b>Connectedness</b> (e.g. an obligation to care for the deceased and fulfil community responsibilities)</p> <p><b>Autonomy</b> (e.g. an obligation to work through their own grief and look after their own psychological and emotional needs)</p>
2	<b>What should the bereaved person do with the deceased?</b>	<p><b>Let go of them and leave them alone</b></p> <p><b>Continue to relate to them and have bonds with them</b> (e.g. cleanse them, pray for them)</p> <p><b>Make contact with them</b> (e.g. through a medium)</p> <p><b>Turn them into ancestors</b> (e.g. make offerings and sacrifices)</p>
3	<b>Who should be mourned?</b>	<p><b>The sacred dead who legitimise a state or religion</b> (e.g. military personnel)</p> <p><b>Family ancestors who legitimise seniority or patriarchy</b> (e.g. grandparents)</p> <p><b>Close family and friends who legitimise the importance of emotional attachment</b></p>

4	<b>What should the bereaved person do with their emotions?</b>	<p><b>Express their emotions</b> (e.g. cry, weep, wail – at home and/or in public)</p> <p><b>Contain their emotions</b> (i.e. grieve quietly and privately)</p>
5	<b>How are mourners treated?</b>	<p><b>Ritually excluded</b> (e.g. not permitted to attend social events while mourning, women not allowed to attend funeral)</p> <p><b>Socially excluded</b> (e.g. because people find it difficult to be alongside the bereaved person)</p> <p><b>Socially included</b></p> <p><b>Expected or allowed to take on new roles in the family</b></p>
6	<b>How is grief/loss/mourning regarded by the bereaved person's religion or other belief system?</b>	<p><b>Normalises loss</b> (i.e. ensures that the bereaved person knows that everyone goes through this)</p> <p><b>Pathologises loss</b> (i.e. treats it as abnormal)</p> <p><b>Provides a place for stories of mourning</b> (e.g. in day-to-day conversations or ongoing rituals)</p> <p><b>Supports mourners</b> (e.g. provides emotional support and other assistance)</p> <p><b>Oppresses mourners</b> (i.e. makes them feel uncomfortable or burdened)</p> <p><b>Marginalises mourners</b> (i.e. treats them as unimportant and powerless)</p>

# Resources

## Useful Good Thinking resources

[Apart of Me](#) (app for young people)

[Coping with grief and isolation during lockdown](#) (video)

[Five ways to good mental wellbeing](#) (article)

[How to cope with bereavement and grief](#) (advice for adults)

[How to cope with the death of a loved one](#) (advice for young people)

[Mental health and debt](#) (podcast)

[Why a micropause can help your mental health today](#) (podcast)

## Websites for bereavement support practitioners

[Cancer.net](#)

[Dying Matters](#)

[Grief Encounter](#)

[NHS](#)

[Sudden](#)

## Websites for people who have lost a loved one

### Advice and support

[Age UK](#)

[BAMEStream Bereavement Support](#)

[Cruse](#)

[Dying Matters](#)

[Grief Chat](#)

[The Good Grief Trust](#)

[NHS](#)

### Directories of bereavement services

[At a loss](#)

[UK Government](#) (find bereavement services from your council)

### Practical support

[Christians Against Poverty](#)

[Citizens Advice](#)

[Debt Free London](#)

[Step Change](#)

[UK Government](#) (what to do when someone dies)

### Advice and support about sudden bereavement

[Thrive LDN](#)

[Sudden](#)

### Advice and support for children

[Child Bereavement UK](#)

[Grief Encounter](#)



# About us

Good Thinking is supported by the NHS and London borough councils. We provide free, 24/7, digital support to Londoners seeking mental health advice and help regardless of where they are on their journey. We offer round-the-clock support and self-care options that are easy to access and simple to navigate.

# Our mission

We support individuals to look after their mental wellbeing in a way that works best for them. We encourage everyone to be proactive about their mental health and we provide tools and guidance to support this.

# London Bereavement Support Programme

This resource has been funded and supported by the Mayor of London under the remit of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Mission, which is being led by Thrive LDN. The mission aims to build a coalition of wellbeing champions and empower Londoners to act to improve their own and their communities' wellbeing. For more information visit [www.thriveldn.co.uk](http://www.thriveldn.co.uk).

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[good-thinking.uk](http://good-thinking.uk)