

Alcohol-related bereavement

For those who have lost a loved one



The death of someone you love is emotionally devastating. Losing a loved one through alcohol can add a sense of immense isolation to this experience. There is support available to help you find your way through the first few days, weeks or months of bereavement, and on your journey towards understanding and accepting what has happened.

The circumstances of the death

Your bereavement may have happened suddenly, or it may be the result of a long-term illness caused by alcohol use. This may mean you have witnessed your loved one deteriorating slowly. If this is the case, you may have felt a sense of loss before they actually passed away. Loss of hope of reconnecting with them may have meant that you grieved even though they were still alive.

Whatever the circumstances, you will most likely be experiencing emotions ranging from shock, anger and disbelief to confusion, helplessness and possibly guilt.

The stigma that often surrounds harmful drinking may make you reluctant to talk openly and can make those around you feel awkward or at a loss to know what to say or how to help. It can be reassuring to know that there are people and organisations that you can turn to who can give you support if you need it.

The first days and weeks

If you have recently lost a loved one to alcohol, you may be feeling numb and find it hard to believe what has happened. You may have to deal with doctors, coroners, social services or the police, and some people can find this intrusive and distressing. Others find that, whilst stressful, dealing with the practicalities helps them in some way to find answers.

In the early days after a bereavement, you may withdraw from friends and family and not want to talk. Loss of appetite, weakness, digestive upsets and sleeplessness are common after someone dies, as are uncontrollable crying and feelings of panic and desperation. You may feel confused and find it hard to concentrate – your thoughts are constantly with the person who has died.

“The problem I had was my own shame, I suppose, in admitting the cause of my son’s death.”



When to talk to your doctor

Bereavement can bring a number of reactions, including anxiety and depression. This can happen at any time and is a normal response to separation, but if it is severe or prolonged you should consult your GP.

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Accepting offers of support and allowing yourself to talk

Try to accept suitable offers of support – not just practical help in the early stages. Think of specific things that people can do when they ask. Having supportive people around you who you can rely on will also help you cope with the loneliness and isolation which often kicks in when your new day-to-day reality becomes apparent.

Talking can be a great healer. It can help you acknowledge your loss and eventually find a way of accepting it. Friends who are good listeners and are non-judgmental about the way in which the person died can be an invaluable source of support. You may find it sufficient to get support from your friends and family; however, some may find it beneficial to seek counselling.

Adjusting to your new reality

As you start to come to terms with your grief you will begin to find meaningful but realistic ways to remember the person you have lost. If those around you seem to be 'getting over' the loss sooner than you expect you may be frustrated. You may also feel guilt due to feeling that you are beginning to feel better. These are natural steps towards adjusting to your new reality.

If life has seemed hopeless and meaningless, you will probably slowly find that it starts to feel worth living again. Moving on doesn't mean that you are 'over' the loss of your loved one – the loss is now very much part of who you are today – but it does mean that you can see a future that is possible without them.

Offering others support and advice

Some people who have experienced drug or alcohol-related loss find that getting involved in campaigning about the impact of substance use or offering others support can be helpful. It may be a way of channelling unresolved feelings of guilt or anger; feelings that might appear to be negative can often be transformed into positive action.

“Friends didn't understand and I also felt awkward in talking with them about the bereavement.”

The grieving process

Grief is our response to loss and separation of all kinds. Grieving is a natural process and we go through it to adjust to a new world where someone significant has died but still lives on in memory, thoughts and feelings. There are four generally-accepted phases of grief:

- Dealing with the shock of bereavement and facing what has happened
- Experiencing the pain of grief and dealing with what the loss means to you
- Entering the world again and adjusting to your new reality
- Investing in the future

You may find that you experience them in a different order or that you fluctuate between the phases, sometimes minute-by-minute, day-by-day. How you feel is not a matter of choice but you can choose how you cope with your feelings. If you are having difficulty finding ways of coping, you may want to seek counselling.

Further support

- **Al-Anon** family groups provide support to anyone whose life is, or has been, affected by someone else's drinking. Visit al-anonuk.org.uk
- **Cruse Bereavement Care** offers support and advice for people who have recently lost a loved one. Call their helpline on **0808 808 1677** or email helpline@cruse.org.uk. Find out more at cruse.org.uk
- **BEAD** (Bereaved through Alcohol and Drugs) Project is a website produced by Adfam and Cruse drawing together stories and practical and emotional support information. Find out more at beadproject.org.uk
- The **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy** can help you to find counselling. Visit bacp.co.uk