

Grief after a sudden or unexpected bereavement



Ko te here o te aroha tē taea te wetewete
A loving bond cannot be undone

Living with a sudden loss

The death of someone you care about is one of life's most difficult experiences.

If you've lost a loved one, we'd like to acknowledge your loss and the many thoughts and feelings you may have. It may feel like your world has been turned upside down and that so much has changed.

This information is designed to support you, and your whānau, as you navigate the many emotions and reactions that come with grief and bereavement.

Grief is a natural response to the loss of a loved one.

It is important to look after yourself, and your loved ones. Take the time you need to grieve in your own way. It's also okay to ask for help and support if you need it.

Feelings of grief

For many bereaved people, the sudden, unexpected loss of a loved one can bring with it many strong and often unpredictable reactions.

These reactions aren't just emotional ones. Grief affects us physically, mentally and spiritually, and it can affect our relationships with others. In other words, grief affects us more than we often expect.

Some people may express they are feeling taimaha – an extreme heaviness weighing on their body, mind or spirit brought about by losing their loved one.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve, as everyone experiences loss differently.



Grief always takes the time it needs to take – and that is different for everyone.

Some common grief reactions

Knowing some common grief reactions others have experienced following a bereavement may be helpful. These include:

Physical

- Tearful, sobbing or unable to cry
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping more
- Changes in appetite
- Exhaustion, low-energy, tired
- Restless, high-energy
- Feeling ill or having pre-existing conditions worsen
- Having headaches, body aches
- More sensitive to touch, taste, sounds, smells and sights.

Emotional

- Intense sadness, distress
- Shock, disbelief, helplessness
- Feeling numb and disconnected
- Feelings of regret or guilt
- Anger or frustration, short-tempered
- Relief that the person you care about is no longer in pain.

Behavioural/Social

- Trouble coping with day-to-day things
- More sensitive about what people are saying
- Avoiding certain places or topics
- Wanting to be close to others all the time or seeking more time alone
- Loss of interest in things you usually enjoy
- Feeling irritable with others
- Using drugs or alcohol to cope.

Mental

- Forgetfulness, poor concentration, brain fog
- Difficulty making decisions or completing tasks
- Wanting more information, seeking answers
- Preoccupied by your loss or avoiding thinking about it.

Spiritual

- Questioning why this has happened, your spiritual or cultural beliefs
- Losing meaning or direction in your life
- Drawing closer to, or away from, beliefs and faith
- Looking for meaning.

All these kinds of reactions are normal.

Ask for support

Notice how you are feeling and any changes you are observing.

Gradually, these reactions will decrease in their intensity and become a little easier to manage.

If you need some extra support to cope, ask for it. Use your own circle of support which might include family, whānau, friends, neighbours, kaumātua or a faith leader, your GP, a local counsellor or support service, or a helpline.



Saying your goodbyes

If circumstances impacted on how you farewelled your loved one, whether in person or at their funeral, you may like to find your own ways to say goodbye. Take the time to remember and mourn for them in ways that feel right for you. Perhaps you could:

- Go to a place that holds special memories of your loved one and say your goodbyes there.
- Try to focus on what you can control. Find ways to connect with others to share memories and say your goodbyes and acknowledge your loved ones passing in a way that helps you.
- Look back over photos or videos, remind yourself of the times you shared, visit their resting place and say your goodbyes.
- Connect and share memories with others who were close to the person.
- Recognise and accept any feelings of anger or frustration that you are experiencing. These feelings are normal and understandable in such circumstances.

Be gentle with yourself as there is no “normal” time period for grief.



Your recovery

Recovering from the loss of a loved one takes time. The reactions you experience may be intense and could take a toll on you.

Over the next few days, weeks, months, and even years, you may experience all kinds of reactions to your loss, and that's okay. Keep in mind:

- There's no wrong or right way to grieve. Grieve in the way that feels best for you.
- Stay connected to friends, whānau and your community. It can often help to talk to trusted friends or whānau about how you are feeling.
- Naturally, it can take time to adjust to what's happened and to learn to live without your loved one. Take the time you need.
- It's okay to take a break and to try to distract yourself with other activities – doing this can help you adjust to loss while managing your everyday life. People often say they go in and out of their grief and that's very normal. Expect it to be an up and down time for a while.
- Try to keep to your daily routine. Doing familiar things can be comforting and can help you to feel in control of some things at a time when other things have been out of your control.
- Expect that milestones, holidays, and other reminders may trigger your memories and sadness. That's okay. Just give yourself some extra care at those times.
- If you, or a loved one, are finding it hard to cope, reach out to someone you trust, a counsellor, GP or other support service. You can also free call or text 1737 day or night to speak to a trained counsellor. To find other helplines or support services visit [mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines).

While grieving, self-care is essential.

Make the time to look after your wellbeing by getting plenty of sleep and rest, eating healthy food, staying connected to others and keeping active.

Visit our Fives Ways to Wellbeing for more tips: [mentalhealth.org.nz/five-ways-to-wellbeing](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/five-ways-to-wellbeing).

More information and support services

Grief counselling is available in-person, online and by phone. For more information, and to find a counsellor, you could ask whānau, friends or community contacts for recommended local counsellors or find one through these websites:

- The New Zealand Association of Counsellors – nzac.org.nz
- Talking Works – talkingworks.co.nz
- New Zealand Psychological Society – psychology.org.nz
- New Zealand College of Clinical Psychologists – nzccp.co.nz
- Skylight Trust – skylight.org.nz
- The Grief Centre (Auckland) – griefcentre.org.nz
- Grief Support Services (Tauranga) – griefsupport.org.nz
- Loss and Grief Centre (Southland) – lossandgriefcentre.com
- The Loss and Grief Kapiti Centre – lossandgriefkapiti.business.site

The following services offer free support 24/7 and can connect you with others who can help you:

- Free call or text **1737** anytime to talk to a trained counsellor
- **Lifeline** – **0800 543 354** or free text **4357 (HELP)**
- **Youthline** – **0800 376 633** or free text **234**
- **Samaritans** – **0800 726 666**

Other websites and helplines that offer guidance and support include:

- **Anxiety NZ** 0800 ANXIETY (269 4389) for specific questions around your or your loved ones' anxious feelings.
- **What's Up** – 0800 942 8787 (for 5–18 year olds). Phone counselling is available every day from 11am–11pm. Online chat is available from 11am–10:30pm.
- For whānau support visit yellowbrickroad.org.nz
- Call **Asian Family Services** helpline on 0800 862 342 (Mon–Fri 9am–8pm).
- Call **Vaka Tautua** – free national Pacific helpline on 0800 Ola lelei/0800 652 535 (Mon–Fri 8.30am–5pm).
- Contact your GP or your local healthcare provider.

For more resources or information visit mentalhealth.org.nz

For Covid-19 wellbeing tips visit mentalhealth.org.nz/covid-wellbeing-tips

