

COPING WITH THE FLU OUTBREAK

BEREAVEMENT

Written by Selena Elcombe, 2009

NHS

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INTRODUCTION

This leaflet is one of a series about pandemic flu and mental health. The leaflets contain information about how the flu outbreak might affect your mental health, how to look after yourself, what to do if a problem persists, and where to find further information.

Pandemic flu is a type of influenza that occurs every few decades and which spreads rapidly to affect most countries and regions around the world. Its key features are:

- It affects the whole world, not just one area.
- It can occur at any time rather than being concentrated in winter time.
- It may affect two or three times as many people as ordinary flu – perhaps around one quarter of the population.
- It is likely to be more severe, and hence causes more serious illnesses and deaths.
- It may affect any age group rather than being a threat mainly to the very old and the very young.

This leaflet is for people who have lost a friend or relative because of the flu outbreak, and for those who are helping someone else who is coping with a death. It tells you a little bit about what you might expect and includes some advice about things that might help you. Other leaflets cover depression, fatigue, recovering from trauma and coping with worries and uncertainty.

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How do people react when someone dies?

People react in very different ways when someone dies. There are no right or wrong ways to feel. Most people experience a whole range of different emotions at different times:

- You may feel shocked and numb, as if you can't really believe what has happened.
- You may feel overwhelmed by sadness and longing for the person who has died.
- You may feel guilty about things that happened when the person was well, or about things to do with their illness and death.
- You may feel angry with the world, yourself, or other people, and even with the person who had died. You may feel angry that they have left you to cope on your own.
- You may feel that there is no meaning to life and no reason to go on.
- You may become sad again about other losses that you have experienced in the past.
- You may have times when you feel perfectly fine and normal.

In the aftermath of a death it is common for emotions to change very quickly, like stormy weather. You may find that your mood swings rapidly and unpredictably between different feelings, and this itself can be quite confusing and frightening.

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After someone has died you might have the experience of seeing them or hearing their voice. This can be experienced as very disturbing or, for some people, comforting. It is a common experience of those who have been bereaved.

How do children react to a death?

Children can react to death quite differently to adults. How a child understands death and how they respond depends on how old they are:

- Younger children find it difficult to understand death and may expect the person who has died to come back, even if they have been told this is not the case. Older children may understand more but may still think of death in quite a literal way, believing the person who has died to be asleep or to have gone somewhere else.
- Like adults, children can be numb, angry, and guilty as well as sad. Children tend to think of everything in terms of themselves so they may feel responsible for the death.
- Children often change their behaviour after a death. They may become moody or quiet. They may have difficulty with sleeping and eating. They may become very naughty or very good. Sometimes they have a period where they behave like a much younger child, needing more help and comfort and becoming less independent.

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Coping with death during the flu outbreak

Being bereaved and coping with grief during the flu outbreak is different to coping in normal circumstances in important ways:

- You may be coping with bereavement (or looking after someone who has been bereaved) when you yourself are ill, or worried about becoming ill.
- You may be looking after other people who are ill and be worried that they will die.
- You might experience more than one death in your family or community.
- In addition to the emotional aspect, practical circumstances during the outbreak may be very different to normal circumstances, making things harder.
- Communication and transport can be difficult. It may be difficult to contact or meet friends and family before or after a death.
- The availability of support from doctors and other professionals may be less than at other times.
- Practical problems may have made it difficult to care for someone who was ill in an ideal way, and it may have been difficult to make arrangements after the death in the way you would have liked.

Your emotions may be more intense or more changeable because of these additional stresses. However, you may also feel more of a sense of community and empathy from

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other people, as many people will be going through the same experience.

Practical advice – ways to help yourself

The basics – sleep, eating, and exercise

After bereavement many people have difficulty sleeping and you may lose your appetite. Try to keep your sleeping and eating in a normal routine as much as possible. Getting overtired and run down will make it more difficult to manage your emotions. If your nights are disturbed, try to have a short nap during the day - but not too long - that may make it harder to sleep at night. Try to eat at regular times each day even if you don't feel very hungry. Some people find it helps to eat little and often. You may not feel very energetic but taking a little bit of exercise will do you good. Even a five minute walk can be refreshing and will help you regain your appetite and settle your sleep.

Coping with your emotions

Remember that emotions after a loss can be very strong and very changeable. It is not realistic to expect yourself to be calm and in control all of the time. It can be helpful to allow yourself just to feel what you are feeling at any one moment, rather than struggling to feel differently. Strong emotions tend to come in waves and pass by themselves so it is fine just to let them come and go.

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Many people find it helpful to talk about how they are feeling. You may feel that you want to go over the events associated with the death over and over again. During the flu outbreak other people will be experiencing losses and difficulties. Sharing your experiences can make you feel less burdened and less alone. Those with a religious faith may find this a source of comfort and support.

If you are caring for someone who has been bereaved, it is helpful to let that person talk about how they are feeling. You do not have to say things to make them feel better - just listening helps. Letting someone express their feelings and pain is a very powerful way of helping. You may also need to talk about your own experiences of grief and loss, now or in the past, as your own emotions can be triggered off by hearing someone else talk.

When someone dies, we can become very focused on their illness and death, so that we always think about them with sadness. Some people find it helpful to remind themselves of happier times. Photographs or mementos may help you to remember the good times. Happy memories can be very comforting at times of sadness. Keeping some special things from the person who has died can be comforting.

Helping children

Like adults, children are helped by routines at times of stress. Although it might be hard to do so, sticking to the normal rules about meals, bedtime, and behaviour can help

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children feel safe. Children will need more help and comfort and will be less independent for a while.

When talking about death with children, remember that their understanding depends on their age. You need to match your explanations to what they can understand. You may need to explain things over and over again. Remember that children may interpret things very literally.

It is helpful to create opportunities for children to talk about how they are feeling, rather than try to force a conversation. Children will sometimes express how they are feeling in their drawings and their play.

In the longer term

After bereavement people vary a lot in how long it takes them to feel more normal again. However, sometimes the normal emotions of bereavement can go on to develop into depression. If, after some time, you are still experiencing poor sleep and appetite, unchanging low mood, or feeling that life is not worth living, then it may be a good idea to see your doctor.

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KEY POINTS

- People can feel many different things in response to death. There are no right or wrong feelings.
- Most people experience different feelings at different times and these can change quite suddenly.
- Allow yourself to experience and express your emotions.
- Children do not understand death in the same way as adults, and they respond differently. They may show their grief in their behaviour rather than in words.
- Both adults and children will benefit from keeping to healthy routines of sleep, eating, and exercise as much as possible.
- It can take a long time to feel more normal after bereavement. Consult your doctor if you feel that you are becoming very depressed.

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Further reading

- *Manage your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide*, 2nd edition (2007) by Gillian Butler & Tony Hope, published by Oxford University Press.
- *Overcoming Grief: A Self-help Guide Using Cognitive-Behavioural Techniques* (2008) by Sue Morris, published by Constable Robinson.
- *If There's Anything I Can Do: How to Help Someone Who Has Been Bereaved* (2007) by Caroline Doughty & Roni Jay, published by White Ladder Press.

Internet & other sources of information

About bereavement:

- www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk – CRUSE is a charity specialising in bereavement care. Their website has a lot of useful information.
- www.seesaw.org.uk – SeeSaw is a charity dedicated to providing grief and bereavement counselling for children when a parent or sibling has died.
- www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk – the NHS Direct website has information about bereavement and links to other topics that may be of interest.

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About the flu:

- Go to www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu and/or www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Call NHS Direct on 0845 4647
- Pick up leaflets from doctors' surgeries and other places.

Other leaflets in this series:

- Depression (PB 247.09)
- Fatigue (PB 248.09)
- Recovering from Trauma (PB 249.09)
- Worry and Uncertainty (PB 250.09)

This and the other leaflets in this series can be found on the Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust's website:
www.oxfordshirepct.nhs.uk

If you need the information in another language or format, please contact us:

Nëse ky informacion ju nevojitet në një gjuhë apo format tjetër, ju lutem na kontaktoni:

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Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust,
Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)
Freephone: 0800 052 6088
www.oxfordshirepct.nhs.uk