

Working with Bereavement

Bereavement is widely recognised as an inevitable, but deeply distressing part of life. Individuals can experience a wide range of reactions to a bereavement, and their support needs can vary just as much. This is particularly true in the early stages of grief where a spectrum of emotions can be experienced in quick succession and there are often practical processes unfolding alongside the grief

During these early stages of grief, we encourage individuals to use the helpline in the first instance to talk about their experience of the grief process and any associated thoughts and feelings.

Our counsellors can help an individual by normalising the often-confusing emotions they are experiencing and provide psychoeducation to help in understanding the grieving process. The combination of normalisation and psychoeducation can help individuals to engage with the grief process and begin the journey of processing their loss and adapting to ongoing life. The counsellor will work collaboratively with an individual; helping them to understand their reactions in a compassionate setting and guiding them to resources that might help during such a difficult time.

When should an individual access structured counselling?

Understanding when counselling is appropriate for bereavement is challenging, with research¹ suggesting that most individuals effectively manage their symptoms of grief without professional support, and furthermore, that counselling does not produce statistically significant improvements for individuals in the early stages of a grief process², compared to working through the grief themselves.

Most individuals will find their own resources for dealing with loss, including existing support networks - there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that when a counsellor becomes involved during the early stages of grief, friends and family tend to withdraw emotional support, as they feel that the individual is being adequately supported in therapy - this can negatively impact the grieving process.

Typically, bereavement organisations recommend accessing counselling after around 3-6 months if symptoms are not significantly improving, however, at HA Wisdom Wellbeing we do recognise that there will be occasions where an individual will need to access structured support earlier.

Crucially, we will never turn someone away from seeking support. Our goal is to support an individual in the first instance and assess their needs on a case-by-case basis, making recommendations informed both by the above research and their specific circumstances.

What will happen if an individual requests structured counselling or a counsellor feels an individual may benefit from this?

If an individual expresses a wish to access structured counselling or the counsellor identifies that an individual may benefit from structured counselling, our clinical assessment process will identify relevant factors and establish how structured counselling can be used for their specific situation. This process allows us to understand the main presenting concerns, current support networks, existing coping strategies and readiness for engaging with a structured approach. The clinical assessment process will

help to identify a clearer focus for the counselling sessions, which is crucial when working appropriately to a short-term model. When working with grief, the focus may simply be to talk through emotions and explore ways of looking after oneself. In these instances, the counsellor will focus on how best to facilitate this open discussion and establishing effective self-care strategies.

At times, the outcome of the clinical assessment will identify that an individual has all the necessary tools to support themselves and engage with their current experience of grief. In these instances, the counsellor may recommend that the individual engages with collaboratively identified strategies and contacts the service again if they require additional support later in their grief process.

Alternatively, it may be identified that more specialist long-term support is required. This specialist support would typically involve longer-term support with a specialist grief counsellor and is more likely to be recommended when grief is complicated by other mental health difficulties, or when the nature of the bereavement is traumatic. In such instances, we may signpost an individual to their GP or a specialist bereavement organisation. Importantly, all counsellors will provide context and rationale when making a clinical recommendation or providing signposting. We strive to ensure that all individuals using the service understand how best to access appropriate support for their unique needs.

References

1- Kersting, A. , Brähler, E. , Glaesmer, H. , & Wagner, B. (2011). *Prevalence of complicated grief in a representative population-based sample. Journal of Affective Disorders, 131(1), 339–343.*

2- Currier, J. M. , Neimeyer, R. A. , & Berman, J. S. (2008). *The effectiveness of psychotherapeutic interventions for bereaved persons: A comprehensive quantitative review. Psychological Bulletin, 134(5), 648–661*