

Bereavement: the first twelve months and beyond

Guidance and support when you need it most



We would like to express our sincere sympathy to you and your family.

As part of our service, we are available to support you, your family and friends in the coming weeks and months of your bereavement.

Our Bereavement Service can provide information resources, individual counselling and group support.

This booklet has been designed to include a range of information which may be of use to you and your family and friends. It does not need to be read front to back – pick the topics that are relevant to you. Understanding what may be happening for you in your bereavement will not necessarily lessen your pain but it can help you to manage better.

Please feel free to contact our Bereavement Services staff or Pastoral Care staff if you have any questions, or need further assistance. Contact numbers for a range of support services are listed at the back of this booklet.

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Legal matters

Will

A will is a legal document that instructs you about the deceased person's wishes. The will nominates one or more people as executor(s) and it is their responsibility to distribute the deceased person's assets and belongings to the beneficiaries named in the will. The executor is also responsible for payment of any debts from the estate assets. The executor may choose to request the services of a solicitor to execute the will.

If you are unable to locate a will, you should seek legal advice from the NSW Trustee and Guardian, Legal Aid or a private solicitor. The NSW Supreme Court, Probate Section can also assist with information. They can be contacted on 02 9230 8111. For more information visit: <http://www.tag.nsw.gov.au>

If a will is being contested, it can be an extremely stressful and distressing experience for all involved. It is important to seek appropriate legal advice. You may also need additional emotional support from trusted friends, family or a health professional.

The change of circumstances that occurs when someone dies may mean it is necessary to review your own will and other documentation such as 'enduring power of attorney'.

Probate

In NSW, probate is applied for if assets of the deceased were solely in their name and are deemed to be of significant value (e.g. real estate). If the deceased person owned only joint assets, then probate is not required to transfer those assets as those assets pass to the surviving joint tenant.

An application for probate is made to the Probate Registry of the Supreme Court. A Grant of Probate recognises the authority of the executor(s) to deal with the estate and entitles the executor to collect and pay debts and distribute the estate as directed by the will. The documents for probate can be provided by your solicitor, they may be downloaded from the Internet or they can be purchased from a supplier of legal stationery.

Who to notify?

There are a number of people and institutions that need to be notified of a death. A copy of our 'Who to notify? Checklist' is available from the Palliative Care Team or online: <https://www.hammondcare.com.au/bereavement>

The process of notifying organisations can be daunting and often people comment that they feel like they're involved in erasing their family member's existence at a time when they most want to hold on to them. It may be helpful to take your time to inform organisations, prioritising those that are most urgent, and to enlist the help of others to make these notifications.



About grief

Impact of grief

Grief can affect us in a wide range of ways. Here are some examples of impacts you may experience:

Physical responses you may experience

- Decreased appetite
- Tiredness and lethargy
- Sleeplessness or sleeping a lot
- Decreased/increased sexual drive
- Shortness of breath
- Palpitations
- Gastro-intestinal upsets
- Dry mouth

Remember to see your GP if you have any concerns about your health. People often neglect their own wellbeing when caring for someone else – now may be the time to attend to health checks you've been putting off.

Emotional responses you may experience

- Sadness
- Frequent bouts of unexpected tears
- Anger/feeling short-tempered
- Irritability
- Despair
- Numbness
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Yearning, longing, pining
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Feeling like you do not want to live
- Relief

Cognitive impacts

- Forgetfulness
- Inability to concentrate or think clearly
- Confusion
- Difficulty making decisions
- Distraction
- Vagueness
- Obsessive thinking
- Denial
- Hallucinations
- Vivid dreams

Often people comment that they feel like they are going crazy.

Behavioural responses you may experience

- Hyperactivity
- Restlessness
- Social withdrawal
- Lack of motivation
- Low self-esteem

Spiritual responses you may experience

- Questioning of previously held religious beliefs
- Questioning the meaning of life
- Loss of faith
- Sense of meaningless/pointlessness
- Strengthening of spiritual connections
- A sense of the presence of the person who has died

Not everyone will experience all of these reactions. You may only experience a few. The intensity of these responses is likely to fluctuate, gradually reducing over time. However we experience our grief, the impact of a death of a family member is far reaching.

Theories of grief

There are many theories of grief. The one that most people have heard of is the idea that there are stages of grief we must work through before reaching a place of 'acceptance'. This theory has been criticised as it doesn't accurately describe many people's experience of loss. Newer theories of grief are based on the idea of 'continuing bonds' – the idea that we might keep a connection with someone who has died and have a changed relationship with them. For example, when we have known someone well we can imagine what they might have said in a particular set of circumstances, so we can draw upon their wisdom even though they are not physically present. We may continue to talk to them when we look at their photograph or visit a grave, thereby continuing a relationship with them in a different form.

No single theory of grief can capture the experience of all people who are bereaved and no one theory can explain all aspects of one person's experience. How we experience grief will vary depending on a wide range of factors including gender, culture, beliefs and personality. One model of grief you may find useful is the Dual Process Model (see diagram page 8). It suggests that there are two domains that need to be attended to.

The first domain relates to the experience of loss, including:

- the range of emotions you might feel (e.g. numbness, sadness, guilt, loneliness)
- remembering events related to an illness or the event of death itself
- experiencing triggers of grief: the waves of emotion that sweep over you when you are reminded of your loss by visiting a particular place, hearing a certain song or looking at a photograph
- avoiding changes that are made necessary because of your loss

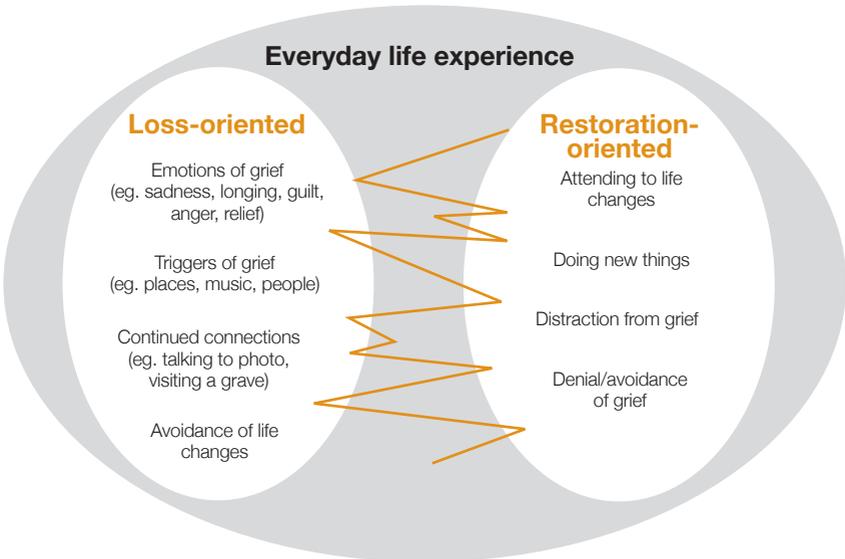
The second domain relates to more practical changes, including:

- learning new skills (e.g. managing finances may be a skill you now need to learn)
- going back to work or re-connecting with friends
- taking time away from grief (e.g. distracting yourself by keeping busy with other tasks)
- trying new things

Both areas need to be attended to and people find themselves moving between each domain (the zig-zagging line between each area in the diagram below suggests how people may bounce back and forth between these different impacts of grief). The balance between each area may shift and change over time. You may feel more able to attend to tasks in one area versus another.

Dual Process Model

(Adapted from Stroebe and Schut, 1999)



How long does it take?

There is no set time frame for grief. The following is a guide, remembering that each of us is unique in our grieving. Everyone copes differently. It is not useful to compare your way of grieving with that of other people. Some people need to talk about their feelings. Some people are more private. Some people cope better by keeping busy. Some people do not feel able to do much at all. Often, people are able to navigate the ups and downs of grief with the support of family or friends. For some, it can be helpful to speak with a counsellor.

The first couple of months

At first, most people will feel some form of shock, numbness or unreality. After the funeral there are often feelings of unreality and emptiness. You may feel quite disoriented, referring to the deceased in the present tense, at times forgetting that they have died. This can be quickly followed by periods of sadness as the reality returns. For example, people often talk about picking up their phone to contact someone or calling out to them when at home and then remembering that they're no longer there.

There are lots of formalities to attend to even though you may feel it's hard to focus on anything. Notifying organisations means you have to tell others that the person has died and this can be very painful. Although these tasks are difficult, they can provide a sense of purpose when you may be feeling lost and help prevent practical and/or financial challenges in the future.

If your partner has died, this can also be a time when you may start to realise the many unnoticed things they have given you or done for you. You may have to learn new skills and take on unfamiliar tasks.

Sometimes people experience pressure to dispose of the deceased's belongings and clothes. Some people like to do this immediately while others leave it much longer. You will know when you are ready to do this. Having familiar sights and smells in your home can be comforting and provide powerful ways of remembering.

Often people choose not to decide what to do with belongings all at once. There can be some items that feel easier to remove from the home (e.g. medical equipment), and others which you know you will keep forever. For everything in between, it's ok to take your time and make decisions bit by bit. It can sometimes feel easier to give items away if you know they will be used and appreciated.

Sometimes during these early weeks people have a strong feeling that the deceased person is around them. Often this can be a comforting experience. Others may not have this feeling and this can be a relief for some and disappointing for others.

Around three months

Not uncommonly, people will say that they feel worse at this time. This is when the body's protective hormonal mechanisms are wearing off. The funeral and other practical matters have been attended to, and those around you have returned to their routines. You are also trying to return to your routine or trying to establish new ones.

Just when family and friends are expecting you will feel a little better, the pain of your bereavement often increases. You may feel you are getting worse or going backwards. The permanence of your loss becomes more of a reality. In addition to grieving the absence of your family member in the present, you may also be grieving the plans and hopes you had for the future.

Some people lack their usual motivation or zest for life and have to push themselves to do things that they would normally enjoy. Some people are able to return to their usual activities while having sad or thoughtful times as they remember the deceased.

For some, life without the person who has died feels unbearable and you may wish that you too had died. At times people feel they don't want to live without the deceased. This is not uncommon and different from contemplating suicide. Thoughts of suicide are an expression of extreme distress and it is important to talk about them with your GP or a counsellor.

After the first three months

For many, this is a time of feeling very alone. Even when you have the support of other family and friends you can feel lonely. You can find yourself going over and over memories, feeling preoccupied and forgetful about everyday matters. You may have unexpected outbursts of emotion that you find difficult and at times embarrassing.

As you come to terms with the reality of your loss, your senses may seem to play tricks, catching sight of your family member or friend, only to be disappointed when you realise they are not there. You may find yourself wanting to visit significant places. Acknowledging the reality that this change is permanent can be a slow process. Your mood and behaviour may continue to be erratic.

Friends and family may be resuming their lives and expect you should be too. You may feel not understood. If your partner has died you may also feel you no longer fit in within your social group.

Grief can feel like a roller-coaster ride, and it can be very unpredictable. However, gradually over the months following a death, for most people the times in between the moments of grief become longer and the feelings lessen in intensity.

The process of becoming accustomed to a world which will be forever different takes time. For most, at least the first year may be full of ups and downs as you adjust to a new reality. You may find yourself reassessing life, searching for new meaning, and questioning old ideas and values. It is, in fact, a very busy time and can be exhausting. Grieving takes far more energy than we imagine.

After the first year

During the first year of grief many people experience intense emotions. For some people the second year can continue to be very difficult. As during the first year, the support of family and friends can be enough to assist people to cope with the ups and downs they are experiencing. If you are concerned about how you are coping or if your grief is getting in the way of things you need to be doing in everyday life please feel welcome to contact the HammondCare Bereavement Service.

Sexuality and intimacy

After the death of a partner you may feel anxious and miss the closeness, intimacy, touch and sexuality that was part of your relationship. You may feel that you will never, or do not wish to, meet anyone as special again. On the other end of the spectrum, you may feel you need companionship and a close relationship. Both responses are common for people who are grieving. These are responses to grief that may not be easily talked about or understood by family and friends. Counselling is a space where issues around sexuality or intimacy can be discussed if that feels helpful.

Difficult/complicated relationships

Often literature on grief can talk about the death of a 'loved one' but, sometimes, that is not how the bereaved person thinks of the person who died. If a relationship has been strained, conflictual or abusive, people often experience feelings in their grief which don't fit with stereotypes of what grief 'should' look like. There might be a confusing mix of feelings about a range of issues including: no longer being able to 'fix' a relationship or to have important conversations. Or, not having been able to end a relationship sooner. People can feel relief that a challenging relationship has come to an end. Bereavement counselling is not only for grief about a relationship which felt very loving. If you think it would be helpful to speak with someone about a relationship that was more difficult in any way please feel welcome to contact our team.

Visiting the grave or significant places

For some, there may be a special place to visit that creates a sense of closeness to the deceased. This may be a grave, memorial garden, bench, park, beach or any other place that has a connection to your family member. Like all aspects of your grief, visiting this place is a very personal decision. Some people may visit this spot frequently, whilst others visit only on birthdays and anniversaries or choose not to visit at all. You will know when and if you need to visit a grave or other significant place and who you may need with you for support.

Ashes

It's ok to take your time to decide what to do with your family member's ashes. Some bereaved people tell us they have been surprised by their response to ashes, including feeling comfort in bringing ashes home. You may wish to consider having a supportive friend or relative go with you when you collect the ashes. Many people find it takes many months to make the best decisions about where ashes will be scattered or to feel ready to do this. Members of the family may have different opinions about what to do and this can take time to figure out. Some people feel ok about separating the ashes, scattering them in multiple places, whilst others feel strongly about keeping them together. There is no right or wrong.

The scattering or interring of ashes can be another opportunity to remember and honour your family member with others. As time passes people often think of things they wish they had included in a funeral service. This can be an opportunity to do these things or share those memories.

Scattering ashes

If you are scattering ashes in a public place (e.g. park or beach) or at sea you are expected to seek permission from the relevant authority. For more information visit: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/factsheets/Pages/cremation-ashes.aspx>

Taking ashes overseas

Individual airlines and consulates have information on their websites about the requirements for taking ashes overseas. It is important to check with them about what might be needed. Commonly, an official document from the crematorium confirming the contents of any container and a death certificate is required. The container must be sealed properly, taken as carry-on and will need to be screened like other carry-on items.



How to help yourself readjust

Things to do...

- Talk about the person who has died. It can be helpful to express your thoughts and feelings.
- Look at photos, share stories, listen to music or start a journal when it feels helpful to do so.
- Allow yourself to have times when you are distracted from your grief. Similar to working hard, you may need to take some time off from grief to keep you resilient.
- Learn more about what to expect in your bereavement. Information can help your understanding and prevent unrealistic expectations.
- Take one day at a time and don't look too far ahead.
- Tell yourself that you will get through this. Even though this may not seem possible now, there are many other grieving people who manage to navigate this experience.
- Your loss will mean life will never be the same, you will never forget the person, there will always be reminders, but the pain will lessen. It can be helpful to decide that something meaningful will result from your loss.

Practical matters

- Grief involves managing many practical changes and challenges. Try your best not to feel overwhelmed by these problems. Deal with each problem one at a time, accepting help and support where needed.
- Setting yourself small, achievable goals can keep you going, give your life a little meaning and provide purpose and direction.
- Where possible, avoid making big, irreversible changes or decisions within the first 6 to 12 months.

Looking after yourself

- Take care not to rely on drugs and alcohol. Although your pain may be eased temporarily, it will return once the drug has worn off. It is healthier to experience your feelings, even if it seems more painful in the short term.
- Diet is important when you are grieving. A healthy diet will help fight infection. During the early days, you may not feel like eating but try to have small, healthy, regular meals.
- Rest and sleep are important. People who are grieving often have difficulty sleeping. Seek professional help if this continues for a prolonged period.
- Physical exercise like walking and swimming can improve your mood and energy levels. Fresh air and being outdoors can relieve stress and lethargy.
- Take time to pamper or indulge yourself – do something special. At first, things might seem pointless and without pleasure, but do them anyway, as they may refresh you and ease tension.
- Feeling happy, laughing or enjoying moments do not mean you do not miss your family member, it is okay to have these during your grief.

Other people

- Sometimes differences in grieving can result in tension and disagreement in the family. Try to accept and understand individual differences.
- Be wary of advice-givers. Well-meaning people offer many suggestions. Pick and choose what works for you.
- While not giving up hope of feeling better, do not let others minimise your loss and grief. Many people are uncomfortable with grief and will try to 'fix it'.
- Try not to isolate yourself. Stay connected with people who care for you. As much as possible allow them to care for you and nurture you.
- Give yourself quiet time alone. Be mindful of being very busy and being with other people all the time.
- Understand your friends' strengths. Know which of your friends are able to listen and those friends who are better at giving practical help or offering distraction from your grief with offers of activities. You may need to tell your friends what you need.
- Seeking out people who have also experienced the death of a family member or friend can be helpful. Support groups are available.
- Ask for help if you feel you need it. You do not have to cope with this on your own.

How to prepare for anniversaries, religious celebrations and special occasions

Special occasions

You may experience unexpected increases in your feelings of grief in the build up to special days during the year, such as birthdays, anniversaries, and other events. Some people say the build up to these days is worse than the day itself. Remember that it's normal to feel a heightened sense of grief around these days.

It is often useful to think about the days that might be difficult and make some flexible plans – you might like to spend the day with family or friends, plan an activity, or have time to yourself.

You may find yourself experiencing an increase in your feelings of grief and may not understand the cause, only to realise later that a significant date is approaching or has passed. This is very common.

Remember difficult feelings come and go, and they might be mixed with happy feelings and memories as well. Your grief for the person that has died never ends but it usually does change and become less intense as time goes on. If your grief tends to surface more strongly around significant dates, you or others may feel that you are not coping as well as you should. However it is normal to experience these feelings. This does not mean that you are not coping but rather that you are grieving. In fact, coping and grieving usually happen at the same time.

There are no right or wrong answers to what should or should not be done on special occasions. Having some loose plans or ideas about what to do can help you feel more in control. You may want to continue with family traditions, or to change them if they feel it's too painful. What you decide for this year can be changed next year. You can try something new or stay with the old way. Making a decision about what feels right for this occasion is often the best we can do.

Celebrations

Birthdays, religious celebrations, Father's Day and Mother's Day are often expected to be a joyous time that many people spend with family. You may experience anxiety and heightened grief when anticipating and planning the first special occasion without your loved one. This can be a time of intense grief and sorrow. How can you smile and pretend that all is well on the outside when you're suffering deeply on the inside?

Family traditions at these times can bring painful reminders of your loss. You may want to continue with your established family or religious traditions or you may want to change them. You might consider rearranging the seating around the dinner table, opening gifts at a different time, meeting in a different place or decorating the house in a new fashion. It may be helpful to start a new tradition such as a special gift to a charity in your family member's memory. Sharing fond memories, praying, lighting candles or quietly reflecting can all be ways of honouring the person who has died.

Anniversary of a death

When approaching the first anniversary of a death people can often find themselves remembering and reliving what was happening a year ago. This can lead to an increase in the emotions of grief and distress around specific events. It may be helpful to ask of yourself 'what went well?', 'what did I do well?' during that time. It is also important to balance painful memories with attention to memories of happier times. To help recall those happier moments, we suggest you look at photographs and listen to music you enjoyed together.

The anniversary of a death can be an opportunity to create new traditions of remembering. You may want to include family and friends in any plans you have for the day. Some people choose to visit a place where they feel connected to their family members, play music, write a letter to that person, light a candle or take time to share memories. Going through the first anniversary (and the first of other special occasions) is an opportunity to try different things to see what feels right for you.



Helpful considerations as you prepare for anniversaries and special occasions

- Plan what you want to do and do not want to do during this time. Be open to changing your mind depending on how you feel on the day.
- Consider the venue – for example, it is easier for you to leave someone else's home than it is to ask guests to leave your home.
- Commit yourself to attending an event only for a limited amount of time (e.g. "I'll come for an hour"). This gives you the option to leave if you're feeling uncomfortable. No one will mind if you choose to stay longer.
- Your distress is normal. Others have felt, and currently feel, as you do right now.
- Do something to honour your loved one. Hang a special Christmas ornament on the tree, light a candle, plant some flowers.
- Recognise that the absence of your family member will cause pain no matter what you do. This is often a time filled with bittersweet memories. You may find yourself reminiscing. Sharing memories with your family and friends can be helpful.
- Give yourself permission to have fun and experience joy when you can, just as you give yourself permission to mourn when you need to. Remember that feeling happy is not a betrayal, it does not mean you do not miss your family member.
- Tell people what you might find helpful. Sometimes concerned family or friends may be unsure about how to help. Encourage them to let you grieve in your own way and in your own time.
- Rest if you feel tired. Don't overwhelm or over commit yourself. Spread out events if possible.
- Choosing how to sign cards and whose name to include can be difficult. Give yourself permission not to send cards if that feels too confronting.
- Often people may not acknowledge or say anything about the person who has died because they're afraid of saying the wrong thing. But if you do have people coming up to you and saying things or asking a lot of questions that are difficult, then it's useful to have some phrases to close things down if it feels a bit too difficult to talk about. That can be as simple as turning it around on the other person in some way, for example, saying "Yes, it's been a tough time, we're getting through it as best as we possibly can. How are things for you? What's happening at work? What plans do you have for next year?"
- Beware of 'shoulds'. Try to do what fits best for you and your family, not what you or others think you 'should' do. Give yourself permission not to do things.
- Choose to be around the people you find most supportive.

How to help people who are bereaved

Each person will grieve in a unique and personal way. It is important to allow people the time and space to grieve as they choose. However, support is important, and can be very beneficial. The following are some points to keep in mind as you help someone who is grieving.

What to say?

- Avoid platitudes such as 'I know just how you feel' or 'he's in a better place now'. Such answers rarely console, and it is often better to say nothing at all – simply be there.
- Be available to listen if the person wants to talk. Bereaved people often want to talk a lot about the person who died. Do not change the conversation or avoid using the name of the person.
- Be comfortable with silence. Sometimes it is simply your company that is needed.
- Weekends, evenings, anniversaries and holidays can be especially painful for the person. Extra contact and support at these times may be appreciated.

What to do?

- Try to maintain your usual way of interacting with the person who is grieving. If it would be a usual part of your relationship, continue with physical signs of comfort, such as touch and hugs.
- Try not to avoid the person. This will add to their sense of loss.
- Do not be afraid to cry or express feelings. This may help the person know that they are not alone, and that someone understands. However, do be conscious of not forcing them into a position where they have to look after your emotional wellbeing.

- Encourage the person to rest, eat well and care for themselves in a way that feels right for them.
- Inform yourself about all the reactions we can have when we are grieving.
- Offer help with practical matters. Often very simple tasks are difficult when one is exhausted by grief. It is more helpful to offer specific assistance rather than asking the person what they want help with, as decision making can be difficult.
- Remember that grief can last for a long time. Continue to visit, make calls, share your own life and thoughts – anything which reminds the person that they are valued and that you care for them.
- Sometimes a bereaved person may not want to talk. This does not mean they want you to stop contacting them. Reassure them it is okay to tell you this and that you will continue to be there for them when they need and/or are ready.
- Give special attention to any children in the family. They are also grieving.

Looking after yourself

- Be aware that you may feel uncomfortable and may feel you do not know what to say.
- Be aware that the self-esteem of the person may be low, and that they may initially appear very self-centred. This will diminish with time.
- Be aware of your own feelings and needs. You may also be grieving. It is important to care for yourself at this time too.
- Remember grieving takes much longer than you think.

Other supports

- Support groups and/or professional counselling can help some people. Providing information about this can be useful. The person who is grieving can then make their own decision about following these suggestions.
- Sometimes the pain of bereavement is so intense that thoughts of suicide may occur. Contact the person's GP or the Mental Health Line (1800 011 511) if you are concerned.

Resources for support

If you are concerned about what is happening to you, or have any further questions in regard to the information in this booklet, you can contact us during business hours:

Bereavement Counsellor/Coordinator

Northern Sydney

P 1300 427 255

Greenwich Hospital, Greenwich

Neringah Hospital, Wahroonga

Northern Beaches Palliative Care Service, Mona Vale

South West Sydney

P 02 9756 8878 or 02 9756 8849

Braeside Hospital, Prairiewood

SWSLHD Palliative Care Service

For services in other areas of NSW:

NSW Bereavement Counselling Service Directory

<http://www.palliativecarebridge.com.au/resources/25-nsw-bereavement-counselling-services-directory-2017>

These services are free of charge.

Other Community Services you may find useful include:

National Association for Loss & Grief

P 02 6882 9222
www.nalag.org.au

Australian Centre for Grief & Bereavement

P 03 9265 2100 or Toll Free 1800 642 066
www.grief.org.au

National Centre for Childhood Grief

P 1300 654 556
www.childhoodgrief.org.au

Solace (for widows & widowers)

P 02 9519 2820
www.solace.org.au

Compassionate Friends (for bereaved parents)

P 02 9290 2355
www.thecompassionatefriends.org.au

Griefline

P 1300 845 745 or 03 9935 7400
www.griefline.org.au

MensLine Australia

P 1300 789 978
www.mensline.org.au

Lifeline

P 13 11 14
www.lifeline.org.au

**Additional information and resources can be found on our website:
www.hammondcare.com.au/bereavement**

Other resources include:

Understanding grief

What to expect following a bereavement

Practical matters

Arranging a funeral, legal matters, ashes and belongings

Who to notify?

Checklist

HammondCare Foundation

We receive limited Government funding for bereavement services and rely on donations to make sure we can offer support to everyone when and where they need it.

If you would like to donate, or get further information please contact the HammondCare Foundation on **1300 426 666** or email **foundation@hammond.com.au**

To make a donation please go to **www.hammond.com.au/about/support** and select 'Bereavement Support'

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