

When Grief Feels Overwhelming - 10 Gentle First Steps When Bereavement Feels Too Much

Grief can feel overwhelming at any age, but bereavement in later life can bring its own particular difficulties.

You may be coping not only with the death of someone close, but also with changes to your daily routine, your home life, your confidence, your health, your social circle, or your sense of purpose. If the person who died was your husband, wife, partner, close friend, sibling, or someone you relied on deeply, the world may feel unfamiliar now.

This short guide isn't here to tell you how you "should" grieve. There's no single right way to grieve, and there's no timetable you have to follow.

Instead, these are ten gentle first steps. They're small, practical things you can return to when grief feels too much.

You don't need to do them all. Choose one that feels possible today.

1. Get through the next hour, not the rest of your life

When grief feels overwhelming, the future can seem too large to face.

You may find yourself thinking:

“How am I supposed to live like this?”

“What’s going to happen to me now?”

“How can I possibly manage the years ahead?”

These are understandable thoughts. But when grief is very raw, trying to imagine the whole future can make the pain feel even heavier.

For now, try to bring your focus down to a smaller question:

What do I need to get through the next hour?

That might mean making a cup of tea, sitting somewhere safe, phoning someone, having something simple to eat, taking your medication, opening a window, or resting.

You don’t have to solve your whole life today.

For now, the task may simply be to get through this morning, this afternoon, or this evening.

A gentle question:

What’s one small thing that would help me get through the next hour?

2. Keep one simple daily routine

After a bereavement, ordinary routines can fall apart. This is especially true if the person who died was part of your everyday life.

Mealtimes, television programmes, shopping, bedtime, Sunday mornings, or even making tea can all feel different. Sometimes the smallest routines hurt the most, because they remind you that life has changed.

You don't need to rebuild your whole routine immediately. Start with one simple daily anchor.

For example:

- Get dressed by a certain time
- Eat breakfast, even if it's small
- Go outside for a few minutes
- Make a hot drink in the morning
- Take medication at the usual time
- Sit in the same chair and read for ten minutes
- Phone or message one person each day

A routine doesn't remove grief. But it can give the day a little shape when everything feels uncertain.

A gentle question:

What's one small routine I could keep today?

3. Eat something simple and drink enough

Grief affects the body as well as the mind. You may lose your appetite, forget to eat, feel sick, or find yourself eating very little. Some people eat more than usual. Others live on tea and biscuits because cooking feels impossible.

Try not to judge yourself. But do try to give your body some basic care.

You don't need to cook proper meals straight away. Simple food is enough.

For example:

- Soup
- Toast
- Porridge
- A sandwich
- Yogurt
- Fruit
- Scrambled egg
- Ready meals
- Something a neighbour or family member can bring

Drinking enough matters too. Dehydration can make you feel more tired, confused, shaky, or low.

If eating feels difficult, try asking yourself:

“What’s the easiest thing I could manage?”

Not the healthiest. Not the best. Just the easiest.

A gentle question:

Have I eaten and had something to drink today?

4. Let grief come in waves

Grief often comes in waves. You may feel almost steady for a while, then suddenly be hit by sadness, anger, panic, guilt, loneliness, or disbelief.

A smell, a song, a photograph, a letter, an empty chair, a supermarket aisle, or a familiar phrase can bring everything rushing back.

This doesn't mean you're going backwards. It means grief is moving through you.

When a wave of grief comes, try not to fight it too hard. You might say to yourself:

“This is a wave. It's very painful, but it will pass.”

You may need to cry, sit quietly, breathe slowly, hold something comforting, or speak the person's name.

A wave of grief can feel as if it'll last forever. But feelings usually rise, peak, and soften again. Even if they return later, you don't have to handle every wave at once.

A gentle question:

What helps me feel a little safer when a wave of grief comes?

5. Tell someone what you need, even if it feels awkward

People often say, "Let me know if you need anything." They usually mean well, but when you're grieving, it can be hard to know what to ask for.

You might not want to be a burden. You might worry about upsetting people. You might feel that others expect you to be coping by now.

But grief can be isolating when needs are left unspoken.

Try asking for something specific and manageable.

For example:

"Could you phone me on Sunday evening?"

"Could you sit with me for half an hour?"

"Could you help me with a form?"

"Could you come with me to the cemetery?"

"Could you pick up some shopping?"

"Could you help me sort one drawer, but not the whole room?"

"Could you just listen without trying to fix it?"

Most people find it easier to help when they're given a clear request.

You don't have to explain everything. A simple request is enough.

A gentle question:

What's one specific thing I could ask someone for this week?

6. Be careful with big decisions

Bereavement can bring many decisions. Some are unavoidable. There may be paperwork, finances, belongings, housing, family matters, funeral arrangements, or legal issues.

But when grief is very intense, it can be harder to think clearly. You may feel pressure to make quick decisions just to get things over with.

Where possible, pause before making major choices.

This might include decisions such as:

- Moving home
- Giving away important belongings
- Making large financial changes
- Ending important relationships
- Taking on major commitments
- Clearing out everything quickly

Some decisions can wait. Some can be broken into smaller steps. Some can be discussed with someone you trust.

A useful question is:

“Does this need to be decided today?”

If it doesn't, give yourself permission to wait.

A gentle question:

Is there a decision I'm rushing because the feelings are so painful?

7. Create a small comfort plan for difficult times of day

Grief is often worse at particular times.

For some people, mornings are hardest because they wake up and remember all over again. For others, evenings are hardest because the house feels quiet. Weekends, birthdays, anniversaries, mealtimes, bedtime, or the time the person used to come home can be especially painful.

Rather than hoping these times will be easy, prepare gently for them.

A comfort plan might include:

- Having a programme ready to watch
- Phoning someone at a regular time
- Going for a short walk
- Keeping a blanket nearby
- Lighting a candle
- Writing in a notebook
- Making soup or tea
- Listening to calming music

- Looking at photographs only when you feel ready
- Going to bed earlier
- Keeping the radio on for company

The aim isn't to distract yourself from grief completely. The aim is to make the hardest part of the day a little less lonely.

A gentle question:

Which time of day is hardest for me, and what could I put in place before it arrives?

8. Keep a connection with the person who died

Some people worry that they have to “move on” by putting the person out of their mind. But many people find that healing involves keeping a continuing bond in a new way.

The relationship has changed, but your love, memories, and the influence of that person may still be part of your life.

You might keep a connection by:

- Talking to them quietly
- Writing them a letter
- Keeping a photograph nearby
- Visiting a meaningful place
- Cooking something they liked
- Wearing something that reminds you of them

- Creating a memory box
- Lighting a candle on difficult days
- Telling stories about them
- Supporting a cause they cared about

There's no right or wrong way to remember. Some people want photographs around them. Others need time before they can look at them. Both are normal.

Keeping a connection doesn't mean you're stuck. It can be part of learning how to carry love after loss.

A gentle question:

What's one way I'd like to remember or stay connected with the person who died?

9. Notice guilt, but don't let it become the whole story

Guilt is very common after bereavement.

You may think:

"I should've done more."

"I should've noticed sooner."

"I should've been kinder."

"I should've visited more."

"I shouldn't have said that."

"I feel guilty for laughing."

"I feel guilty for wanting a break from the pain."

Sometimes guilt points to something real we regret. Often, though, grief turns love into self-blame. It's the mind's way of trying to regain control over something deeply painful.

When guilt appears, try asking:

“Am I judging myself with hindsight?”

“Would I speak this harshly to someone else in my situation?”

“What else was true at the time?”

You may not be able to make guilt disappear, but you can loosen its grip.

You were human before the bereavement, and you're human now. No relationship is perfect. Love doesn't require a perfect record.

A gentle question:

If a friend had the same guilt as me, what would I say to them?

10. Know when to seek extra support

Grief is painful, and intense feelings can be a normal part of bereavement. But you don't have to cope alone, especially if you feel overwhelmed, frightened, unable to function, or very isolated.

Extra support may be helpful if:

- You feel unable to get through the day

- You're not eating or sleeping for long periods
- You feel constantly panicked
- You feel completely alone
- You're using alcohol or medication to get through
- You feel you can't talk honestly to family or friends
- You feel stuck in guilt, anger, or despair
- You feel life isn't worth living

Support might come from your GP, a bereavement charity, a counsellor, a faith or community leader, a trusted friend, or a local support group.

If you feel at risk of harming yourself, or you feel you can't stay safe, seek urgent help now. In the UK, you can call 999 in an emergency, contact NHS 111, go to A&E, or contact Samaritans free on 116 123.

Asking for help isn't weakness. It's a way of taking your pain seriously.

A gentle question:

Who could I contact if today becomes too difficult to manage alone?

A short reflection exercise

You may find it helpful to write down your answers. There's no need to write neatly or fully. A few words are enough.

Today, the hardest part is:

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One feeling I'm carrying is:

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One thing my body needs today is:

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One small task I can manage is:

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One person I could contact is:

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One thing I want to remember about the person who died is:

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One gentle thing I can say to myself today is:

.....

A final word

When grief feels overwhelming, it can seem as if life has become too much to bear. You may feel changed, shaken, exhausted, or unsure who you are now.

Please remember: you don't have to know how to live the rest of your life today.

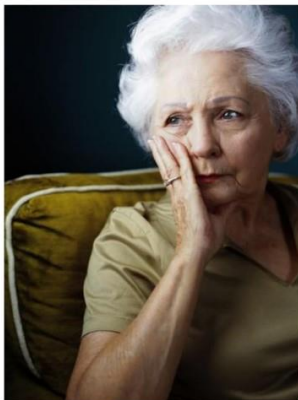
Start smaller.

Get through the next hour. Eat something simple. Let one person know how you are. Keep one small routine. Rest when you can. Ask for help when you need it.

Grief isn't something you have to "complete" quickly. It's something you learn to carry, one day at a time.

About Living With Loss

Living With Loss:
A Practical Guide to
Bereavement in Later Life



Jerry Livings

This free guide is based on the same gentle, practical approach as *Living With Loss: A Practical Guide to Bereavement in Later Life*.

The book offers compassionate support for older adults navigating grief, loneliness, changed routines, difficult emotions, and life after bereavement.

It's available in paperback, hardback and ebook from Amazon: [*Living With Loss: A Practical Guide to Bereavement in Later Life*](#).

More free support: olderpeople.co.uk/freehelpsheets