



Written by Carol Schoneberg  
Bereavement Services

## What is Bereavement?

Bereavement is the period of mourning and grief following the death of a loved one, for which there is no time frame. The ancient root of the word means **to rob** or **to be torn apart**, which is, in fact, what it feels like when we lose someone deeply loved. Our world is turned upside down, and suddenly nothing is as it once was. We hardly recognize ourselves or the world around us. We are vulnerable and filled with uncertainty.

We start to grieve the moment we hear our loved one has a terminal illness from which he or she will not recover. Once our loved one dies, grief comes to us in waves—with or without our permission. It is a time of broken-heartedness unlike any other. Grief reactions manifest in our bodies, our feelings, and our behaviors, and no two people's grief looks the same—even in the same family. It is important to let people grieve in their own way, at their own pace. It might look very different from the way you experience grief. The most caring thing we can do for a grieving person is to bear witness to their grief—to be truly present and listen if they want to share their story, to be comfortable with their tears or anger or silence, but not to offer unsolicited advice or tell them what they should or shouldn't be doing or feeling.

Mourning is the public expression of our grief, and it is a critical component of healing—we can't heal unless we mourn. Mourning might take place with

Deep Peace of the running wave to you  
Deep Peace of the flowing air to you  
Deep Peace of the quiet earth to you  
Deep Peace of the shining stars to you  
Deep Peace of the gentle night to you  
Moon and stars pour their healing light on you  
Deep Peace to you  
-Gaelic Blessing

one or more trusted friends, in a support group setting, or with a grief counselor. Mourning also takes place through rituals or symbols of bereavement, such as wakes and funerals, memorial services, or honoring a loved one's memory by participating in an event that raises funds for the illness that took our loved one's life. These are all powerful rituals that help us heal.

Grief can be very isolating, even if we were socially active prior to our loss. For a period of time, we can feel alone even when surrounded by those who love us. We may find ourselves withdrawing from the activities of daily living we engaged in before our loved one died—activities that used to bring us pleasure and we found meaningful. Now meaning and joy seem no where to be found. It is important to be able to reach out for support, if only to one person. When friends or family ask what they can do to help, tell them what you need. Those who love us the most often feel helpless because they cannot take

our grief away, and many are grateful to be told something tangible they can do to help lighten our load. It might be to sit with you as you deal with the paperwork and phone calls that follow a death, helping address thank you notes, or simply coming over to be with you and listen. Allow yourself to be open to the love and support of those who care about you. Your time of grieving is one of the most human and sacred things you will ever do.

### **What am I supposed to do now?**

For some of you, the time between your loved one's diagnosis with a terminal illness and death might have been short—days, weeks, or a couple of months. For others, this time might have been many months or even years. In either case, if you were providing the daily care for your loved one, you may be asking yourself, "What is my purpose now?" If you are, please know that this is a natural response to discovering, overnight, that there is no longer a need for the caregiver role you have been living. A client once told me, "Grief is love with no place to go."

While you were caring for your loved one, day in and day out, you might have often wondered, "How will I get through this?" but you probably never wondered, "What is my purpose?" You knew what needed to be done, and you did it. The death of your loved one and this new question can bring with it a loss of identity and confusion. Who am I now? Am I still a husband, a wife, a parent, a sister or brother, a son or daughter? It is grief upon grief—one of the many secondary losses we discover after our loved one dies.

Now is the time to focus this caregiving and loving kindness on you. This is the time to allow yourself to feel whatever you are feeling. There are times you might find yourself pushing away the reality of the death. This is normal. We first acknowledge the reality of the loss with our heads—only over time do we come to acknowledge it with our hearts. You will begin to take it in, little by little, as you are able, in your own time. You have just lived through one of life's most painful and difficult experiences, and you have the right to grieve in your own way.

*Hospice of Southern Maine is grateful to have been able to provide care to your loved one and your family. As your healing journey continues, we hope you won't hesitate to contact us if you would like further information or support.*

*(207) 289-3640*

*or visit our website at [www.hospiceofsouthernmaine.org](http://www.hospiceofsouthernmaine.org)*

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Newly Bereaved