

Loss and change



Providing services we would be
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Navigating the journey through loss and change

This booklet guide is for anyone who is experiencing loss and change.

Its aims to provide information on how to cope with a loss or change in your life and highlight the common themes and reactions to a loss and bereavement.

Understanding loss and change

A natural part of living involves the experience of loss and change. People experience this in unique and individual ways, however there are common themes of responses to different kinds of loss.

By recognising these similarities, we can begin to recognise that we are not alone when facing loss or change, nor are we “losing the plot”, “cracking up” or abnormal in any way.

The process of coming to terms with any loss or change has many parallels with the grieving process, which is a natural and normal human response to a crisis or event.

What do we mean by loss and change?

When thinking about losses, perhaps loss by bereavement

usually comes to mind, but other losses can evoke similar responses. Most major life changes involve a loss of some kind, even events that on the surface are happy events.

For example, the birth of a baby, although a happy event, brings with it many changes and perceived losses for a mother - usually a period of time away from work, perhaps a loss or change in social circle or a sense of a loss of competency. A more obvious change following a new arrival is loss of sleep.

Other types of loss and change that can take time to come to term with are:

Leaving the family home

Illness / Loss of mobility

Aging / loss of looks

Birth of a sibling

Relationship breakdown

Divorce

First job / new job

Death of a family member

Starting / changing schools

Moving home / migration

Life stages / identity

New responsibilities

Burglary or theft

Partner has an affair

Death of a pet

Death of a friend

A Journey?

The process of adapting to change and coping with loss can be seen as an unfamiliar journey. Our circumstances are no longer fixed and we find ourselves walking along a new pathway which can be strange and daunting. Sometimes, once we have gained an understanding of what is happening to us and accepted that our feelings, although unpleasant are normal, it can increase our confidence that we can cope and that we will come through this.

If different types of losses can give rise to similar emotions, and the road to recovery is seen as a journey, then it can be helpful to consider the commonalities in this journey, whether we are coming to terms with a relationship breakdown, leaving home or the sad loss of a family member. This process is illustrated (in figure 1) on the next page.

Following a bereavement, loss or major life change we will, sometimes after an initial period of numbness, experience a range of natural emotions.

Although there is a general path through the process of change, it is important to say that people experience different feelings in different sequence and there may be repetitions along the way. For example, it is not a case of ticking off each stage and thinking “that’s that bit done” because the process can be influenced by other stressors or life events.

Unfortunately the normal pressures of living do not let up

Figure 1 - Sugarman's Curve - A visual representation of the grieving process / adapting to change process.
 (Sugarman's Curve 1986 Life Span Development)

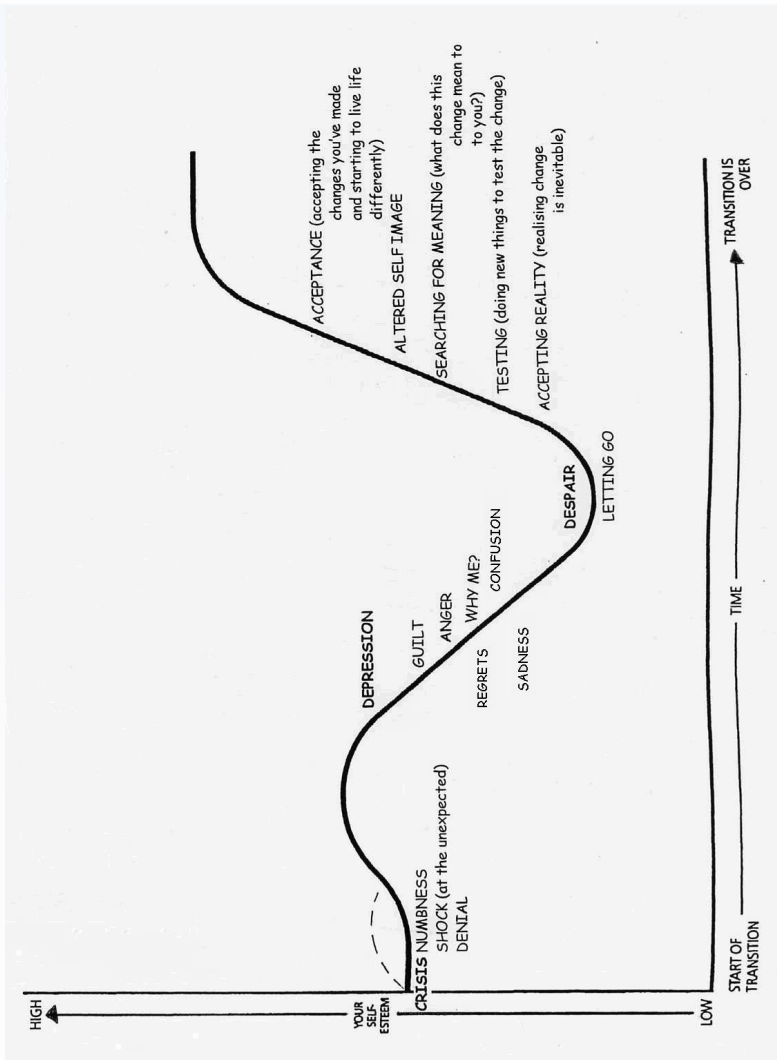


Figure 1

whilst we are going through a period of change. We have to allow ourselves to experience the distressing emotions in order to move forward through acceptance to come up the other side of the graph. We can then make sense of things like “what this change means for me” and “what new skills do I need to learn?” and “how will life be different now?”

If a number of people (eg. a family) are experiencing the same loss, then this can make the situation more complex. If one person is feeling sad, and the person they try to get support from is feeling angry, it can be very difficult for either to support the other. This can be very unsettling for relationships, not only for those experiencing the loss but for those around them such as family, colleagues and friends.

The myth that life is always happy!

If someone visited our current Western culture from another planet or another time, they could be forgiven for gaining a false impression of what life is all about.

We seem to be in an age of idealism, instant gratification where we must have, do or be more. Television, instant fame and fortune, the portrayal of celebrities and their ‘perfect’ lives, relationships, homes, bodies and children can contribute to the feeling that life is only any good if it is successful, happy, affluent, easy and fair.

When circumstances are not just so, this can lead to strong negative emotions such as disappointment, anger, sadness, depression and anxiety. It can seem that if everything is not

perfect, then life is intolerable. Yet life will always have its challenges and there will always be events happening that are out of our control.

The Downward Spiral - Thoughts and Feelings and Actions.

In the time immediately after a loss or change it is quite natural for us to feel sad, confused and many other feelings appropriate to the event. It is how we change our response over time that will decide whether we get into a downward spiral or adapt and move on, learning from the experience.

It's very difficult to have thoughts without feelings and the other way around.

Feelings of disappointment and frustration as well as sadness and regret can sometimes lead to unhelpful thinking styles and to behaviour that is counter-productive. For example, someone who finds their circumstances have become harsh and difficult may respond by saying 'This is all wrong! This should not be happening to me! I am a failure and I can't cope anymore!'

Those feelings of failure and being unable to cope may in turn lead to withdrawal from family / friends / colleagues at a time when extra support is important.

This can lead to further unhelpful thoughts; "I'm not very good company. Who would want to spend time with me anyway?" And so the downward spiral goes on. The further we go down, the harder it may seem to turn around and start to come back up.

Under threat of failure?

An example of this was recounted by someone who became redundant from their job after a long time of service. Our work can be an important part of our identity and of how we see ourselves. If our employment comes to an end against our wishes, we can feel uprooted, insecure, uncertain, at a loss and ultimately feel out of control of what is happening in our lives. All that is familiar and related to work ends.

This can lead to a knock on effect, where one loss or setback leads to another, setting off a whole sequence of events rather like a row of dominoes; whilst all the dominoes are standing, all is well. Once one falls, they all fall.

The loss of a job can lead to money problems, which can affect relationships and from there the self-esteem and confidence is reduced.

In such cases it will be important to gain the right support and break the problem down into pieces that can be tackled one at a time, rather than becoming totally overwhelmed by the number of changes to be addressed.



Vicious Cycle

There may be many events that cause us distress throughout our lifetime, and these events will come and go. Often it is what we focus on, how we think and what we do that will determine how long we remain distressed / upset / angry in response to the events.

When we experience a major life change or loss, it is natural to be sad, cry, feel like withdrawing for a while. This is a normal response and if we remain open, the feelings will change and become less intense over time. So it is 'OK' to feel these feelings and do what we need to do. Some people refer to this as the "duvet days", where you might just feel like pulling the covers up and hiding for a while.

What we need to be careful of though, is that we don't stay in that emotional place and get into a vicious cycle. Eg. Following a relationship breakdown → feel distressed → think "I'm not very good company" → withdraw socially → feel even more lonely → think "no-one's bothered about me" and so on.

At some point we need to make the decision to do something different, accept that life will be different but we can still find ways to cope, learn from our difficulties and gain confidence that we can handle life's setbacks. An example of the vicious cycle is shown in figure 2 on the next page.

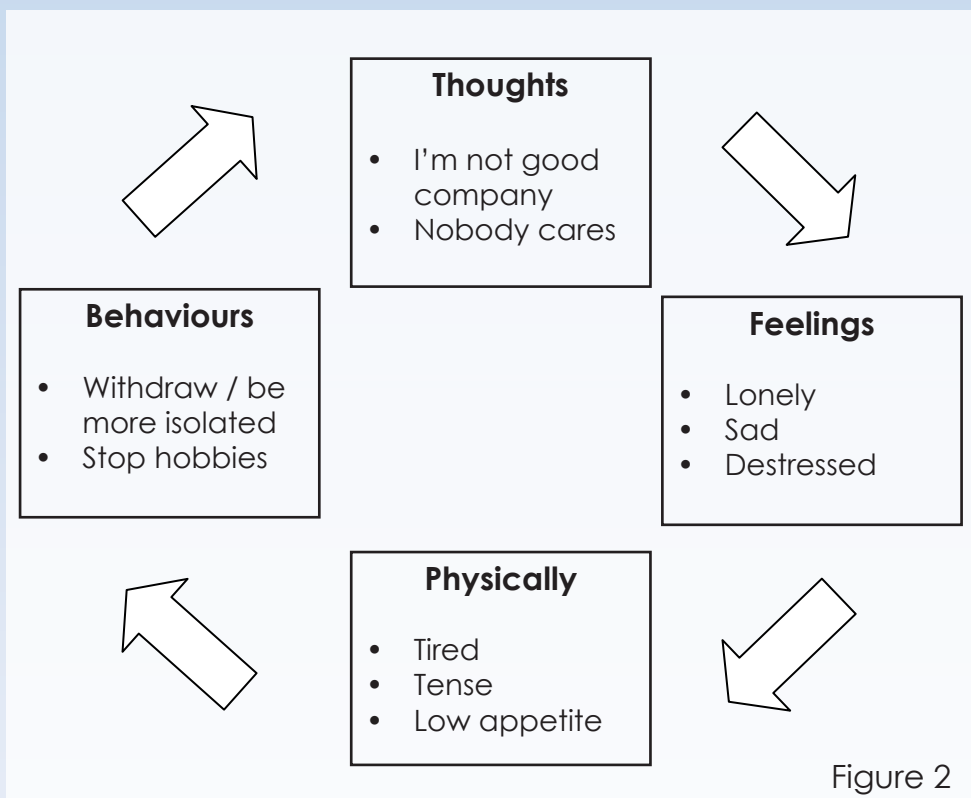


Figure 2

Some Dos and Don'ts

What you can do if you have experienced a loss or change in your life

DO - acknowledge your feelings and accept that although they may be unpleasant, they are normal. We are human beings and there is nothing more normal than to laugh when we're happy, and have a period of sadness when we experience difficulties. We would not be able to experience joy if we haven't experienced pain.

DO – talk to someone about your feelings, without necessarily having any expectations that the problem will be solved. Sometimes just re-telling the story can help.

DO – let yourself cry and express how you feel. Suppressing your feelings can sometimes result in them getting stuck. If you express your emotion, you may experience a shift in how you feel. Also allow yourself to acknowledge it when you have a 'better day'.

DO – let time heal. Although it has become a cliché it is true that feelings change over time. We have enormous capacity to adapt and learn from difficulties. You may well find that you feel better of your own accord in time

DO – seek professional help if you remain overwhelmed over a longer period.

DON'T – expect too much of yourself. You may experience difficulty in concentrating or need more time to complete routine tasks if you are feeling stressed or emotional about a loss.

DON'T – rush into making important decisions soon after a big life change. Dealing with one change at a time will help prevent you from feeling overwhelmed. Eg. Moving house away from all your friends shortly after retirement may not be the best idea.

DON'T – compare yourself to others too much. Although reactions to the process of adapting to loss and change have some common features, we are all different and have

different needs and different tolerance levels.

Some Dos and Don'ts

What you can do to support others who have experienced a loss.

DON'T – pressurise them to get on with work or tasks if it is not essential

DO – acknowledge the loss / change and gently encourage the person to talk if they want to.

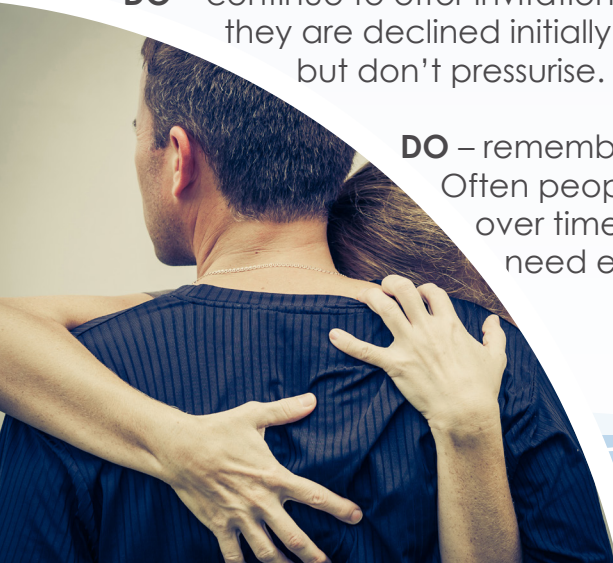
DO - allow people to cry without loss of safety or self respect

In a workplace situation, **DO** check whether close colleagues know of the bereavement / loss / change and check whether the person wishes them to know

DO – encourage them to keep up some routine activities.

DO – continue to offer invitations to social events, even if they are declined initially. Remember, encourage, but don't pressurise.

DO – remember – we are all different. Often people will adapt to change over time; sometimes they may need extra / professional help.

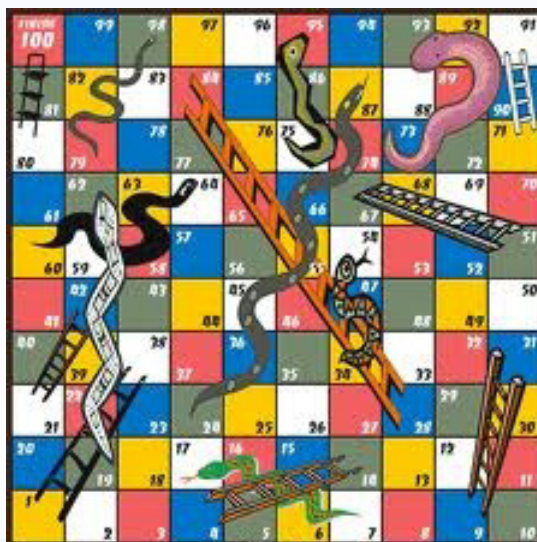


DON'T expect colleagues to be 'back to normal' too quickly after a major life change, especially following a bereavement.

DO – be prepared for setbacks. It can be helpful to use the image of the game of Snakes and Ladders (adapted from: PTSD, The Invisible Injury by David Kinchin-1998) to help put any setbacks in perspective.

The board represents our journey through loss or change. The snakes represent difficulties or set-backs encountered on the way. No matter how difficult the set-back, we never go right back to square one.

The ladders represent our support systems, ie. people or resources that can help us. The Snakes and Ladders image can remind us that when we encounter a setback (a snake), this is when we most need to seek out our support systems.



Further help

If you require more information, please speak to a member of staff. We are here to help you and get you back onto the right track. Alternatively, you can receive more information and help from the following organisations and charities:

Open Minds - Grimsby

7 - 9 Osborne Street
Grimsby
DN31 1EY
Tel: 01472 625100

Open Minds - Cleethorpes

13 - 15 Grimsby Road
Cleethorpes
DN35 7AQ
Tel: 01472 252760

email: NAV.Openminds@nhs.net

Single Point of Access -

The crisis home treatment service provides an open referral system where people can self-refer via the Single Point of Access.

The service can be contacted 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Tel: 01472 256256 - press **option three** for mental health

The acute crisis home treatment service is based at -
Harrison House,
Peaks Lane,
Grimsby.

Lincsline -

Telephone support service for anyone affected by mental health issues

Tel: 0808 800 1010

http://www.rethink.org/how_we_can_help/our_services/yorkshire_and_north_east/north_north_ea.html

ACAS – for Employment Issues

www.acas.org.uk

Call the Helpline on 08457 47 47 47

Monday-Friday, 8am-8pm and Saturday, 9am-1pm

Cruse Bereavement Line -

Help for bereaved people and those caring for bereaved people Grimsby, Cleethorpes and Louth Branch

Tel: 01472 814455

Rethink -

telephone support service for anyone affected by mental health issues

Tel: 0808 800 1010



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