

EXPERT ADVICE FROM CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGISTS  
WITH FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

# Coping with Bereavement

Practical Strategies to Empower  
and Support You

'This timely book integrates a wide range of contemporary approaches, the professional and personal experience of the author and attention to important but often neglected situations (e.g. bereavement in the refugee experience), distilling them into clear and practical suggestions for the grieving. A refreshingly knowledgeable and wide-ranging resource for the bereaved.'

**Dr Ray Owen**, *Consultant clinical psychologist,  
author of Facing the Storm and co-host of the podcast  
Two Old Psychologists Talking About Stuff*

'This book engages with a wide range of contexts for bereavement, and acknowledges the importance of personal circumstances, including intersection with other trauma and with culture. Each chapter includes a range of practical ideas for growing through grief, but always recognises that none of these is a simple solution: grief is messy, and each one of us experiences it uniquely.'

**Sands Bereavement Support Service**

'Incorporating current thinking and approaches to grief and how to work through a significant loss experience, *Coping with Bereavement* is a wonderfully sensitive and thoughtful resource. Through the examples, practical suggestions, and realistic descriptions of grief that can occur from many types of loss experiences, readers will find this to be an incredibly useful guide that will help them navigate their grief in compassionate and helpful ways.'

**Professor Darcy Harris**, *RN, RSW, M.Ed.(Couns), Ph.D., FT,  
Professor Emeritus, King's University College at  
Western University*



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# Coping with Bereavement

Loss is something that we all experience in various ways, yet conversations about grief can feel particularly difficult as death continues to be a generally unspoken subject between many of us.

Written by a clinical psychologist with lived experience of bereavement, this book aims to lessen the taboo around death and grief by inviting readers to reflect in an open, honest and judgment-free space. Elaborating on different circumstances of grief, chapters provide psychologically informed, practical strategies for caring for yourself while navigating bereavement.

Topics explored include, but are not limited to:

- The impact of bereavement
- Life after death and what coping can look like
- Coping with the death of someone you have experienced trauma alongside or from
- Navigating bereavement as a parent
- Coping with death by suicide
- Bereavement in the context of war, as well as immigration

An essential read for anyone experiencing bereavement, this book guides and encourages readers to look after their wellbeing and become better informed about their individual process of grief. It will also be of interest to mental health practitioners looking for resources to support their clients, and to individuals in helping professions who have encountered bereavement at work or in their private life.

**Dr Agnieszka Anna Pytlowana** is a clinical psychologist whose main area of interest is coping with trauma that may have occurred during childhood or adulthood, as well as coping with bereavement. Since 2005, she has worked in third sector charities, Local Authorities and the National Health Service in the UK. Her father died in 2015 and she draws on this lived experience as well as on her professional expertise to benefit others who are also faced with death and grief.

# Coping With ...

Series Editor: Dr Sarah Swan, ACP-UK

The *Coping With...* series is a set of books written by clinical psychologists about their lived experience of a health condition or life challenge, while simultaneously drawing insights from their professional expertise.

Each of the books provides the author's account of the psychological impact of their particular challenge and how it impacted on their own emotional wellbeing. They then explain which psychological coping skills they used to support their wellbeing and talk the reader through how they might be able to apply these to their own situation. The authors of each volume also provide an explanation of the psychological theories underpinning these coping strategies and the evidence base from which they are drawn.

This series will be of interest to individuals (and their loved ones) who share lived experience of the health condition or challenge explored in each volume. It may also be of interest to healthcare or mental health practitioners who are seeking a better understanding of the experiences of these specific client groups.

## List of titles

### **Coping with Bereavement**

Practical Strategies to Empower and Support You

Dr Agnieszka Anna Pytlowana

For more information about this series, please visit: [www.routledge.com/coping-with/book-series/cw](http://www.routledge.com/coping-with/book-series/cw)

# Coping with Bereavement

Practical Strategies to Empower and  
Support You

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Designed cover image: Getty Images

First published 2026

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781041117353 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781041117346 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003661412 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003661412

Typeset in Avenir

by Newgen Publishing UK

Access the Support Material: [www.routledge.com/9781041117346](http://www.routledge.com/9781041117346)

This book is a result of countless pockets of wisdom, guidance and encouragement I have been lucky to have had access to over the years.

First of all, thank you to all my clients I have had the privilege to support. I have been humbled by what you have taught me.

I also want to thank all my supervisors who helped shape and develop my practice.

I want to say thank you to Dr Sarah Swan, ACP-UK and the other authors of books in this series – you have been oh so patient and motivating!

Thank you to all the loving and precious relations in my life; friendship-based, romantic, and those with family members (blood and chosen).

Last but not least I want to thank you, Dad. All I am proud of in myself has either been gifted or inspired by you. I dedicate this book to you.



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# Series Foreword

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2019, I knew I was going to have to use my skills as a clinical psychologist to help me cope with the distress that this inevitably caused. Early on in my journey, I had the urge to write, as a way of processing my experiences. I immediately thought it had the potential for a book, but never thought this would come to fruition. But with the support of the Association of Clinical Psychologists, Sequoia Publishing, friends, family and colleagues I committed to writing the book.

I began to realise what a unique position I held; facing a difficult life event that many others face, but with the knowledge and experience of a long career in helping people with their emotional experiences. Suddenly, it dawned on me that there could be any number of difficult or challenging experiences that other clinical psychologists may have faced. And, like me, they would in all likelihood have valuable skills to share with others facing the same situation. And so, the idea for the series was born.

It is an honour to launch the series with my book, *Coping with Breast Cancer*. And it has been my pleasure to support other clinical psychologists with their writing in order to produce a series of books that will help to bring valuable psychological ideas to a wide audience. With the knowledge and skills of the writers, I am confident that this series will benefit many people facing difficult and challenging situations and given them helpful skills to cope.

Dr Sarah Swan  
*Coping With ...* Series Editor  
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

# The Unique Perspective

The Association of Clinical Psychologists (ACP-UK) is delighted to be publishing these important *Coping With ...* books. In these pages clinical psychologists have taken the courageous step of sharing how they applied their skills to their own lives, in order to help others facing similar difficulties and challenges.

The profession of clinical psychology spans many types of psychological approach across all areas of the lifespan and of individual experiences, from physical health, psychological distress and mental illness, as well as cognitive difficulties, family challenges and workplace problems. Clinical psychologists have rigorous training not only in psychological therapies but also in research methods and using evidence-based practice. They draw on these aspects to inform everything they do, including looking after themselves. These books evidence the flexibility and creativity with which we can use and apply our skills, both to help ourselves and others.

It is not often that clinicians share their first-hand experiences of challenging situations and how they have applied what they have learnt in their training and the many years of experience that follow. I feel very proud of my clinical psychology colleagues who have written this series of books, not only for everything that they have experienced with courage and insight, but for the generosity and openness with which they want to help other people. It is not

easy to combine subjective personal experience with an external clinical perspective, yet in these books they share the breadth of knowledge and training that the profession brings us.

Dr Penelope Cream  
Clinical & Health Psychologist  
Director of Operations, ACP-UK

# Overview

This book looks bereavement in the eye from a perspective of a clinical psychologist who has been there, and so draws on both personal and professional experiences while guiding the reader through the challenging journey of grief.

The first time I paused to really think about death and bereavement was in 2015 when my dad suddenly died. I was so unprepared. All those years I passively and unintentionally ignored this part of the reality of life – human mortality. I have written this self-help resource to help others because I now know that there are lots of psychologically-informed ideas that can really help in this testing, distressing and challenging time.

The book is the first of its kind as it brings together the themes of death in Western and other contexts, being a psychologist in the UK, as well as being an immigrant and so navigating more than one cultural version of what bereavement is. In many ways, it is timely given the world-wide crisis of the recent Covid-19 pandemic which has suddenly placed the taboo of death in everyone's living rooms. It will be helpful to you if you have just found out that someone significant to you has died, if you are supporting someone who is terminally ill, if the person close to you died many years ago, or if you are looking for resources to cope with pregnancy loss.

The book is based predominantly on two well-known and well-supported therapy models: Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT)

and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), alongside theories about attachment, and the human nervous system. The chapters draw on well-researched therapeutic strategies and offer accessible and tangible ideas and worksheets you can dip in and out of according to your need and the stage of your bereavement journey.



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# Introduction

# 1

## Why Another Book About Bereavement?

Many books have been written about the theory of bereavement, many of which I explored while studying psychology, but none of which I felt able to pick up when grappling with my own bereavement. I did not feel I had the headspace to appreciate the sophisticated theories presented in those books.

There are also many self-help books on the market, many of which I read and/or purchased to be able to recommend them to my clients. That said, again, I did not feel able to use these when coping with my own loss. As a helping professional myself, I felt I should be able to cope without any of that.

This book offers a unique merge of the professional and the personal. This was a challenging process as self-disclosure as a therapist is only advised in rare instances. When my training tells me that sharing a personal experience with my client will benefit them, I do so. What I was taught about self-disclosure, in some ways, made writing this book difficult. I managed to navigate that difficulty (with a lot of help from others) in order to share my story and insights, to normalise that psychological therapists struggle and need help, and to offer a number of coping strategies to those experiencing bereavement.

Whichever function this book may fulfil for you, it is not an academic text nor is there an implied pressure to read it

## 2 Coping with Bereavement

cover-to-cover in order to be a “diligent” therapy client, adult, or simply-put, human wanting to feel better. At the same time, whilst it incorporates personal experiences, there are also theoretical frameworks and methods of coping based on well-researched theories and presented in accessible ways.

I am caringly inviting you to look after yourself while making your way through the chapters. One of the ways in which this can be done is by dipping in and out, and “taking what you need” (Karen Treisman’s quote which you can see on her website <https://safehandstinkingminds.co.uk/>) by choosing the chapters and sections you feel ready to embark on and find most relevant. There isn’t a right or wrong way of doing it. If at any point reading the book feels too much, put it down and default to your hopefully already-established healthy/safe ways of coping. The book will always be available to you and as you will find throughout this book, the process of bereavement takes time.

### Grieving Is a Form of Learning

When someone significant in our life passes away, our brain and body typically experience confusion. This confusion is caused by brain changes that happen when something or someone we are used to having in our lives is no longer there. In terms of what happens, it can be compared to getting up at night to have a drink and discovering that our dining table is no longer there (O’Connor, 2022). We don’t bump into it as per most nights; when searching it in the dark with our hand, there is just an empty space. Imagine the confusion this would cause if you were eventually to wake properly, put the light on and discover that, indeed, your dining table had disappeared. It is the least expected thing that could happen; hence the understandable confusion and shock.

I am not giving this example to trivialise grief including the dismay and disbelief that comes with it; quite the opposite. I am making this point to explain just how profoundly our bodies and brains experience grief. Just like we learn where objects are in our house and our brains make those connections to help us remember, we also create brain pathways to remember who

people are, to be able to recognise them in the crowd and build continued relationships with them.

When someone significant to us dies, our established brain pathways need to adapt to this new information. New routines need to be developed. For example, laundry or food shopping needs to be done for one person less. A call from them/their name on our phone screen is not going to appear again. This is profound physiological work our brains need to do in order to gradually increase our ability to make sense of what has happened, feel various emotions and continue to function moving forward. It is hard work, and this is why it can take weeks if not months to get used to life's new routines. We might see the person who died, smell them or hear their voice. This isn't us going crazy, it is our brain producing information based on previous brain connections, whilst also re-wiring to adapt to the new context (O'Connor, 2022).

So, we are learning; learning how to do life, who we are, what matters, how we want to remember the person who died. Any new habits and learnt skills take time to develop, so please go easy on yourself. This is not exactly the learning we signed up for or consented to; yet it is before us and it is most likely all new, overwhelming and paralysing at times (as it was for me).

What we know about learning is that repetition and having a go at putting into practice newly learnt ideas is what leads to learning. The skills gradually feel more natural to us. Practice makes perfect as they say!

I hope that as you dip in and out of the chapters in this book, you will be able to find a little determination to really give the strategies a go. It is okay if it does not feel authentic to start them. Another saying – fake it until you make it!

All of the strategies are based on research, my practice and my own experience of using them. I hope that will help you to trust the process and give the ones you think resonate with you the most a really good and patient go.

There is a way forward with grief. It is not easy, yet we can find our individual ways to peace and healing, and if we wish to, continue the bond with the person who died. This will be discussed in later chapters.

### Grief Is Grief – Nobody Should Question What You Are Going Through

As you will see in later chapters, I dedicate space to various circumstances of where bereavement can occur and how those can affect our response to it. Sometimes we can experience the loss of a person, but not through death. This is termed ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999) (or unresolved grief). This can result from situations in which the person's physical self is still present (like in conditions such as dementia, severe and enduring mental health challenges, or brain injury), or not (like in situations where someone is missing, has been adopted or moved abroad and lost contact).

This book does not touch on all those experiences, as it focuses predominantly on bereavement where there is certainty that someone has died. That said, I have touched on grief following adoption as this is relevant to the chapter on Parenting (see Chapter 6).

However, many of the strategies (each chapter ends with a few) will be relevant to navigating ambiguous loss. As this subsection is titled, grief is grief. If you feel that the descriptions of bereavement or loss covered in this book resonate with you, you are going through bereavement and are likely to need multiple strategies to look after yourself on this journey. Nobody has the right to challenge or qualify the degree, severity or nature of your response to your loss (unless it is a professional and you have consented to his or her assessment and opinion). There is a lot of work still to be done in many societies to validate bereavement and respond supportively, regardless of the circumstances of the death. This small section is a nod to the importance of naming any grief as just that – grief, which comes with challenges and wobbles along the way.

### What to Expect from Each Chapter

Each chapter focuses on particular aspects of bereavement.

You will notice that in various parts of the book I refer to grief being painful. This is not just a colloquialism or something people say. We know from brain science that the regions