

Death and bereavement

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Signs the person has died

The following signs typically indicate that death has occurred:

- Breathing ceases
- No heartbeat
- No response to loud talking
- Eyes are fixed, pupils dilated, eyelids may be open
- Jaw relaxes and mouth remains open
- The person may be incontinent.

What to do next

You do not have to do anything immediately after the person dies and there is no need to call police or an ambulance.

Their body can remain at home for several hours to allow time for family and friends to say goodbye. You may wish to talk to the funeral director if you wish the person to remain at home. However this will depend on the condition of the body at the time of death and you will need to be able to keep the body cool by lowering the room temperature etc. The body should be positioned so the person is lying on their back with their head and chest very slightly elevated, on pillows with their hands on their

chest. It is natural for their jaw to drop, but you can roll up a towel and tuck it under their chin if you wish to close their mouth. Your community or Palliative Care nurse may be able to help with these preparations.

A doctor, paramedic and some Registered Nurses can attend to confirm the death and organise a death certificate. After this, your chosen funeral director can attend to the body and begin funeral arrangements.

Caring for yourself

It can be a time of great sadness for you when the person you have been caring for dies. Grief is a natural response to the loss of someone special and can affect every part of your life, including your thoughts, behaviour, beliefs, emotions, physical health and relationships with others.

You may have mixed reactions including anger, anxiety, depression, disbelief, relief, guilt or numbness. These reactions can be unsettling, particularly if they are not expected. Not everyone will experience these emotional responses and there is no set order for those who do. The length of time the grieving process takes will vary from person to person.



You need to be able to express your grief, remembering that there is no right or wrong way to do this. You may need support during this time from family, friends, a religious figure or a professional bereavement counsellor. A social worker may also be able to help guide and support you with the practical tasks and questions after death.

It is a common myth that people get over grief. The reality is that you will always grieve your loved one but over time the pain will lessen. There may still be things that trigger your grief, months or years later and this emotional response is normal.

Suggested approaches for bereavement self-care include:

- Delaying major decisions if possible
- Finding a creative way to express your thoughts and feelings, such as keeping a diary or journal, writing letters or poems, or creating artwork
- Creating a physical memorial in honour of your loved one
- Allowing yourself to cry
- Exercising, which can help you feel better through the release of natural endorphins
- Drawing on your religious or spiritual beliefs
- Limiting your alcohol and caffeine intake, particularly before sleep
- Sharing memories and stories with others
- Asking for help and accepting support from others.

Caring for your family

Grieving members of your family may need support from you but they may also need space. Everyone has to work through their grief in their own way. The most important thing is to make sure that your family members know that you care. Just being there can be comforting.

One of the greatest gifts you can give someone who is grieving is time and a listening ear. You may find that some people wish to talk repeatedly about the same events and issues, which is quite normal. However, listening to and sharing someone else's pain can be exhausting and it is important to recognise that you too are grieving. Make sure you are conscious of your own needs and responding to them; that being supportive is not inhibiting your own capacity to grieve. You might encourage a grieving relative to seek help from other sources and not be totally reliant on you. They may be able to seek a listening ear from other family members and friends, link into support groups, use the internet to access support material or access counselling or other professional support.

Supporting children

Like adults, children and young people will experience grief in different ways, depending on their age, developmental stage, personality and past experiences. Although most adults will want to be protective of the younger members of their family, it is almost impossible to shield them from the facts and you may be surprised how much they work out for themselves.

One approach to discussing a loved one's death is asking them what they know and inviting any questions. Answer their questions honestly and consistently. They may have an increased curiosity about death, have changes in behaviour and eating patterns, and feel angry towards anyone connected to the death – such as medical staff.



In simple terms, young children tend to worry about three things: Can I catch it? Did I cause it? Who is going to take care of me? You may need to provide reassurance for each of these concerns.

Children and young people sometimes fear they have caused a death through something they said or did. It is important to clarify that they are not responsible in any way. You may need to repeat answers their questions many times.



It is important to use appropriate language with younger children. Use the words 'has died' instead of 'gone to sleep' or 'gone away' as this may illicit fears when the child goes to sleep at night, or if someone goes away on holiday.

Some children will experience a loss of concentration, have dreams and nightmares. As with adults, children's responses will vary.

Some may experience a delayed response as they take time to absorb the loss and its meaning. It is important to take time to talk to them and to listen. They may benefit from creating memories of their loved one, by sharing stories, visiting their grave and creating a memory box.


Where possible, give children some control by allowing them to make decisions they are comfortable with when it comes to seeing their loved one's body or attending a funeral. Try to pose a number of scenarios so they can choose options they feel most comfortable with.

Who to advise of the death

The following list provides a starting point of who you might need to contact to advise of a recent death:

- Australian Taxation Office
- Centrelink
- Medicare
- Australian Electoral Commission
- Public Trustee
- Executor of the will
- Funeral director
- Funeral insurance
- Health insurance fund
- Superannuation fund
- Hospital
- General Practitioner
- Local government
- Social worker
- Post office
- Religious advisor
- Solicitor
- Accountant
- Support services (Commonwealth Home Support Program, Aged Care Assessment Team, etc.)
- Banks and credit unions
- Clubs
- Department of Veterans Affairs
- Employer
- Friends and family
- Landlord or tenants
- Utility companies for gas and electricity.

Services Australia has information in different languages about what to do following a death:

 servicesaustralia.gov.au/death-loved-one

Useful contacts

Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet

- ☎ (08) 9370 6336
- 🖱 healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/learn/health-system/palliative-care

Cancer Council NSW

- ☎ 13 11 20
- 🖱 cancercouncil.com.au

Carer Gateway

- ☎ 1800 422 737
- 🖱 carergateway.gov.au

Carers NSW

- ☎ (02) 9280 4744
- 🖱 carersnsw.org.au

Caresearch

- ☎ (08) 7221 8233
- 🖱 caresearch.com.au

Centrelink

- ☎ 13 27 17
 - 🖱 servicesaustralia.gov.au
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Dementia Australia NSW

- ☎ 1800 100 500
- 🖱 dementia.org.au

GriefLine National

- ☎ 1300 845 745
- 🖱 griefline.org.au

Leukaemia Foundation

- ☎ 1800 620 420
- ✉ info@leukaemia.org.au
- 🖱 leukaemia.org.au

Lifeline

- ☎ 13 11 14
- 🖱 lifeline.org.au

My Aged Care

- ☎ 1800 200 422
 - 🖱 myagedcare.gov.au
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My Health Record

- ☎ 1800 723 471
- 🖱 myhealthrecord.gov.au

National Disability Insurance Service (NDIS)

- ☎ 1800 800 110
- 🖱 ndis.gov.au

National Stroke Foundation

- ☎ StrokeLine: 1800 787 653
- 🖱 strokefoundation.org.au

NSW Trustee & Guardian

- ☎ 1300 109 290
- 🖱 tag.nsw.gov.au

Palliative Care NSW

- ☎ (02) 8076 5600
- 🖱 palliativecarensw.org.au

Relationships Australia

- ☎ 1300 364 277
- 🖱 relationships.org.au

Services Australia

- ☎ servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/contact-us/phone-us
- 🖱 servicesaustralia.gov.au

The Department of Veteran's Affairs

- ☎ General enquiries: 1800 838 372
- ☎ Counselling Service: 1800 011 046
- 🖱 dva.gov.au

If you require an interpreter, contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National)

- ☎ 13 14 50
- 🖱 tisnational.gov.au

If you have a hearing or speech impairment, contact the National Relay Service

- ☎ 24 hour relay call numbers
TTY/voice calls: 133 677
Speak and Listen: 1300 555 727
SMS Relay: 0423 677 767
- 🖱 relayservice.gov.au

Caring for someone as they approach the end of their life can be both rewarding and demanding. It is hoped that this book will help to explain what caring involves, so you are better equipped to make informed decisions which reflect your needs and circumstances.

You matter.



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