

Living with the  
death of your  
parent, brother  
or sister from  
cancer

Now what?



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**headstuff**

**heartstuff**

**practicalstuff**

**handystuff**

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This book is dedicated to my dad, Bert Shilkin. A relationship re-claimed.

*Pauline Don*

introduction  
introduction  
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introduction



Nothing can prepare you for the death of someone you love.

There could be a lot of pain, confusion and hurt going on for you right now.

Some of you may have known that your mum or dad or brother or sister was going to die but for others you didn't know until it happened.

Either way this will be one of the toughest challenges you will ever face.

Grief impacts on every part of you and your life. It messes with you inside and outside, with little 'every day' things and with the big and small events in your world.

Unfortunately there is no rule book on how to deal with this. And this book doesn't try to be one.

The hard part about writing a book on grief is that nothing really fits into nice little neat boxes. Grief is just this really huge thing that comes out of every corner. It is always there and at times it will feel like it is going to completely take you over.



This book might frustrate you a little – you might want answers, might want it to follow a clear order and be predictable. Unfortunately it isn't the kind of book that you can guess what happens at the end once you've read the first page few pages.

Even though the book is divided into chapters you may find that some things are repeated in different chapters. That's because things cross over into different areas that are being covered.

This book is meant to be like a friend who will travel next to you – they may stay by your side the whole time or they may take you in a direction that you didn't expect but they won't fix all your problems, experience it the same way as you or take the steps that you need to take.

There are certain ideas about grief that are the same for many people. But how it feels is different for everyone.

The main message that we want you to take away from reading this book is that no two grief journeys are the same. A bit like your fingerprints – we all have ten of them but not one of them is the same, even though all the fingers belong to us.

Grief is confusing, has a mind of its own and certainly won't behave the way you, or other people, want it to.

What is really, really important to remember is that you can deal with your grief any way that works for you – as long as it doesn't harm you or anyone else.

There is no right or wrong way to do it.

The best thing is that you will realise that you are not alone in what you are thinking, feeling and doing.

While you may find it hard to believe right now, almost all young people do survive the death of a parent or a brother or sister. Life continues and you do get through it.

Believing in that may help you as you face the tough times ahead.

We've had input from lots of young people who have shared the same stuff, so, while we can't give you all the answers, we hope that you find something in here that helps you make sense of the space you are now in.

We have used the terms mum, dad, brother and sister to make it easier to read, but we know that families are all different and that for some of you it might be a step parent or step brother or sister who has died. The term parents is also used, but we know that some of you live in families where there is only one parent.

# What is bereaved?



You will be described as 'bereaved' if your mum, dad, brother, or sister has died.

The word bereavement refers to the experiences that you have after someone you love dies, including strong feelings of grief and loss.

The difference between bereavement and grief is that you can grieve for other things that you lose in your life, like the end of a friendship, a job loss or moving house, but you are only bereaved if someone has died.

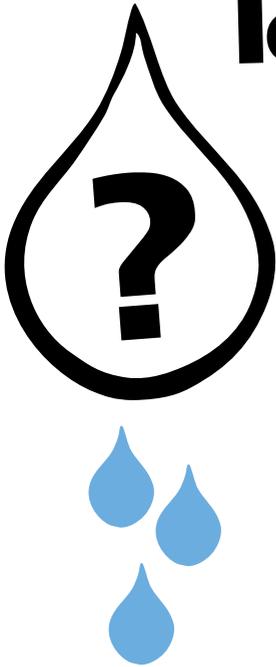
People also talk about being in 'mourning'. Mourning is the way you display your grief. The way you mourn will be different according to your culture, religion and family traditions, as well as your personality.

It doesn't matter what terms you use or how you define it, the death of a parent or a brother or sister turns your world upside down.

## Top Tips

No-one handles grief in the same way, everyone has a different experience.

# What does **GRIEF** look like?



We often have pictures in our head of what things look like. You might have an image of people who are grieving all sitting around dressed in black, crying, sobbing and looking very bleak and sad.

It may surprise you that this isn't always the case. There are so many ways to express grief. Some of them can include:

- Crying
- Wanting to be alone, not wanting to talk to anyone
- Talking a lot
- Being silent
- Laughing
- Wanting to party
- Needing to do lots of physical activities
- Sleeping a lot
- Listening to the same song (often on repeat)
- Not wanting to change anything in the house
- Wanting to move away from where you live
- Throwing things out
- Sleeping with something that belongs to, or reminds you of, your parent or brother or sister
- Talking to the person who has died
- Calling their mobile phone so you can hear their voice
- Doing activities that remind you of them, so, for example, if you helped mum with the cleaning you might clean a lot

## What's normal?

There is no such thing as a 'normal' way to grieve.

Yep it may seem lame, but just as no two people laugh the same way, no two people grieve in exactly the same way.

Everyone in your family will do it a bit differently, even though you are grieving for the same person.

Apart from the fact that you are all individuals, the relationship that each of you had with the person who has died is unique.

Your mum or dad loved your brother or sister differently than you did.

Your relationship with your parent who has died is not the same as that between your parents.

In most cases we grieve the same way we live. What do we mean by that?

Well, if you are someone who tackles problems head on and just gets on with it then you will grieve in the same way. On the other hand, if you are quiet and withdrawn and tend to keep things to yourself, then you will cope with your grief that way.

**Remember: There is no right or wrong way to grieve.**



Grief has a mind of its own. It doesn't follow a neat pattern and it certainly isn't predictable.

There is no checklist for grief. It's not like you get to 3 months and go "OK. Check. Done that stuff, time to move on."

You may be completely shocked by how overwhelming it is, how long it lasts and the fact that it can feel like it comes in waves. There may be times of calm when you feel on top of it and then it can all come crashing down.

It is surprising what can trigger one of those crashes. It's also surprising how long after the death they can still happen.

Sometimes you can prepare for it, like a birthday, anniversary, or school event. Sometimes it may be completely random, like hearing a song, smelling something or seeing someone who reminds you of your parent or brother or sister.

It may also surprise you that the death of someone you love isn't something that you get over (even though other people might think you should). It will always be part of your life; you just learn to live with it.

There is more on this in *How Long Does Grief Last* on page 7.

### A word about crying

If you don't cry it doesn't mean that you aren't grieving or that you aren't affected by the death of your mum or dad or brother or sister.

In fact, crying is just one part of grief (you may be very glad to read this).

Crying in public can freak you (and other people) out. There is a fear that you may look like a wuss (especially for guys) or that others won't know what to do.

You may also be scared that if you start crying that you won't be able to stop. (You will!!)

If you can and want to, find a private, safe place to cry. This might be on your own or it could be with someone you trust.

Crying is a great release. The chemicals that are released in your body when you cry can make you feel less stressed.

You might be surprised at how much better you feel after a good cry – especially if it's not something you usually do.

**Remember: Crying is just one way to express your grief.**





# How long does grief last?

**Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to this question. It is different for everyone and can depend on a number of things, including:**

- What is your relationship with the person who has died?
- What else is happening in your life?
- Have you had someone else close to you die?
- Do you have people who can support you?
- What are your religious or spiritual beliefs about death and dying?

What may come as a bit of a shock is how long it actually takes. You might expect to get back to 'normal' in a few weeks or months and then get angry and frustrated when that doesn't happen.

Other people may also expect you to get back to normal and this can put extra pressure on you.

You may have no idea what 'normal' looks like or feels like now that your mum or dad or brother or sister has died.

Over time things will start to feel better and you will feel like you are on top of things again.

You may even get a surprise when you suddenly realise that you don't think about your mum or dad or brother or sister all the time and that things don't upset you as much any more.

You will still have moments of sadness but they won't last as long or throw you as much.

## Will I ever get over this?

In short no.

Does this mean I will feel like this for ever? No, probably not.

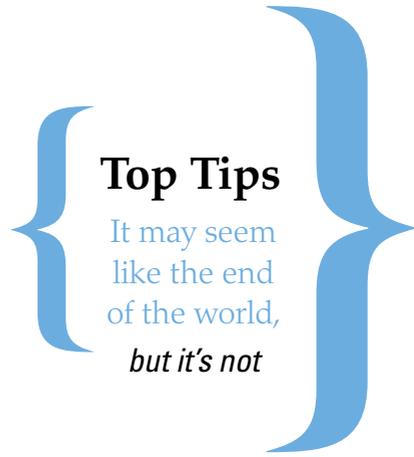
In the past, people talked about 'getting over' the death of someone and used terms like 'moving on', 'moving forward' or 'putting it behind you'.

Those ideas have changed and it is now accepted that you never really get over the death of someone you love, but you do learn to live with it and it becomes a part of who you are.

Think of it like a deep cut. When it first happens, it hurts like anything, it is really raw and you are aware of it all the time. At some point (this can be weeks, months or several years) it starts to heal, it hurts less and you sometimes forget that it is there. But then you bump it, or something touches it and it opens up or the scab is knocked off and it starts to hurt again.

As time goes on the cut heals, but the scar is still obvious and whenever you look at it, you are reminded of it. After a while, the scar just becomes part of you but then there are times that you will look at it and remember how it happened and how much pain it caused.

**Remember: Learning to live with your grief takes time.**



## Caught between two worlds

One of the many weird things about grief is that it is a very public thing – you can't hide the fact that someone has died, yet the feelings that you have are very personal.

This can put heaps of pressure on you to behave in certain ways or you may feel like everyone is watching you.

Some young people describe it as living in two worlds: the outside world where you have to appear normal and do normal things and your private world where you can let it all out and do things that help you with your grieving.

Having your own and other people's expectations about how you should be behaving and what you should be doing all make it extra tough.

This can make you hide what you are really feeling and then you may also get involved in stuff that makes you forget how you are feeling.

There is more on this in *Unhealthy ways to deal with grief* on page 12.

Moving between these two worlds can be really tough. This is where an organisation like CanTeen can help. You can live in those two worlds at the same time and people really do get what it's like.

You can be grieving on the inside and no-one else knows. This can be hard for parents, friends and other people in your life.

Your mum or dad may think that you are all OK cos you keep it all inside.

Adults don't always get it. They may think you are being insensitive or not acting the right way.

Adults and young people grieve in different ways and this can cause conflict.

Sometimes you might just want to 'get on with things'.

Let them know, somehow, that the death of your brother or sister or parent is having a huge impact on you but you just don't want to show it or share it.

**Remember: Everyone grieves in their own way. As long as you are not harming yourself or anyone else, it doesn't matter what you do if it helps you with your grief.**





# *grief*

## **YOU HAVE RIGHTS**

**You have the right to:**

- ✓ Have your questions answered honestly.
- ✓ Grieve anyway you want to as long as it is safe for you and others.
- ✓ Not talk about what you are feeling or share your thoughts with your parents, friends or anyone else.
- ✓ Be angry at the person who has died, yourself, God (or any other being), other family members or the whole world.
- ✓ Not 'get over it' and 'move on' because other people think you should.
- ✓ Have your own spiritual, religious and philosophical beliefs about death and what happens after.
- ✓ Create your own rituals that help you deal with your grief.
- ✓ Talk about your mum or dad or brother or sister who has died.
- ✓ Laugh and have fun even if you are grieving.
- ✓ Go on with life.

# *Dealing with the grief*

It doesn't matter how long it was before you found out that your mum or dad or brother or sister was going to die from their cancer, nothing could have prepared you for when it actually happened, or for the emotions you are experiencing as you grieve.

This can come as quite a shock.

Every family will be different. Some of you may have known for a long time that they were going to die and some of you may have only found out in the last week or days.

When someone you love dies your life is changed forever. Understanding those changes, getting used to them and adjusting to them can take a really long time.

The grief that follows the death of a parent or of a brother or of a sister can have many things in common. However there are some differences that can have a huge impact on how it feels and how you can learn to live with it.

From the littlest thing like one less toothbrush in the bathroom, to the really big things, like having to step into the role of parent for younger siblings, death messes with your life big time.



## Safe ways to deal with grief

Grief can cause some incredibly strong feelings that can make you feel out of control.

Finding safe ways to release these will help and may prevent you from doing harm to yourself.

- Punch a pillow – use your hands, a stick or anything else you can get your hands on.
- Go for a run, walk or do some other type of exercise.
- Watch a sad movie – what a good excuse for a great big cry!
- Find a private space and SCREAM at the top of your lungs.
- Listen to music.
- Write it down. Some people find writing stuff and then tearing it up and throwing it away helpful.
- Recognise when it is getting too hard and take some time out.
- Talk to someone.
- Call a Help Line.
- Take the dog for a walk.
- Eat heaps of chocolate.

## Unhealthy ways to deal with grief

A lot is written about positive ways to deal with grief, but we all know that there are other ways that you can try to cope that aren't exactly so healthy or helpful.

Don't let the fear of people possibly judging you stop you from asking for help.

When it seems like you don't have control over things anymore, you might start to do things that you have control over. This can include things like stopping eating or getting in a car and driving fast.

Taking risks is part of being a young person, but when you are grieving your judgement about what is a safe risk may not be so good.

If you are into any of the following, you may be at risk of doing yourself some long-term damage. No-one will judge you if you are doing any of these. Staying safe and healthy is more important.

Find someone you can trust to share what is happening or use the *Where to get help* section on page 55.

## Top Tips

Find out your own most *helpful* methods and then use them when *necessary*

## Drugs and alcohol

You may start using drugs and/or alcohol to cover up the pain or to try to make it go away. Or you may simply use them to wipe out or escape from what is happening to you.

Without the lecture, this is only ever going to be a short-term fix.

As tempting as it may be for you to use this as a coping strategy, it will not help you in the long term and in fact will only do you harm.

## Hurting others

Feeling angry when your brother or sister or parent has died is OK. Anger sometimes covers up all the other emotions going on underneath. If you don't think you have a safe place to express yourself you may turn your anger on others.

Anger is a natural emotion but violence, physical or verbal, towards others is never an OK way to deal with it. There are better ways to express your anger that don't involve hurting others.

See *Safe ways to deal with grief* on page 16.

## Deliberate self harm

This is when you deliberately harm yourself, usually in secret. This can involve cutting, burning, pulling out your hair, scratching yourself or picking at sores on your skin. Often it is used to cope with difficult or painful feelings.

It's also a way of trying to tell people that you need some support or feel out of control.

Deliberate self harm can give you an instant sense of relief but it is only a temporary solution. You can be left with permanent scars and ongoing issues with your mental health.

## Hooking up and having sex

For some of you hooking up and/or having sex can help make you feel loved and close to someone. When you are grieving you may feel the need for this more and either start having sex before you are really ready or hook up with more people than you would have before. If you are already having sex then the number of partners you have may increase.

While there is nothing wrong with having sex, doing it before you are ready and doing it with more than one person can put you at risk both emotionally and physically.

**Remember: Always practice safe sex.**

## Suicidal thoughts

Dealing with the death of someone you love is very painful. Sometime it is hard to imagine living without that person in your life and this may lead to thoughts about harming yourself. This is not uncommon for people who are grieving.

**If you are having thoughts about suicide it is important to tell someone so that you can get help to keep yourself safe.**

**If you don't have someone you trust then you can call:**

**Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800**

**LifeLine 13 11 14**

**Remember: It really hurts when someone you love dies, but hurting yourself won't make it stop.**



You may be finding it so hard to imagine life without your brother or sister. Your whole world has changed and you don't know what to do.

It's not fair! You may be thinking they were young and had their whole life ahead of them. It seems so unreal and you can't help asking "why?"

It will feel like life will never be the same again – and in many ways you're right.

Not only have you lost your brother or sister, but you may have lost your family as you know it.

You will be dealing with your own grief as well as that of your parents and this can make it twice as hard for you.

### Your grief

There will be a whole heap of mixed up, confusing and really intense feelings and this can be quite scary.

They may be the same as others in your family or they can be completely different.

Relationships between brothers and sisters often swing between being the best of friends to the worst enemies. This doesn't necessarily change when they are dying.

Now that they have died you may have feelings of regret for things that were said or done. It might be all that you can think about. Sharing this can be hard – you might feel like the worst brother or sister and be scared that other people will think badly of you.

You already know that nothing you said or did made them die but this won't necessarily stop you having deep feelings of sadness or regret.

This may be made worse if you didn't get the chance to talk openly with them before they died.

You might be angry with them for dying. They have now left you with parents who aren't the same, who may have shut down and now fight a lot. They have left you with a big mess that you may feel like you have to clean up.

**Remember: Nothing you said, did or thought made them die.**

## Your parents' grief

Children are not supposed to die and parents expect to see their children grow and mature. The death of a child messes all of this up.

Just when you really need your parents, they may not be able to give you the support that you need as they will be struggling to cope with their own grief.

It may be really hard to understand and deal with their behaviour. Because of this you may also feel that you have to hide your feelings and not share your grief in order to protect them.

Understanding some of what they are going through may help you.

## Disbelief

Even though they knew that your brother or sister was going to die there is still a sense of disbelief that they are no longer physically here.

## Sadness

This can be so strong that just getting out of bed each day and doing the simplest things is too hard. They might stop laughing and have trouble finding anything to be happy about.

## Guilt

Your mum or dad may feel that they didn't do all they could, or they may question some of the decisions that they made regarding your brother or sister's treatment. Parents expect to be able to protect their children and when they can't they may feel guilty about it.

If they are struggling with their own grief they may also feel guilty because of the effect this is having on the rest of the family.

## Anger

This is a very normal reaction to something that seems so unfair and so out of their control. Their anger may be aimed at themselves, each other, you, the doctors, God or in fact anyone. How they deal with that can have a huge impact on you – especially if it is not the way you are used to them behaving.

## Overprotective

Your parents may suddenly want to know where you are or what you are doing all the time. This can be a real hassle, especially if you are used to a certain amount of freedom or were just starting to go out and do things on your own. The slightest cold, bruise or ache you get may trigger a real sense of panic in them.

## Withdrawn (tuned out)

Some parents may go the other way and not seem to care what you are up to. While this might be OK to start with, after a while you may want them to care about what is happening in your world.

## Lonely

Your parents may feel that no-one understands what they are going through. (And, like you, they will also get tired of people telling them they know how they feel.) They may stop going out or wanting to spend time with other people because of this. And, just like you, they may feel that after a certain time people expect them to be over it and moving on (don't you just love those terms?) Feeling like they have to pretend and keep things inside can be really isolating.

These strong feelings can affect the way your parents behave. And this in turn can affect your relationship, and what home feels like, and can make things unpredictable.

## Hey – I’m still here!

You may have felt that you were competing for some attention with your brother or sister while they were going through treatment and this can get worse after they have died – strange as that sounds.

You may feel like you can never live up to your brother or sister or that nothing you do can compare to them. It is really common to only focus on the good things about people who have died – they can’t mess up anymore. But you are still you and you will still have the normal hassles that young people have.

This can be really hard.

Some of you may try to be the perfect child and others may rebel and start to act out.

Unfortunately the feelings of “what about me?” won’t always disappear after your brother or sister has died.

In fact for some it may get worse.

After having all these thoughts you might feel guilty about it cos apparently you’re not supposed to think like that when someone dies – but lots of people do.

Sibling grief is not recognised by everyone – there will be a lot of focus on your parents and how they are dealing with it.

Everyone gets that the death of a child is a huge thing – but losing a brother or sister doesn’t seem to get the same attention.

Some young people feel like they have a responsibility to make or do something ‘special’ with their life after a brother or sister has died. This can put you under a lot of pressure. Living someone else’s dream is not easy.



For some of you, the experience has given you a different perspective and many young people talk about how their outlook on life has shifted.

Whichever way you choose to go, it is important to make decisions that are right for you and not simply to please others or because you feel like it is what is expected of you.

**Remember: You have a right to still be you. You can’t replace your brother or sister who has died.**

Like so many other things having some patience and understanding and finding ways to communicate will help all of you adjust to this new situation.

Everyone in your family will be under a lot of stress.

*Talking is tough* on page 21 has some tips on how to talk about what is happening.



# When a parent dies

It doesn't matter which way you look at it or what words you use to describe it, the death of a parent is devastating. When it happens to you as a young person it truly sucks.

It will mess with your head, your heart, and every part of your life. It will hurt so bad that at times you may even wonder if you will survive.

As hard as it may be to believe, you will survive – and adjust to life without them.

Your parent will always be a part of your life, even after they have died. You will just find new ways of connecting with them.

At the moment your sense of security and stability is gone and you may not know what is going to happen.

It is a pretty scary space to be in and the first few weeks may pass in a complete blur. In fact you may not remember much of what happens.

You will be dealing with both practical and emotional stuff.



If you knew that they were going to die then you may have had a chance to do some planning about what was going to happen and put in place some things that would make it less uncertain for you.

However, it won't make the pain any less or make it any easier.

While there is no such thing as one grief being harder to deal with than another, different circumstances can add to the already huge list of challenges that you may now have to face.

If there are also other big changes in your life, like moving house, having to live with other people or changing schools, this can mean that there are more losses that you will have to deal with. At times it may all just seem too much.

Having a parent die will certainly make you different than most of your friends. (At a time when being different is not what you want to be.)



## Top Tips

Don't block the memories of your parent – strengthen them by doing things that help you to remember like making a memory box.



You may be really angry at your parent who has died because they have left you and you feel completely abandoned.

Your sense of loss may be different depending on which parent has died.

What you shared and what you got from each parent is often different. You may have told your mum stuff that you wouldn't tell your dad or you may have had special activities that you only did with your dad.

You may not want the other parent to step in and take on that role, so getting used to not sharing those things will take time.

You might also feel anger or resentment towards other people who try to step in and take on the role of your mum or dad – this could be other family members or family friends.

This frustration is OK and a normal part of adjusting to this massive change. It is important to learn positive and safe ways to deal with these feelings.



# Feelings

*and other mixed emotions*

Grief and bereavement cause all sorts of mixed emotions. You will already have experienced a whole heap of different emotions to do with your parent or brother or sister's cancer.

When you are grieving they can be a whole lot stronger.

## **Sad**

When someone you love dies you may be overwhelmed by feelings of sadness.

You may feel like you will never smile or laugh again. It has been described as a heavy feeling deep in you.

## **Lonely**

Apart from the obvious feelings of loneliness cos you miss the person who has died, you may also feel lonely because there is no-one to share what you are feeling or thinking.

It may feel that you are the only person going through what you are going through. It's OK to want to be alone but it becomes loneliness if it makes you sad and unhappy.

## **Angry**

It is pretty normal to feel angry when your mum or dad or brother or sister dies. There are lots of people you may be angry at; the person who died, the doctors, the whole world, God, other family members and even yourself.

You may think it is unfair (and yes, it is) and want to know why it has happened to you (and your family). You may then get angry at yourself for feeling that way.

Anger is OK. Learning some positive ways to deal with it is important. See *Safe ways to deal with your grief* on page 12.

## **Frustrated**

Because there have been so many changes in your life, everything may feel messed up. Things that you had planned and thought would happen may not, or they will not be the same.



## Panic

There can be a real sense of panic about all sorts of things when you are grieving.

You may panic about your ability to survive and get through it. You might also panic about things that other people think are silly or selfish like will we be able to go on holidays? Can I still go out and have fun? Who will teach me to drive? Will I have to go to another school? Will I fail my exams? Will we move house?

Panic is a normal reaction. Everyone does it, even the adults in your life, although they may worry and panic about other things that they think are more important.

## Scared

A bit like panic. Having someone you love die can make you scared about lots of things. You might be scared to be on your own, scared that other people you love will die or scared about what will happen to you and the rest of your family. Doesn't matter how old you are, you can still be scared of stuff.

## Relieved

If your parent or brother or sister has been sick for a long time and they were in a lot of pain you may be relieved that they are no longer going through all of that. It can be a bit confusing – it doesn't mean that you are relieved that they are dead, just that they aren't in pain and suffering any more. It is OK to feel like this.

## Guilty

There maybe lots of 'what if' moments after your parent or brother or sister has died. You may also have regrets about things you said or did and these feelings can hang around for a long time. It is common to have these, but remember nothing you did said or thought had anything to do with their death. Try to be kind to yourself.

## Nothing

Feeling nothing is not unusual. This can be connected to shock and disbelief. Even if you knew that your parent or brother or sister was going to die, it is still hard to believe that they have died. Sometimes the numbness is a way of protecting yourself.

After someone you love dies it can feel like you are on an emotional roller coaster. Sometimes you just don't know what to feel. You may also be surprised what sets off certain feelings and also that they keep coming back – when you thought you may be over it.

**Remember: There is no right or wrong way to feel.**

Death is a tough topic to talk about (no kidding!!!) Most of us have had little experience in dealing with death let alone talking about it.

If you knew that your mum or dad or brother or sister was going to die then you may have already tackled the task of talking about difficult and painful things and worked out some way to do it.

But all families communicate differently. It can be difficult to talk about stuff if there is a big gap between what you want to talk about and what everyone else wants to talk about.

There may be a real fear that if you talk about the person who has died then you will upset people. This can make honest communicating very difficult.

But difficult things can become even more difficult if everyone goes around thinking about it, but not sharing how they are feeling and talking about what is really going on. The trick is to find ways that you can talk and communicate.

Dealing with your grief is about finding ways to talk about it, but lots of things can get in the way of talking openly.

### **Talking tips**

It may help to think about what you want to ask and what you want to say before you start.

It may be really hard to start with and there may be lots of silent moments. That's OK.

Try not to freak if you or your parent or your brother or sister gets upset – this is not an easy thing to be talking about.



Talking with your parent or parents can be easier if you are doing something else at the same time – driving in the car, cleaning up in the kitchen.

Same for your brothers or sisters – doing something together can sometimes give you the chance to share what is going on.

Try not to worry about getting it right. It may take time to work out the best way to talk to each other.

### **If talking is too hard**

Sometimes talking is too hard but you still want your parents or brothers or sisters to know how you are feeling.

These may help:

- Try writing a letter.
- Find cards that say what you may be feeling.
- Send an SMS.
- Leave Facebook messages.
- Download some music (if you have access to this stuff).
- Draw.

# my body **HURTS**

**Grief is really painful, not just on the inside  
but your whole body can feel it.**

Some physical symptoms include:

- Losing or gaining weight.
- Headaches.
- Sleeplessness or wanting to sleep all the time.
- Exhaustion.
- Body aches and pains.
- Stomach upsets.
- Feeling out of breath.
- Having a 'racing heart'.
- Increase in colds and infections.
- Feeling dizzy.
- Tightness in the throat.

This is why it is important to look after you. If you are experiencing any of the above let someone know.

Physical symptoms may freak you out and you might be scared that you have cancer or another serious illness. This is not an uncommon thought.

That's why it is important to get them checked out – it may stop you worrying unnecessarily.

If you are over 14 you can make an appointment with a doctor without your parent's permission. You will need your Medicare number (you don't need the card just the number).

However, physical symptoms are likely to be an expression of your grief. You can treat the symptoms, for example take pain killers for headaches, but if you don't deal with your grief then they are likely to keep coming back.

### The following are good tips for keeping yourself healthy:

- Eat well throughout the day. Several small meals instead of 3 big ones might make it easier if your appetite is down.
- Get enough sleep. If this is hard, try meditation, relaxation exercises or listening to music. A warm shower or bath or herbal drink before you go to bed can also help.
- Try to keep up with sport or regular exercise.
- Take time to chill with your friends.
- Try to find something that makes you smile or laugh.
- Listen to music that helps your mood.

### As well as having a healthy body, your mind needs looking after as well.

Things to do:

- Learn how to relax.
- Deal with things so that you don't spend time and energy worrying about them.
- Talk to people about how you are feeling – which can be difficult to do at first.
- Write your thoughts and feelings down: try journaling or you can start an online blog.
- Find others who are in the same situation as you. You can find support services at [www.nowwhat.org.au](http://www.nowwhat.org.au)

### Top Tips

Drink lots of *water* after you have had a big cry – helps stop things like headaches and fatigue

When you are grieving, it is normal for everyday things to seem hard and for you to have a heap of mixed and really strong emotions. It is also OK if those feelings continue over a long period of time.

That's why grief and depression sometimes get confused.

Most young people who experience the death of a parent or a brother or sister do not develop depression.

It is sometimes said that depression is about being empty of feelings, but grief is about being full of feelings.

However, sometimes things can start to seem like they are out of control and it can feel like it is all too much. You may start to take drugs (both legal and illegal), drink and/or smoke. You need to be aware that it is these things that can cause your healthy grief to tip over into depression.

If you are worried about how you are feeling and concerned that maybe things aren't starting to feel any better then you may need to talk to someone who is skilled in these things and get some help.

You might be very relieved to know that most young people do survive the trauma of having a parent or brother or sister die and in fact go on to find enjoyment in their life.

That might be hard to believe right now but hanging onto that thought might just give you something to be hopeful about.



## Complex grief

Hopefully you will have gotten the message by now that grief is a normal and healthy response to the death of your mum or dad or brother or sister.

However, there may be certain factors already present in your life that can cause you to experience unhealthy or complex grief. These things can lead to your grief getting stuck, making it really hard for you to learn to live with.

Things such as:

- Family dynamics and your relationship with the person who died.
- Other stressors such as exams, financial worries, friendship problems, physical health problems, trauma, abuse or neglect.
- Experiencing multiple losses.
- A history of depression or mental illness.
- Drug or alcohol use.
- A lack of support.

## What does complex grief look like?

Complex grief can take many forms. You may recognise what's happening for you in one of these:

- Absent grief: When you don't show any signs of grief at all and you just go about your normal day like nothing ever happened. You might find it really hard to accept that they are actually gone.
- Delayed grief: When your grief is pushed away and put on hold because you are too busy or too overwhelmed to deal with it. Unfortunately, grief won't just go away and will eventually make its way to the surface. It may rise up even years later over something completely unrelated.
- Inhibited grief: Your grief may show up in other ways, such as in physical symptoms, like stomach aches or headaches, or having strong feelings of bitterness and anger.
- Chronic grief: This happens when normal grief reactions hang around for a really long time and don't seem to be getting any better. You might feel really intense feelings of missing or longing for your mum or dad or brother or sister every day that mess with your ability to think about anything else. These experiences are common, but in healthy grief, most people can be distracted for short periods.

Complex grief can leave you feeling that life just isn't worth it and that nothing has any meaning or purpose. You may believe that the future holds nothing good for you and that you will never be able to enjoy things again.

If you have these symptoms and they are affecting you at school, work and in most other areas of your life then it may be that you need some professional help.

Try not to panic – there is help out there for you. Check out the websites and phone numbers in the 'Where to get help' section on page 55.



## Top Tips

Let people who are close to you know what is going on – no need to keep it a secret





# relationships; family and friends

The death of a parent or a brother or sister will affect all of your relationships.

Adjusting to those changes will take time, understanding and open communication.

While time doesn't 'fix' grief, it does help with learning to live with it and with re-negotiating changes in relationships.

Relationships with parents and brothers and sisters are as different as we are. Some are very close, loving and supportive while others may be more difficult.

You may have been exceptionally close with your parent and now feel like no one and nothing can fill

the void that is left (who's going to give you those hugs now??) It is true that you only have one mum and dad and that relationship cannot be replaced.

It might seem that other family members (or even friends) are trying to replace that connection. This may make you angry – no-one can replace your mum or dad.

They may just be trying to make sure that you have support when you need it.

You might also have lots of thoughts about all the times and special events that they will miss out on. Preparing for these can make it a little easier.

There are some tips on handling this in *Birthdays, celebrations and other special dates* on page 43.

If your relationship with your parent who has died was not close this does not mean that you aren't able to grieve.

However the death of that parent may cause you to have a whole heap of mixed up emotions about it. Your memories might be painful and you might feel pressured to feel a certain way when in fact that isn't how you feel.

There may be lots of anger, or regret that you didn't get to spend more time with them or get the chance to have a better relationship with them. You may also wish that things had been different.

You might also be completely blown away by how different your brothers and sisters deal with your parent's death.

How can two people who have had the same person die, react in such different ways?

As has been talked about elsewhere in the book – your relationship with your mum or dad is unique and therefore how you grieve will also be your own way.

Grief in families is complicated because each person has to deal with their own grief while also coping with the grief of everyone around them.

This can sometimes cause conflict between you. It is really important to respect each other and allow each other to do whatever helps to deal with the grief.

Of course if you think their behaviour might cause them or anyone else harm, you need to let someone you trust know.

**Remember: You can't make someone else think, feel or behave in the way you want.**

Everyone is trying to learn new ways to navigate the changes in relationships that the death of a parent causes.

If your parents were separated or divorced there may be lots of stuff that has gone on and this can have an effect on your relationship with one or both of them.

No one is perfect – we all have our good points and bad points and this is true even for people who have died.

It's OK to remember the person as they really were – the good, the bad and the ugly.

You might be scared to say negative things about the person who has died. But, if you remember that your relationship with the person doesn't end when they die (it just changes) then having these thoughts is OK.

This may be especially true if it is your brother or sister who has died. You may find that people talk about them in really glowing terms and all their annoying and painful habits, as well as all the times they messed up, somehow get forgotten.

They can't mess up anymore but you can and this may seem really unfair. You might feel like you can never be as good as them or that they are now considered the 'perfect child'. Living up to that memory can be a really tough thing to do.

If this is true for you then it is really important to find someone who you can share these thoughts and feelings with. Keeping them inside can end up causing you lots of pain and also increase the risk of getting into stuff that could hurt you both physically and emotionally. See *Getting support* on page 35 for ideas on who might be helpful.

## Blended families

If it is a step-parent or your mum or dad's partner who has died, you may also have some confusing emotions.

A lot will depend on what your relationship was like with them. It's not uncommon for there to be conflict between different family members as the death of that person will affect each of you differently.

It is also the same for step brothers and sisters or other young people who are part of the family.

Being open and honest (OK – a lot easier said than done) and respecting everyone's feelings will help you all.

**Remember: Whatever you are feeling, it is OK.**

## Friends

If your mum or dad or brother or sister had been sick for a while you will already have learnt that some friends are better at being there for you than others and because of that your friendships have changed.

But when someone dies you may find that even your closest friends have no idea what to say or do. They may even avoid you as they don't know if they can do the 'right' thing.

You might wish that they were better at being there for you.

**Remember: You may have acted the same way as your friends are acting before you had this experience.**

Some of the things your friends may be thinking include:

- What am I supposed to say or do?
- How can I be a friend to someone whose parent or brother or sister has died?
- How long are they going to be like this?

As unfair as it may seem, you may have to help your friends to deal with what is happening to you. They might need help in getting over their fears. Often you will have to make the first move and let your friends know that you are able to talk about your situation.

Let them know how they can help and be there for you.

Below are a few things that you might want to think about concerning your friends.

### Friends don't know what to say

Talking about death is not easy for anyone. It makes people uncomfortable so you may find that your friends will just say nothing. It's not because they don't care, but more that they just don't know what to say.

They may be scared that if they mention the name of your parent or brother or sister who has died that you will get upset.

If you want to talk you may have to start the ball rolling.

### Friends won't say things to deliberately upset you

Sometimes your friends will say stuff that really annoys you and makes you angry. This can be really hard. But try to keep in mind they aren't doing it on purpose; it's just that they don't understand.

### Your friends have their own lives.

It may seem that your friends are just getting on with their lives without you and you feel a little left out. Try to remember that they have their own lives too and they aren't facing the same stuff as you are. They may also not understand that you can't 'just get over it' and even if it feels like a long time for them since your parent or brother or sister died, it often isn't for you.

Because you often grieve in private, your friends may forget that you are in fact grieving.

## Friends may change

It's amazing how common experiences can lead to friendships. You may connect with other young people who have experienced the death of a parent or brother or sister. It may be easier to talk to them about what is happening to you because they understand. Lots of young people say that this is often the best support. You may also lose some friends along the way.

Some people find it too hard and you may also decide that they are just not worth the hassle.

Having supportive people in your life is important when you are grieving.

**Go to [www.canteen.org.au](http://www.canteen.org.au) or [www.nowwhat.org.au](http://www.nowwhat.org.au) to find ways to connect with other young people in the same boat.**

## Your brother or sister's friends

Your brother or sister's friends may not know how to act or what to say.

For some families having these friends stay in touch is a way to maintain a connection to the person who has died.

A lot will depend on the relationship they had with your family before your brother or sister died.

You might not have the energy to deal with them but remember they will be dealing with their own grief associated with the death of a friend.

## Top Tips

Do what you would normally do but *don't pretend* that nothing is happening

# Changing families

At the risk of stating the absolutely bleeding obvious, the death of your mum or dad or brother or sister is going to change almost everything in your family.

What your family looks like, how things are organised, who does what and all sorts of other big and small things will change.

Some of these may have already changed when your parent or brother or sister was diagnosed with cancer. The thing now is that many of those changes will become permanent.

If your brother or sister has died you may become an only child or you may become the eldest or the youngest in the family.

Fitting into that new position may take time – and for some of you it will never feel right.

You could become a single parent family after the death of your mum or dad.

This can mean some really big changes in things like your family's financial situation, a parent going back to work, who does what at home and even where you live.

If you didn't live full-time with the parent who died then your day-to-day life may not change as much. For some of you this may make it a little easier, but it can also mean that it takes longer for it to sink in.

You may have come from a one parent family and now have to go and live with other relatives or friends of your parent. This could also bring huge changes such as new school, new house and new people to live with.

It will be really difficult and take time to adjust to all these things.

Not only are you adjusting to life without your parent, there is a whole new world that you have to get used to.

Finding ways to maintain the connection to your mum and dad may be even more important if everything familiar has changed.

See *Finances, legal and other grown up stuff* on page 49 for some advice on how to manage some these things.

You may also wonder who you can talk to about things that you may have shared with the parent or brother or sister who has died.

Things like:

- Advice on clothing and fashion.
- Shaving.
- Periods.
- Boy/girlfriends.
- Other body stuff.
- Plans for the future.

This may be particularly hard if you now find yourself being the only male or only female in the house.

People can step into those roles and it is possible to navigate those changes – it might just take time and lots of good, open communication.

Getting support from other people is also important. See *Getting Support* on page 39 for ideas on where this can come from.

## Taking on new roles

Changes in the family will more than likely lead to you and other family members having to take on new roles. This is particularly true if it is your mum or dad who has died.

For some of you this will mean that you feel like you have to grow up really quickly and take on adult roles.

Being patient with each other is the key to getting through this and sorting out how you will all adjust to the new situation.

The other thing to remember is that it might mean things get done a little differently – your clothes aren't ironed the same way, your favourite meal doesn't taste quite the same, the house may be a little less tidy, the garden a bit over-grown.

If you are now responsible for these things, go easy on yourself – if your siblings are, go easy on them.

Go easy on your parent too, they are also doing the best they can. Dad might not remember which pads or tampons to buy and mum hasn't got much clue on when you should start to shave your upper lip.

Trying to keep things exactly the same can put you all under a huge amount of pressure.

You may have had a chance to learn some things before your mum or dad died, which may make the changes a little easier.

If you didn't get the chance, don't be afraid of making mistakes and about getting it right.

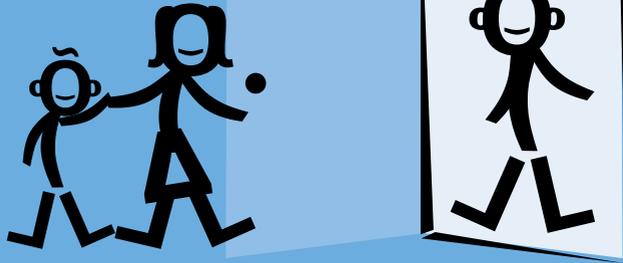
**Remember: Getting support is important. Asking for help is OK.**

It is also OK to get angry about the changes that you have had to make.

You may feel like your normal life has been stolen from you. This isn't fair and definitely not what you asked for. This reaction is perfectly OK. Most of us are happy with routines in our lives and don't like too many changes, especially when those changes feel out of control and life is not how you want it to be.

Again, while time doesn't fix your grief, over time you will adjust to the changes and adapt to doing things differently.

# New partners New families



At some stage following the death of a parent you may have to deal with your mum or dad thinking about, or in fact doing something about, finding a new partner.

This may cause you all sorts of conflicting emotions and challenges.

While you may understand, in your head, their right to do this, in your heart it might be a whole different story.

As you have probably already figured out, everyone deals with their grief differently and everyone's relationship with the person who has died is different.

A relationship between parents (or adult partners) is really different to the relationship between parents and children. So they may learn to live with their grief very differently than you.

Just because your mum or dad has a new partner doesn't mean that they have forgotten the other person or that they have stopped loving them.

You may have your own ideas on how long your mum or dad should wait until they start looking for or having a new relationship. (Lots of other people may also have their opinions.)

If your idea about this doesn't match your mum or dad's then it can cause a heap of conflict.

At the risk of being really repetitive, open and honest communication is the key here.

If possible, find a space to talk when you are not really upset or angry with them. This gives you a better chance of being able to tell them how you are feeling.

But be prepared for the fact that your mum or dad may listen and hear what you have to say but still make decisions that you aren't happy with. (Don't parents do that anyway with all sorts of things???)

**Remember: You have a right to your own feelings – you just can't make others feel the same way.**

There may be a big fear that this new person in your parent's life will:

- Try and take the place of your parent who has died.
- Take your parent's attention away from you – you may not feel ready to share them with someone else.
- Hurt your mum or dad.
- Move in and change things in your home.

The fact that they are dating will be a big reminder that your life has changed and that things will never go back to the way they were.

You may feel really loyal to your parent who has died and be scared that if you accept a new partner you are somehow being disloyal to them.

**Remember: You can maintain your connection to them no matter what anyone else does.**

Even if you are OK with them finding a new partner, seeing your mum or dad dating could be really weird.

You may be protective of them and want to check out whoever they are dating or hanging out with.

So instead of them asking you where you are going, who with and what time you'll be home, you may find yourself asking them.

Like so many other things, it will take time, patience and understanding to get through this.

## Blended Families

A new partner in your parent's life may also mean that other children come as part of the package.

For some of you this might not be a big deal but for others it might be really tough to manage.

So much depends on how it is negotiated, whether you feel like you've been included in the decisions, the time since your parent died and how much it changes the way things were before.

A blended family is a constant reminder that life will never be the same again.

There is no easy way to make this all OK, if you are unhappy about it.

While it would be great if everyone got on well and learnt to like (or even love) each other, respecting each other and being civil may be the best that can be aimed for.

There can be some positives to being part of a blended family, it may just take time to appreciate them – especially as you try to cope with all the other emotional stuff that the death of a parent causes.

In *Where to get help* on page 55 there are some websites with information on dealing with this.

While those people who are close to you will know that your mum or dad or brother or sister has died, there will be other people who you don't see all the time who may not have heard. Sporting teammates, adults who may know your family, uni mates (especially if it happened when you were on holidays) and anyone else you might bump into.

You may have to deal with being asked how they are and then having to tell them that they have died.

For some of you this may be really tough, especially as you know most people aren't too comfortable talking about death.

It may help if you can have a few answers already planned in your head so that you know what to say.

Of course it is up to you what and how much you tell people who are not an important part of your life.

## Answering questions

There will be times after your parent or brother or sister has died where you will get asked questions about your family and your situation.

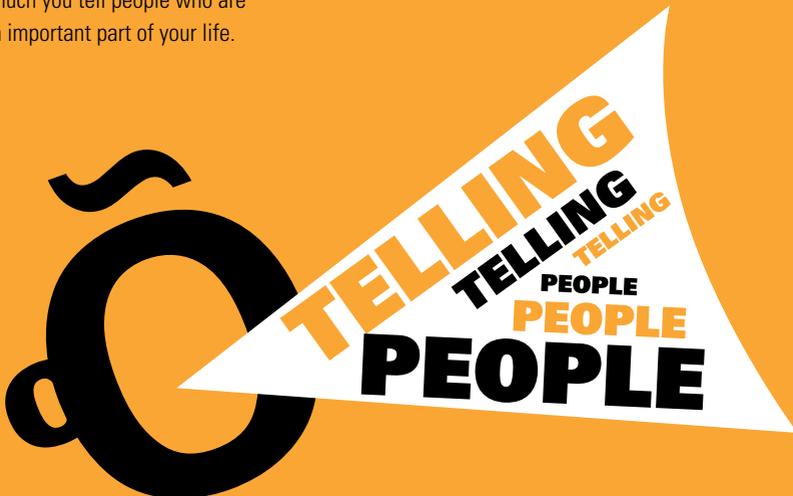
Questions like

- How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- Do you live with your mum and dad?
- What do your parents do?

Again, it might help if you have thought about what to say.

Often the hard thing is that you have to deal with other people not being able to deal with what's happened to you.

Check out *People say the dumbest things* on page 52 for some inspiration.



# getting support

Getting the right sort of support when you are grieving is very important but we know that asking for help can be a pretty scary thing to do.

Because the grieving process lasts for a long time, what that support looks like may change over time and asking for it may get harder – especially if you and others think that you should be ‘over it’ by a certain time.

Where you get your support from now that your parent or brother or sister has died may be different than when they were living with cancer.

Support can come in all sorts of ways. It might be:

- Allowing you to talk openly and honestly about what is going on.
- Helping you keep up with school, uni or TAFE study.
- Going with you to the cemetery.
- Texting or messaging you simply to let you know that they know things are hard.

- Remembering anniversaries, birthdays or other special events.
- Not being scared to mention the name of the person who has died.
- Inviting you over just to chill out (maybe even feed you).
- Respecting your right to deal with your grief your own way.
- Offering to be part of any rituals that you may want to hold.

Everyone in your family will be dealing with his or her own grief and they may not have the energy or the understanding to give you the support that you need.

However it can be a big relief if you can:

- ‘Fess up’ to not doing as well as you would like to be (or are pretending to be).
- Open up about what’s going on.
- Talk about things that are hard.
- Admit that you don’t have all the answers.
- Be honest and let your guard down.

## Who can you get support from?

It may take a few shots at finding the right person, but it's worth making the effort.

A good support person will:

- Listen to you.
- Not judge you.
- Be there when you need them.
- Keep things private (if and when you ask).
- Be honest with you.
- Have a sense of humour.
- Not tell you that they know how you feel.

## Parents

You may find that your mum or dad is able to offer you all the support you need. However, they will be dealing with their own grief and you may be concerned about giving them something else to worry about. Letting them know how they can support you is good idea – even if that is simply telling them that you don't want to talk about it or that you are getting support from somewhere else.

## Other relatives

You may be concerned that your parent or parents have enough to deal with, with their own grief – this may be very true if it is your brother or sister who has died. Other family members can be really helpful.

Aunts, uncles or grandparents are often very willing to step in. They may have already been playing an important role in your life. Use these people to get support.

## Family friends

Your mum or dad's friends can be a great source of support. If they have been a part of your life for a while then they will have some understanding of what is going on. It is even possible that mum or dad spoke with them before they died.

Don't be afraid to ask them to help you out.

## Counsellor

You don't have to be crazy to see a counsellor. Even if you have the support of family and friends, you can say things to a counsellor that you may not want to say to anyone else. The best thing is that you can't hurt their feelings or piss them off. They are skilled in helping to work out ways to cope with anger, sadness and fear. Your school or uni may have a counsellor you can see. Your local doctor should also be able to organise one for you.

The youth organisation, CanTeen, has a free counselling service just for young people whose parent has died from cancer.

Call 1800 CANTEEN or email [support@canteen.org.au](mailto:support@canteen.org.au) to find out more.



## GP

Your family doctor may have known you and your family for a while, so they might understand what is happening for you. Doctors not only treat physical problems, they can help with offering you support. Your grief can also cause physical symptoms and it is important to keep yourself healthy. You don't need your parent's permission to see a doctor if you are over 14, just your Medicare number, not even the card.

## Teacher

Maybe there is a particular school teacher you have a good relationship with. Don't be afraid to let them know what is going down. They work with young people all the time and are usually great listeners and can be an advocate (someone who is on your side) at school.

## Friends

Some friends may be great at giving you just what you need but you may need to ask. Just having people know what is happening can help.

## Religious leaders

Priests, pastors, rabbis or other religious leaders are experienced in supporting people in their communities. You may already be involved in a youth group. They may be able to give you just what you are looking for.



## Top Tips

It is very very  
hard but friends  
will help

## Support groups

Sounds lame? There are organisations that work with young people who are in the same boat. This might not grab you at first (others have said the same thing) but once you actually go you might change your mind. It is said that the best support comes from those who have been there and done that. CanTeen, the organisation for young people living with cancer, has great programs that offer support.

## Online support

There are lots of on-line support groups, blogs and forums for people who have had someone close to them die.

It can be helpful to read other people's stories and know that you're not alone in what you are feeling or experiencing.

Being anonymous and not actually having to ask anyone may be easier for you.

**Remember: Asking for help doesn't mean you've failed. No-one expects you to get through this on your own and other people really do want to help.**



While your mum or dad or brother or sister may no longer be around it is still possible for you to maintain a relationship with them. It will just be a different kind.

You can do this by:

- Talking to them (no you are not mad, strange or odd).
- Talking to others about them and keeping their memories alive.
- Writing letters to them.
- Listening to their favourite music or watching their favourite movies.
- Visiting their grave or the place where their ashes are stored.
- Carrying their ashes or talking to their ashes.
- Developing rituals that help keep you connected.

In fact you can do anything that you feel comfortable with that helps you keep a connection to them.

Things that can make this hard:

- Other people may give you the message, either directly or in a roundabout way, that somehow wanting to do this is not ok or is weird
- It is not always easy to find people you can talk to about your brother or sister or parent who has died.
- You may be scared that you will upset people in your family if you continue to want to keep a connection with the person who has died.
- Other family members not wanting to participate in your rituals or activities.
- If it is a parent then you may struggle if the other parent appears to be 'getting on' with their life.

**Remember: Whatever you do you need to keep yourself and those around you safe.**



# memories

A really big fear after your parent or brother or sister has died is that over time you will forget them.

When someone isn't physically around it can be hard to remember their voice, their laugh, the way they looked or even their smell.

Finding ways to remember can help you.

Some of you may have had the chance to talk about this before your mum or dad or brother or sister died and even made things that will help you to remember them.

If you didn't get that chance before you can still do it.

Here are some ideas for creating and keeping memories.

## **A memory box**

You can buy or make a box to put special things in that belonged to them or that have a special meaning for you. These can include photos, cards, pieces of clothing, toys or any other stuff that will help you keep that connection.

## **Journal**

Keep a journal of your grieving process. This can be really helpful in dealing with all the feelings and the pain that you have. It is also a good way to remember what happened in the weeks and months after your parent or brother or sister died.

Reading back over it is another way to keep the connection.

It doesn't just have to be words – it can be drawings or you can stick pictures, articles or quotes – whatever works for you.

## **Photos**

Apart from pictures of the person who died, photos of bedrooms or any other rooms or places in and around the house can help you remember what you did and what it looked like when they were around. This may be really helpful if you have to move or there are big changes in your home, for example mum or dad has a new partner move in.

## Smells

Smell is one of the most powerful memory triggers.

Your parent or brother or sister may have had a favourite perfume, deodorant or aftershave that they used. You may want to use it or even keep a bottle of it so that the familiar smell stays with you. (Don't be afraid that others will think that you are strange.)

## Voice messages

Hearing their voice can really help retain a memory of them. You may want to download voice messages left on your mobile phone or even keep their mobile phone so that you can listen to their voice. You can do the same with the answering machine on the landline.

## Clothes and other accessories

Wearing clothes, accessories or using things like bags or scarves that belonged to them is perfectly OK.

Some of you may do this privately – like sleep in their pyjamas or with a pillow or toy that was theirs. Again, this is OK and really normal.

## Making something from their clothes

There may be items of clothing that you want to keep but not necessarily wear and you are not sure what to do with them. Making a quilt, a cushion or some other 'comforting' item is a way to find a use for them.

## Food

Cooking and eating certain foods will trigger memories. Learning to cook those dishes so that there is a familiar smell can also help you keep memories alive.

**Remember: Don't let other people's opinions stop you from doing things that will help you maintain a connection with the person who has died.**

You are not weird or freaky – you are just grieving.

There is also no time limit on when you should stop doing any of these things.

For some of you the relationship you had with the parent or brother or sister who has died was a difficult one. It may have been one of conflict, anger and hurt.

In this case, the memories you have may be more painful than comforting.

It is still possible to find ways to have a connection and sort through those conflicting emotions.

**Remember: As long as it is safe for you and others, whatever you do is OK.**

Rituals are activities that you do that can either remind you of the person who died or mark anniversaries or special occasions.

If you practice a formal religion there are often specific rituals that relate to death, funerals, and anniversaries.

If you don't, you can create your own to mark special events and anniversaries.

This can involve the whole family or it can be something that you do just for you, by yourself.

Below are some that you may want to use or that can give you some ideas to create your own.

### **Candle lighting ceremony**

Lighting a candle and saying a special prayer or reading a poem is a powerful way to remember.

### **Planting a tree**

Some families choose a special place to plant a flower, shrub or tree. You can then visit it, decorate it or pick the flowers on anniversaries and other events that you would want to have shared with your parent or brother or sister.

### **Balloon ceremony**

You can buy helium balloons to release on birthdays or anniversaries. Some people write messages or attach photos to them.

### **Sharing a special meal**

This could be about cooking and eating dishes that have a connection to your parent or brother or sister or just about getting together and sharing stories and memories of them while having a meal. Going to a favourite restaurant is another way to create a ritual.

### **Create a special walk**

There may have been places that you used to go to with your parent or brother or sister. If these places are in and around where you still live, you could create a walk that takes them all in and even light a candle or release a balloon at spots along the way. If you no longer live in the same area you could make a special trip back there.



### Online memorial

There are a number of websites that allow you to create an online memorial. You can post photos, write tributes or write about their life. It can be updated and may be especially helpful on anniversaries and other special dates.

There are a number of sites listed in *Where to get help* on page 55.

### Pamper yourself

Doing something just for you on those days that may be hard is another way of creating a ritual. It could be having a massage, going to a movie, buying a new piece of clothing or an ornament.

### Piercings and tattoos

Some young people choose to have their ears or other parts of their body pierced, or get a small tattoo done in a place that is not too visible as a permanent reminder of their parent or brother or sister. (You do need to be aware that it is against the law for people under 18 to get a tattoo, even if you get a parent's permission.)

You can create a ritual around any activity. It is about doing something that honours the memory of the person who has died, has significance for you and helps maintain a connection to them.

Rituals can be one off or they can be carried out every year or on certain dates or events.



# Birthdays and other special dates celebrations

One of the hardest things about the death of a parent or brother or sister is realising that they won't be around to share birthdays, holidays, celebrations and other important events in your life.

These special events can all be difficult after someone has died.

Although the way they are celebrated may be changed forever, they can become special occasions that can be used to remember your mum or dad or brother or sister in a positive way and help to keep them close.

Getting through these tough times can be made a little easier if you can talk about it and plan ahead. As with lots of other issues to do with your grief, balancing the needs of everyone can be really tricky. (And there may be lots of times when you just can't be bothered and that you get angry.)

Sometimes the adults in your life will not think to include you in any discussions about how to deal with things like birthdays, Christmas, anniversaries or annual holidays.

Again, open and honest communication is the key. If you feel like you can't talk to your parents then maybe find someone you trust with whom you can share your thoughts and ideas on what you want to happen around these events. See *Getting support* on page 35 for people who may be able to help out.

As with lots of other things, each of you may have a different idea on how and what you do to mark these events.

Don't expect too much of yourself or other members of your family and also don't feel like you 'should' do or feel anything.

It is important to recognise that it will be hard and that you may need to take special care of yourself.

Often the 'firsts' of these are the hardest – because you can't imagine what it will be like and you may be really scared about how hard it will be.

That's not to say that others won't also be hard and painful, but you may have developed some ways to get through them.

The lead up to the day can be worse than the actual day.

### Things to think about:

Will you do the same things that you have always done?

If not – what will you do differently?

As with everything else, there is no right or wrong way to do it and just because your mum or dad or brother or sister isn't there physically it doesn't mean that you can't share it with them.

Finding ways to do this may take a while and you may choose to do things differently as time goes on.

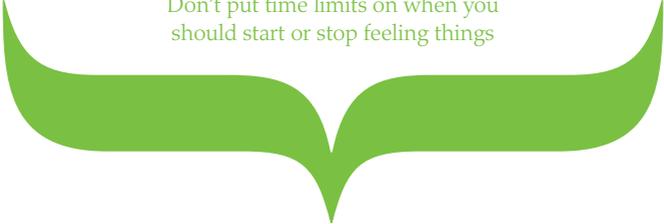
You can use some of the ritual ideas on page 41 to mark the day or you can develop others that are more related to the event you are marking.

A word about friends: You may have already learnt that life for your friends continues on as normal and that they forget that you are grieving. Don't expect them to remember days that have special importance for you. If you need some support during these times, you may have to ask.



## Top Tips

Don't put time limits on when you should start or stop feeling things



# EXPECTATIONS EXPECTATIONS EXPECTATIONS EXPECTATIONS

## *yours & everyone else's*

There is a heap of stuff written about how dealing with the death of a parent or brother or sister gives you a new view on the world and makes you a stronger person.

There seems to be this belief that if you can survive this then you can tackle anything else that gets thrown at you for the rest of your life. This is not always the case.

While it is true that you may find strength that you never knew you had and learn things about yourself that you didn't know, having unrealistic expectations placed on you by yourself, or others, can be really hard to deal with.

You may feel pressured to achieve amazing results at school, study a certain course at uni or go into a particular job area cos that's what you think your mum or dad would have wanted you to do.

Lots of parents place these sorts of expectations on their children, the hard thing for you is that now you may feel that you can't discuss these things anymore and have them understand that you may not want to do what they wanted you to.

This can be true, as well, if it is your brother or sister who has died. Sometimes you will feel that you have to fulfil the dreams and expectations that your parents had for them. If these are not what you want for yourself then it can cause conflict.

Trying to make sense of the future without your mum or dad or brother or sister in it, can take time.

**Remember: Your needs and wants and dreams are still important.**

If religion plays a big part in your life then it can provide you with a lot of comfort and security as you deal with your grief.

However, be prepared for your faith to be tested – you may now start to question God, be very angry and look at your religious beliefs more closely.

It is not uncommon for young people to do this anyway – it's just that this may change the focus or make it more significant.

This might cause some conflicts at home if you no longer want to participate in the customs and rituals of your family's religion.

You might be surprised to find that after the death of your parent or brother or sister you are drawn towards some sort of formal religion. If this gives you support and helps you deal with your grief then it can be a very positive thing.

Even if you are not into traditional religion you might find that you develop an interest in other beliefs and types of spirituality .

Often it's a way to feel like you can get some answers or find some sort of meaning in what is otherwise just a really unfair and awful situation.

## Religious beliefs and spirituality



# SCHOOL + STUDY + WORK

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If you have been living with a parent or brother or sister who has cancer you will have worked out already that the rest of the world doesn't stop because of what is happening in your world. Things like school, other study and work don't go away.

Returning to school, uni, TAFE or work after someone has died can be really hard.

Don't push yourself. Taking some time out to look after you is important.

Grieving can be exhausting both emotionally and physically, leaving you with little energy for anything else.

## School

If you're in school it forms a big chunk of your life. But now you may have difficulty concentrating on stuff because you are grieving and there are heaps of changes in your life.

You may:

- Be tired because you are doing extra things around the house or you are having trouble sleeping.
- Have less time to get your homework done because you have to do extra things at home.
- Find that you just can't get motivated anymore.
- Find that your work is not up to its usual standard.
- Have to deal with friends and teachers acting weird.

If possible, get someone to let all your teachers know that your mum or dad or your brother or sister has died before you go back to school.

Having to tell people can be really hard – especially if you have to repeat the story a few times.

But at the same time you might not want to be treated any differently.

If you are finding things too hard, letting your teachers know may mean they cut you some slack. It will help if you don't have to pretend that everything is OK.

But be prepared for some teachers to think you should be 'back to normal' after a certain time. Many people just don't get the fact that the grief journey lasts a long time.

## Years 11 & 12

If you are doing your final school exams you may be able to apply for special consideration if you have missed work or you are just having a hard time coping with it all.

You will need to speak to your teachers or the school counsellor who can organise this for you.

**Remember: It's not bludging – just recognising that things are really hard.**

## Work

In most workplaces you will be entitled to at least 2 days 'bereavement leave'.

Check with your supervisor, manager or human resources manager about your rights when it comes to taking time off.

As with school and study, don't push yourself to go back to work.

You will have good days and bad days. Don't be afraid to ask for time off.

A lot of work places have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which provides free, confidential counselling to staff. You might find this is really useful after you go back to work.

Check out *Where to get help* on page 55 for more info.

## Other study

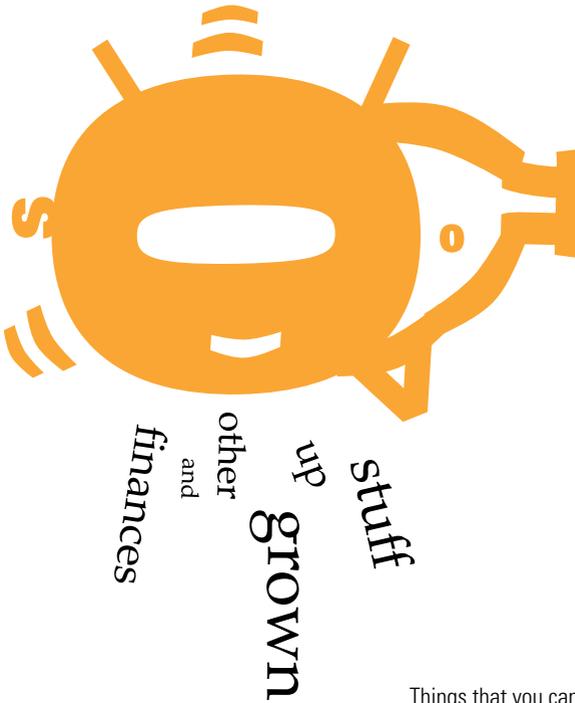
If you are at uni or TAFE, talking to your lecturers, tutors or department heads should help you to work out a strategy to cope with your study work load and with recognition of what is going on at home.

Most campuses have a Student Services Centre that provides counselling and support.

Don't be afraid to take advantage of whatever is on offer to help you get through these tough times.

## Top Tips

Don't give into peer pressure on things like drinking and smoking thinking it will make it better



For some of you, when your parent dies you may have to take on a whole lot of responsibility either for yourself and/or younger brothers and sisters.

This can be really overwhelming and stressful – especially when you are trying to deal with your own and everyone else’s grief.

You may have already been dealing with financial issues, banking, health funds, Centrelink, Medicare and other Government Departments and have some understanding of how these work and people who can continue to help you.

If not, there are all sorts of assistance available. Sometimes it’s a matter of knowing what questions to ask and who to ask.

Things that you can get help with:

- Financial assistance.
- Rent assistance.
- Legal rights.

Where to get more information:

- The social worker at the hospital or hospice (you may already have had contact with them.)
- School counsellors.
- Centrelink – there is a whole section on the website that provides information on what to do when someone dies. Centrelink also has social workers.
- Legal Aid – provides free legal advice.

Check out *Where to get help* on page 55 for links to these sites

## Wills

(probably only an issue if your parent has died)

A Will is a legal document that names the people you want to receive the things you own, your house, money you have and other possessions, after you die. It can also outline what will happen to children after a parent dies.

If there is no Will then you may need legal advice on how these things get sorted out.

If you have had the opportunity to talk about these things before your mum or dad died then what is in the Will won't be a surprise and there may already be a plan in place for what will happen to you and your brothers and sisters.

If this is not the case for you, then it is important to find people you trust to talk about what will happen and what options you may have.

If possible, avoid making big decisions and big changes in the first weeks after your parent has died. In fact, there is evidence that says you shouldn't do this in the first year – although this may not be possible

Apart from the added stress, you may not be able to think clearly and end up making decisions that are not right for you and other family members.

## Managing money

Some of you may now find yourself responsible for managing the finances for yourself and or your

brothers and sisters. This could be as simple as having to do the weekly shopping or it may mean having to look after all the finances for the family.

Knowing how much you have to spend and what you need to spend it on will make it a whole lot easier. That's what a budget is.

Here are a few tips that can help you tackle this:

- A good idea is to list all the things that you need to buy and pay for on either a monthly or weekly basis.
- Always put aside money for the essential things first, like food, rent/mortgage payments, electricity and health care.
- Get a calendar and write on it when the regular bills come in and need to be paid.
- When you are doing the shopping, make a list and stick to it. Having a trolley full of TimTams and ice-cream and then no money for meat and veggies (and no toilet paper) isn't so smart.
- Another way to avoid the 'lots of food but nothing to eat' trap is to work out what you are going to eat/cook for the week, make a list of all the things you need and then make sure you buy it all.
- Supermarkets are cheaper than convenience stores.
- Don't put the envelopes with those little see-through windows in the top drawer and forget about them. They are most likely bills and won't go away just because you didn't open them. (Or they could be offers for credit cards that you don't want or need – in that case, bin them.)

**Remember: You don't have to do all of this on your own and it is OK not to know how to do things. Don't be afraid to ask for help.**

# Become your family's *Masterchef*

If your mum or dad has been sick for a while you may have already mastered some kitchen basics.

If not then it may be quite a shock to you if you now have to cook for yourself and the rest of the family.

In the early days after your mum or dad died, people may have dropped food over so that your family didn't have to focus on cooking. However once that stops and the freezer is no longer stocked you may have to start preparing meals on a regular basis.

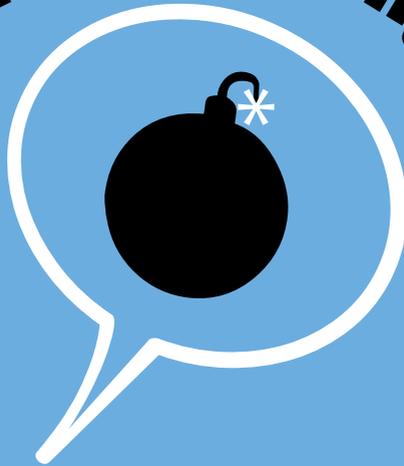
The following tips will help to make this job a little less stressful and mealtimes a little less boring:

- If cooking is new to you find some simple recipes that don't have too many ingredients or too much preparation. There are some recipes on the website [www.nowwhat.org.au](http://www.nowwhat.org.au) or you can Google recipes that you might want to try.
- Ask someone to show you some basic things to get started (like how to turn the oven on).
- Sandwich makers are an invaluable piece of equipment.



- Stock up on things like pasta, bottles of pasta sauce, pizza bases and other healthy pre-prepared meals.
- Buy some frozen meals to have as emergencies. In the freezer section of the supermarket you can find a variety of these.
- Try to get enough protein from meat, fish, eggs, nuts and beans. Tinned tuna or tinned baked beans are great ways to get this.
- If you have to cook for the whole family reserve one 'cooking' day a week to make big batches of family food that can be frozen then reheated (or added to lunch boxes) without too much effort.
- Planning your meals for the week might sound lame but can be really helpful. This will also help with the shopping.

# People say the dumbest things!



You may be surprised to discover that people say the dumbest things when someone has died.

As hard as it may be, try to remember that they are not deliberately trying to be insensitive or say things that are stupid, it's just that death makes most people really uncomfortable.

Because they don't have the right words to express themselves, they feel the need to fill the space with these sorts of unhelpful comments.

Here is a selection of the most common that get used. If you feel brave you can actually use the responses (or put them into your own words) or they might just give you a bit of a laugh.

**"They are in a better place now. They don't have to suffer anymore."**

Really – better than being alive and well and here with me? And yes I know that they aren't in pain anymore but I am. And I would give anything to have them here with me, not anywhere else, better place or not!

This also assumes that I believe in some sort of after-life – well maybe I don't!

**"If you look around, there's always someone worse off."**

Thanks for that but right now all I can focus on is the fact that I have just had one of the most important people in my life die and I don't really have the energy to think about anyone else.

**“Keep your chin up.”**

Why, cos that makes it easier for you???

Actually all I really want to do is scream, cry, yell, run away, punch something or someone and I’m sorry if that makes you feel uncomfortable.

**“You’re only given as much as you can handle.”**

Who made that one up? Who decides that and who gives it out? Maybe I would have liked a choice in things I get to handle?

**“Remember, it’s God’s will” or “God only takes the special ones.”**

Firstly don’t assume that I believe in God. Secondly that doesn’t make it any easier and finally “Why wasn’t it God’s will to let them live??”

If being special means dying young then give me not special any day.

**“Well at least you had them for ...( insert the appropriate number) years.”**

And that’s supposed to make me feel better how? And if I live until I’m 85 that will mean that I have missed out on having them for ...(insert appropriate number) years.

**“I know just how you feel.”**

No, you don’t! No one else can know how this feels for me. Everyone’s feelings are uniquely theirs. I can’t begin to tell you how much that pisses me off when you say that.

**“Now you have to be the man/woman of the house.”**

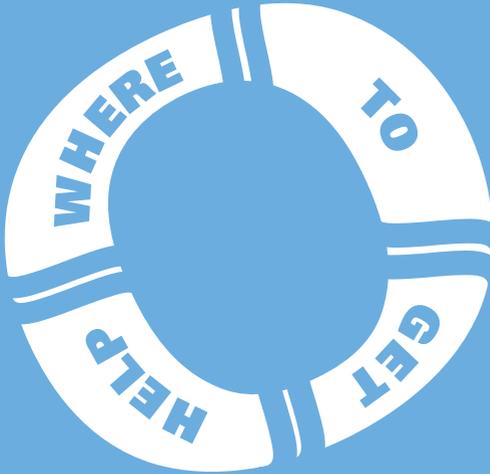
Do I? I’m not so sure that I want to be. I was quite happy when my mum or dad was, thank you. Have you forgotten that I am still a young person?



**Top Tips**

**Breathe through it**





There are lots of reliable organisations and websites out there willing and able to offer you help. They are usually free.

### **Counselling**

The Australian organisation, CanTeen, has a FREE counselling service especially for young people whose mum or dad has died from cancer. You can access counselling in person, in group sessions, on the phone or online. Call 1800 CANTEEN or email [support@canteen.org.au](mailto:support@canteen.org.au).

### **Cancer info, stories and support groups**

#### **[www.canteen.org.au](http://www.canteen.org.au)**

CanTeen is a fantastic organisation for young people aged 12-24. They run a whole lot of programs that are aimed at linking young people together who share similar experiences. They work with a lot of bereaved siblings and offspring.

#### **[www.nowwhat.org.au](http://www.nowwhat.org.au)**

A website designed specifically for young people living with cancer including those who have had a parent or brother or sister die from cancer. It offers practical and relevant information, a place to find support through forums and blogs, plus some ways to connect with other young people in the same situation.

#### **[www.redkite.org.au](http://www.redkite.org.au)**

RedKite provides services to help families who have had a child die from cancer. You may be able to access bereavement counselling, financial support or other services. They also run a telephone support line.

#### **[www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)**

The Cancer Council provides support to families who have experienced bereavement due to cancer. Access the Cancer Council in your state from this national site to find local services.

### **Grief, feelings and mental health**

#### **[www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)**

A site especially for young people going through tough times. Reach Out has fact sheets on grief and loss, depression, self harm and drug and alcohol use.

#### **[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)**

This has a free and confidential online counselling service as well as other helpful information on dealing with tough things.

#### **[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)**

This is a national organisation that has useful information on counselling, health, accommodation and a whole lot of other services.

#### **[www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)**

This is the youth website of beyondblue: the national depression initiative. It has links to other support organisations and also a list of doctors who have experience in dealing with depression. There are also fact sheets on depression.

## Handy Stuff/Where To Get Help

### [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

Headspace is an Australian site that supports young people with mental health issues. There are useful information downloads and links to organisations that provide services.

### [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)

A fantastic website with loads of stuff that is helpful and supportive for young people experiencing grief.

### [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)

A great site with information on things like healthy eating, drugs and alcohol, relationships and money and finances.

## Bereavement support

### [www.livingyears.com/nowwhat](http://www.livingyears.com/nowwhat)

This website allows you to create an online memorial for your parent or brother or sister. There is normally a fee to do this, but for young people who have a copy of Now What...? it is available free of charge for 12 months.

It is a safe and secure site. Only invited friends and family can view your page.

### [www.childhoodgrief.org.au](http://www.childhoodgrief.org.au)

This is the website for "A Friends Place", where young people aged 3-18 grieving a death can share their experience and get information and support.

### [www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk)

RD4U is a UK website designed for young people by young people. It has games, stories, message boards and suggestions for dealing with the death of someone close.

### [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

Another UK website, Winston's Wish provides services to bereaved children, young people and their families. There is a page for young people that has interactive links, podcasts and blogs.

### [www.childbereavement.org.uk/for\\_young\\_people](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk/for_young_people)

A UK website that has easy to read information about a number of topics relating to the death of a parent or a brother or sister.

## Legal and financial help

### [www.lawstuff.org.au](http://www.lawstuff.org.au)

If you have questions about things like Wills, where you want to live and with whom, or any other legal matters this website provides a lot of answers in easy to understand language as well as links to other legal sites.

### [www.australia.gov.au/life-events/death-and-bereavement](http://www.australia.gov.au/life-events/death-and-bereavement)

This is a direct link to Centrelink's bereavement support page. It has information on payments and services available to you after the death of a family member. There are also heaps of links to other really useful websites.

## Telephone numbers

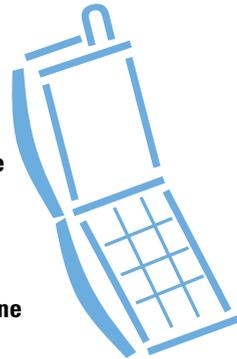
**Kids Helpline**  
1800 55 1800

**LifeLine**  
13 11 14

**Cancer Help Line**  
13 11 20

**CanTeen**  
1800 226 833

**RedKite Telephone Support**  
1300 722 644



# Memory Page



stick photo here

The things I most want to remember about . . . . . are:

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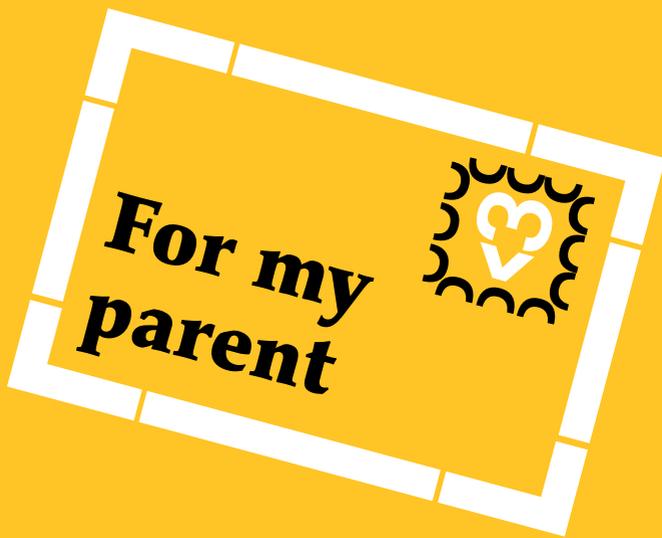


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**I know that this is really tough for you as well and that we are all trying to deal with this grief stuff the best that we can.**

Sometimes I am not really good at telling you that I think you are doing a good job.

But here are a few things that I want you to know:

- Thank you for helping me get through this.
- Thanks for letting me do things. I know this is tough for you.
- I wish you didn't have to be a mother and a father.
- Thanks for being my taxi.
- I wish it wasn't so tough for you.

You can write other messages that you want them to know in the space below.



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**Love**

# Acknowledgements

**Now What?** Living with the death of your parent, brother or sister from cancer.

Free copies of this book are available by calling CanTeen on 1800 226 833 or by going to [www.canteen.org.au](http://www.canteen.org.au)

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**CanTeen Australia**

GPO Box 3821, Sydney NSW 2000

Free Call: 1800 226 833

ABN: 77 052 040 516



This book is intended as a general introduction to the topic and should not be seen as a substitute for advice from doctors or other health professionals. All care is taken to ensure that the information contained here is accurate at the time of publication.



