

Bereavement

Unfortunately, at some point in all of our lives we will experience losing someone close to us. Discussions around death and bereavement are difficult for anybody to have, however, there are additional considerations to think about when having these discussions with an autistic person.

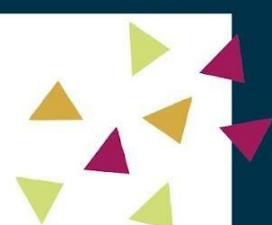
Bereavement is defined as a period of mourning and grief after the loss of a person. Everybody grieves differently and there is no right or wrong way to do this. Feelings experienced during bereavement may include:

- Numbness
- Feeling dazed
- Depressed
- Tiredness
- Anger
- Guilt
- Anxiety

As mentioned, everybody grieves differently; somebody may display all of the above feelings or some or none of them. This does not mean they are not grieving. Autistic people may begin to show more pronounced behaviours such as an increase in repetitive behaviours or obsessions or an increase in sensory differences. It is common for anybody grieving to not react straight away - a lot of people can experience delayed grief.

Tips to help an autistic person deal with bereavement:

- Understand that autistic neurology is different: some autistic people will have alexithymia, meaning it may outwardly appear that they are not affected by the passing of someone, when actually they are having difficulties making sense of their emotions.
- Encourage spending time on special interests: **doing** something enjoyable can be a welcome distraction and comfort during a difficult time.
- Daily routines should be kept the same where possible: predictability and consistency can be a huge comfort and will also avoid additional stress and anxiety.
- Use direct and concrete language when explaining death: autistic people can often take language very literally. Telling the person that someone has died and gone to heaven can be very confusing and upsetting as they may think they can go visit them in heaven. They also may not understand why the deceased person cannot return from heaven to visit.



Avoid using phrases such as “they have gone to sleep,” or “we lost them” or “they aren’t in any pain now” - these phrases can have two very different meanings when taken literally and an autistic person who feels pain may think that death is a way out of feeling this.

Where possible, and if appropriate, be direct and use phrases such as “they are no longer able to breathe” or “Their body has stopped working and cannot be fixed.

- Provide opportunities for participation in the funeral planning: where appropriate, support involvement in the planning of the funeral process. This may help their understanding; however, it is important to prepare the person for what they may face.
- Create a memory box together: using visuals such as photographs, videos, or actual items from the individual can be a pleasant reminder and can provide comfort.
- Visual stories: these should be very specific for each event or situation and should cover what actions are expected by the autistic person, information on what others may be feeling or doing during this time, and any new changes.
- Validate feelings and be responsive to them: **do not** tell the person how they should grieve, ensure they know that it’s ok to respond differently to others.
- Read books with the person on bereavement and death: this can help to make the concept more understandable.
- Offer reassurance: in cases of sudden deaths the autistic person may get anxious that this will happen to them - you may need to reassure them.

Changes in emotions and behaviours are a natural part of dealing with loss. However, if you think the person is unable to move on from the death and is experiencing a depressive state you should talk to your GP as soon as possible to discuss support available.

