

Grieving the Chosen Death: Assisted Dying Grief Support Resource

There is a need for more assisted dying bereavement support. A team of specialists in grief and assisted dying developed this resource based on research with 25 family members bereaved after an assisted death.

What is grief?

Grief refers to the normal psychological, emotional, and behavioural reactions to any significant loss or the perception of loss.

What can feel different about assisted dying grief?

Grief before and after an assisted death can include experiences that may feel unfamiliar or unexpected. You are not alone.

Before an assisted death, many family members or friends describe living with a sense of a “countdown”, knowing that a specific date is approaching. This can make the loss feel very real and present, even before it happens, and it can be emotionally exhausting.

You may have been actively involved in the journey of arranging an assisted death, supporting their decisions, helping with plans, or being present at the end. This can bring a sense of closeness and meaning, but it can also feel emotionally heavy or complicated.

Some people notice their thoughts often returning to their family member's decision to have an assisted death, wondering if it was right or at the right time, replaying moments, or trying to make sense of what happened.

And at times, it may feel hard to talk openly with others. You might not be sure who will understand, or how they will respond.

There is no “correct” way to feel

You may feel comfort that they were able to die on their own terms and also feel conflicted. You might feel sadness and deep loss, alongside relief that the person's suffering has ended, or peace that they died in a way they wanted. You may feel love, relief, sadness, pride, anger, doubt, guilt, or numbness; all at the same time or in waves.

It is very common to feel many emotions at once.

Your feelings do not need to match anyone else's expectations.

Grief before and after: what you might notice

Before the death

Even if you don't think of it as grief, you may be grieving before the death has occurred. You might find yourself thinking about life without them or feeling the loss before it has happened. Knowing a likely date, or that time is limited, can make this feel especially real.



For some people, this is when they needed the most support to work through this new way of dying.

Making the most of the remaining time can involve meaningful conversations, saying things that matter, sharing memories, or simply being together in ways that feel important. For some, this time is one of deep connection, even as sadness and the anticipation of loss are present.

The day of the assisted death

The day of the assisted death can feel uncertain, not knowing what to expect, how to say goodbye or how to feel. Sometimes people are surprised by how quickly the person dies after receiving the medication.

There is no right way to respond to, or feel, in this moment. Some experience the death as calm, beautiful or peaceful. Others feel strong emotions, feel numb, or something in between. You may wonder why you feel “okay,” or why you feel more affected than you expected, even though the death is planned. Your feelings are unique to your own experience.

After the death

After the death, many people notice themselves moving back and forth between different ways of coping. At times, you may feel the loss strongly, missing them, feeling sadness, or thinking about the death. At other times, you may find yourself focusing on everyday life, organising things, returning to routines, or taking small steps forward.

Many people also find ways to stay connected with the person who died, through memories, stories of their life and death through assisted dying, or ongoing actions that advocate for what mattered to them.

Why your mind keeps going over it

After supporting a person through assisted dying, it can be common for your mind to return to the day of the assisted death and reflect on what happened. You may ask questions, revisit decisions, or reflect on why things unfolded the way they did. You might imagine how things could have been different or try to make sense of everything that happened.

This is a natural part of how people process loss. Your mind is trying to understand something significant, new, and irreversible.

When this happens, it can sometimes help to gently ground yourself:

- What am I asking myself right now?
- What do I need in this moment: information, reassurance, or rest?

You do not have to answer immediately. Some understanding comes with time.

Talking or not talking about assisted dying

You get to decide who you talk to, what you share, and when.

Some people find it helpful to speak openly about what happened. Others prefer to keep the details private, especially if they are unsure how others will respond. Both approaches are valid. You might feel tension between your own and others' beliefs. This can make conversations feel difficult or potentially unsafe.



It can help to have a few simple ways to respond:

- “Thank you for caring. We’re keeping the details private.”
- “Right now, I’m focusing on grieving, not discussing decisions.”
- “It would help more to talk about them, rather than the circumstances.”

Protecting your story is a form of care for yourself and for the person who died.

Things that can help

Staying connected

Many people find comfort in continuing their connection with the person who has died. This might mean talking to them, writing to them, sharing stories, or remembering them in ways that feel meaningful. There is no single way to do this; it is about what feels right to you. It is also important to maintain connections with the people who matter to you during this time.

Making sense of things

It can help to reflect on what mattered to them, and to you. Talking with people you trust, or taking time to write or think things through, can support this process. Meaning does not have to be clear straight away; it often develops gradually.

Cultural or spiritual practices

If you find meaning in cultural, religious or spiritual practices, it can be helpful to carry out or adapt these in ways that feel fitting. Grieving together with whānau, family, or community can help you feel supported and grounded in something larger than yourself.

Getting through each day

Grief can affect your energy, focus, and capacity. On difficult days, it can be enough to choose one manageable task. Rest when you need to. It can help to gently bring your focus back to the present moment, rather than getting caught up in the past or the future. There is value in simply getting through the day.

When it feels harder than expected

Sometimes grief can feel particularly intense or difficult to carry on.

You might find yourself feeling stuck in guilt or self-blame, replaying distressing moments, or feeling isolated because you cannot talk openly about what happened. You may notice that your thoughts or emotions feel overwhelming or hard to shift.

If this is happening, it does not mean you are doing grief “wrong”. It may mean you need more support.

Talking with a trusted person, a counsellor, or a support service can make a difference. You do not have to carry this alone. Working through your feelings with a grief counsellor may help you to move forward over time.

“I always think just being open about it and having open conversations about it actually helps.”

Family member participant



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Where to go for help

Professional support

- Your GP Practice may be able to refer you to some funded or subsidised counselling sessions, depending on where you live.
- If your work provides Employee Assisted Programme (EAP), this can also be used.
- There are also specialised assisted dying counsellors you can find online.
- Call [1737](tel:1737) for a free, confidential and 24/7 mental health support
- [Tend](#) - Book a free 30-minute video call with a mental health clinician. No referral or enrolment needed. Open to all NZ residents 16+, 8am - 8pm weekdays.

Peer support

- [Lean On Me](#) – a NZ and Australian peer support network for people and their supporters going through and after assisted dying
- [MAID Family Support Society](#) (Canada)
- [Willow Family Peer Support Group](#) (Australia)

Written resources

- Thinking It Through – a research-based guide for people applying for assisted dying.
- [How to talk to tamariki/children and mātātahi/young people about assisted dying - A guide for Mātua/parents and caregivers](#) by Kenzies Gift.
- [The many faces of MAID: What to Expect When Someone You Know Chooses Medical Assistance in Dying](#) by Cynthia Clark and Carol Cram.



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Contact

If you wish to contact the Assisted Dying Service team, you can phone [0800 223 852](tel:0800223852) or email AssistedDying@tewhatuora.govt.nz

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