

BEREAVEMENT AND GRIEF. NOTES FROM A GP.



Dr Vishahan Retnasingham shares his thoughts with YOL! and also his process for supporting patients with a bereavement.



GPs work with their patients to deal with their health, from the 'cradle to the grave'. What is often forgotten is what happens after death from the perspective of the health of loved ones.

[Mind has a useful page](#) on bereavement which defines bereavement as: 'the experience of losing someone important to us. It's characterised by grief, which is the process and the range of emotions we go through when we experience a loss.'

The [information from Mind](#) is useful for both clinicians and for those who are bereaved. Reading about bereavement may not be suitable for everyone who has lost someone, and is something that may be appropriate at different times for different individuals. However, it can be a useful step in understanding the varying emotions one experiences during loss and the stages involved.

As GPs, we often form connection with our patients over many years of treating them. When this is the case, those suffering bereavement may seek support from GPs who may know them well and also know those they have lost. Unfortunately, due to access issues this support may sometimes come from GPs who aren't as familiar with the patient, or the person they have lost.

However, whether the GP has that connection or not, the response should be empathetic allowing time to support those who have lost someone. In my own practice, if I am unable to provide a longer appointment in the middle of a surgery, I will try to book the bereaved patient at the end of a clinic to allow more time. Additionally, I would book them review appointments as the bereaved patient would like.

Being a supportive ear who is non-judgemental is really important and this cannot be done by rushing the patient out the door.



From my own experience of dealing with patients, I feel it is important to treat each loss with a personal touch. Referencing the lost patient. Asking the bereaved person about how the loss has affected them

and those close to them. The way others around us react to bereavement can also affect how an individual themselves react to bereavement.

As a GP I would ask the patient if there was anything I could do to help support them. Sometimes grief can have immediate impacts on biological functioning, including sleep, and we may offer support and intervention to facilitate some kind of routine and structure.

It's important to reassure the bereaved that what they are experiencing is a natural human response to one of the hardest things we experience in life. It is ok for them to seek support from friends, family, and the community with the latter including GPs and medical staff.

We also make it clear it is ok to come back and see us for further support. At a time when GP appointments are hard to get, the bereaved should not feel they are a burden to NHS resources. The continuity they can get from a GP can be important in helping manage and facilitate their needs in a very difficult time.

Additionally, I try to explain that bereavement is a natural process and that there is nothing wrong with them experiencing difficult emotions, or being tearful and upset. It is a process that eventually hopefully helps in them managing a deep and often painful loss. However, it does not mean this loss will ever be forgotten.

As GPs, we also realise what works for one person may not work for another. It is important we try to be responsive to the individuals needs and responses that we see and feel from them in their consultations.

Signposting in terms of support during and after bereavement is an important part of helping support our patients. For some bereaved patients they may need further support as part of the bereavement process with bereavement counselling. Bereavement counselling is often something that we signpost later in the process but if patients are really struggling to function day to day we do so earlier. We refer locally to Kingston Bereavement Service.

Most importantly our aim is to support the bereaved by trying to make sure they can have an empathetic ear to turn to when they need us, answering their questions as best we can, signposting them, and reassuring them that what they are feeling is a normal natural process.



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