

Navigating bereavement and grief: a guide for retired school leaders



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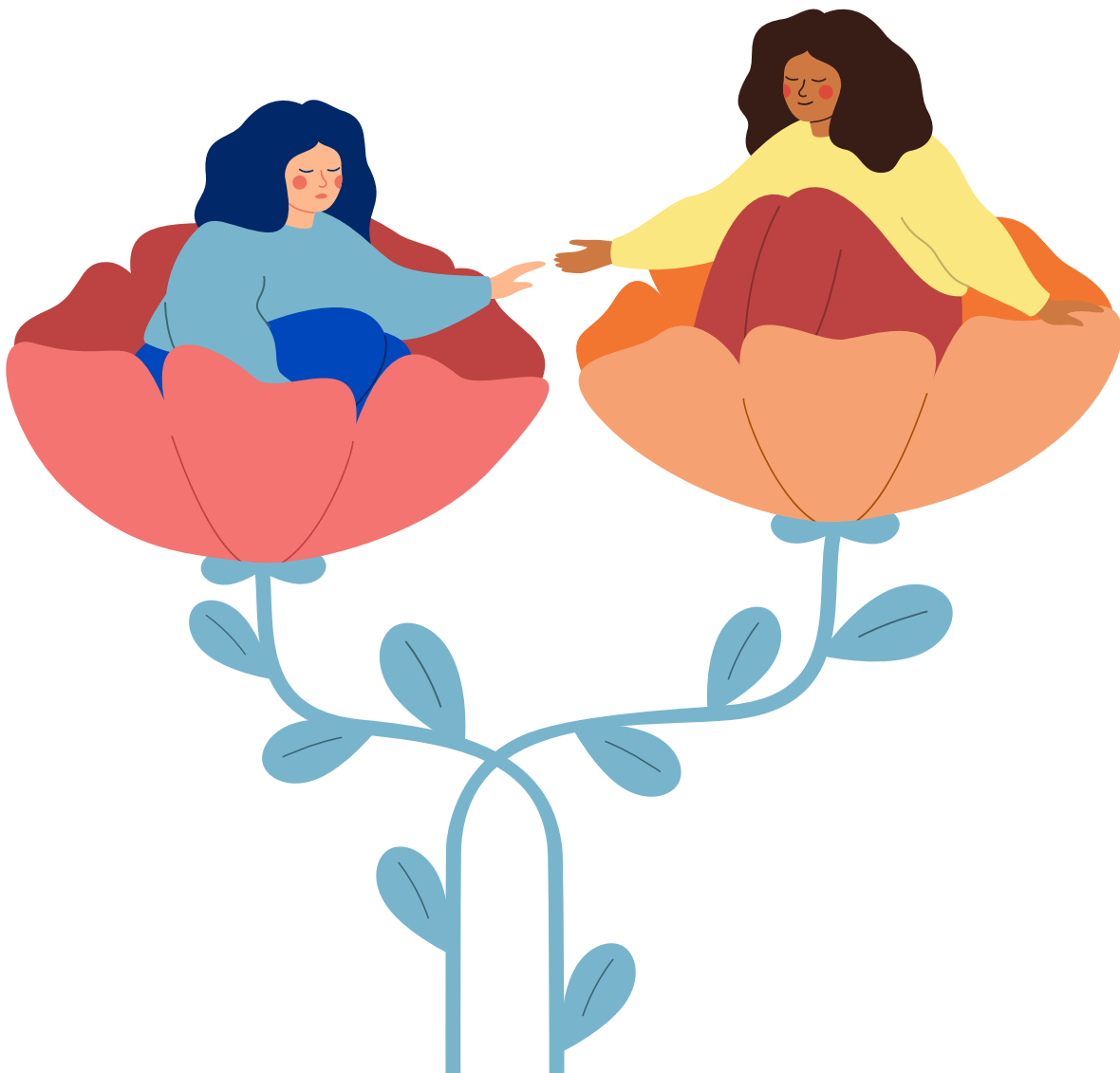
Introduction

Experiencing bereavement and grief can be one of life's most profound challenges. Retirement can add new layers of change that make grief feel even more complex. This guide, produced in collaboration with NAHT, for retired school leaders, has been created to help you understand and manage the emotional, physical, and practical effects of grief during this stage of life. It explores different types of grief, how they may appear in your daily life and offers compassionate, practical advice for coping and finding support.

With special thanks to Dr Erin Hope Thompson MBE, Clinical Psychologist and founder at The Loss Foundation, whose expertise and insight into bereavement have been invaluable in shaping this guide. Together with NAHT, we hope this guide provides understanding and reassurance that you do not have to cope alone.

[You may find it useful to read this guide alongside:](#)

[From school leadership to retirement: how to prepare and protect your wellbeing](#)



About bereavement, loss and grief

Bereavement refers to the state of loss when someone close to you has died. Grief is the emotional response to that loss. While bereavement is a specific event, grief is a deeply personal and ongoing process that may manifest in different ways over time. Understanding the distinction may help some people better acknowledge and address the full scope of their experiences.

Different types of grief

Grief can present in different forms and it doesn't present in the same way for everyone. However, having the range of descriptions below can help some people recognise what they're experiencing:

- **Anticipatory grief:** experiencing loss in advance (for example, when a loved one or former colleague becomes seriously ill).
- **Complicated/prolonged grief:** when grief persists, or becomes intensively distressing and may require more targeted support.
- **Cumulative grief:** when a person has experienced multiple losses over time and these build up, intensifying the impact.
- **Delayed grief:** when grief may not fully present immediately, perhaps because of focusing on retirement transition or on helping others, then it emerges later.
- **Collective grief:** sometimes grief is shared by a group (for example retired peers or former colleagues) or develops in relation to multiple losses (colleagues, friends, role, your identity as a school leader).

However, it can help to know that grief is not a "one-size-fits-all" experience, and you may not recognise any of your experiences in the descriptions above. That's okay. Grief is not the same for everyone, it is also not linear and it does not follow a fixed timetable.



Acknowledging all grief

Grief does not need to be justified by the relationship or type of loss. For example, you may experience grief following:

- The death of a loved one
- The death of a pet
- Breakdown of a relationship or marriage
- Health issues (yourself or others)
- Caring responsibilities
- Moving home or changing environments
- Retirement



The effects of grief

Grief may be experienced in the mind, but its effects can be far reaching and felt throughout the body. It's normal for the experience of grief to feel overwhelming at times, but even the most intense feelings typically change and soften over time. You may notice changes:

- **Emotionally:** feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, regret, numbness, longing. Grief involves a mix of emotions and nothing you feel is “wrong”.
- **Physically:** disturbed sleep, fatigue, changes in appetite, bodily aches or tension, restless mind. Issues with sleep and anxiety can further impact physical and mental wellbeing.
- **Mentally:** trouble concentrating, memory lapses, intrusive thoughts of the loved one or the loss, difficulty planning ahead. This might lead to feelings of isolation or lack of motivation.
- **Spiritually/existentially:** questioning meaning, purpose, identity; perhaps feeling less anchored following the loss of someone who had a central role in your life. These feelings can all be compounded due to retirement, especially for school leaders who often feel a strong sense of purpose and identity tied to their work.



Grief affects everyone differently - there is no “right way” to grieve. Understanding the range of responses can help you feel less alone in what you're experiencing.

How retired school leaders may be affected

For those who have led schools and now find themselves in retirement, grief may interact with the retirement transition in particular ways:

1. **Vulnerability and asking for help:** as a former school leader you may have been the person others looked to as the “pillar of strength” for support and so recognising your own grief and reaching out may feel unfamiliar.
2. **Identity shift:** retirement often involves a change of role, status, routine and purpose. A loss on top of that can trigger questions of “who am I now?”. You may find yourself on a challenging new journey with no road map.
3. **Isolation in retirement:** without the daily professional contacts and structured life of school leadership, grief can feel isolating.
4. **Loss of role, routine and shared purpose:** for many leaders, their identity was tied to leading a team, managing a school and making decisions. Retirement shifts that. Add to that the death of someone close and the combined losses of daily structure, companionship and shared future plans can be strong.
5. **Loss of independence or future plans:** retirement might have come with expectations of shared travel, projects, leisure with a partner or friends; loss of a loved one or another part of your life may mean those plans are no longer feasible. These multiple losses can compound the difficulties.

Secondary losses

The impact of bereavement often goes beyond the initial emotional, physical and mental response. You may also experience:

1. **Financial concerns:** costs related to funerals or sudden drop in household income can add stress during a vulnerable time.
2. **Change in living arrangements:** the loss of a partner might mean you are adjusting to living alone.

Are there different stages of grief?

Grief is a deeply personal and multifaceted experience, yet many have sought frameworks to help make sense of its complexities. Among these frameworks, the five stages of grief, introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, are perhaps the most well-known.

However, The Loss Foundation recognise that grief is not a one-size-fits-all experience.

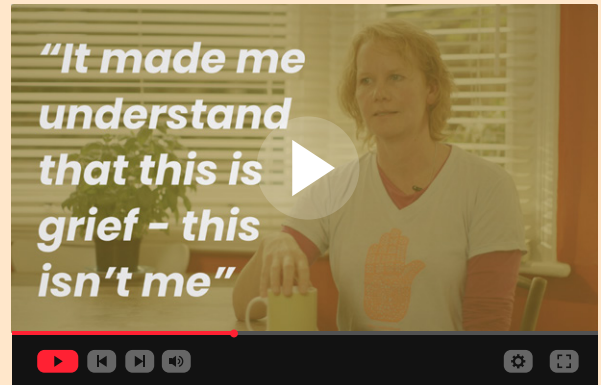
“Each person’s journey through loss is deeply personal, shaped by their relationship to the person they’ve lost or their particular type of loss, their circumstances and their emotional makeup,”

Dr Kirsten Smith, The Loss Foundation.

Instead of viewing loss as a linear progression through five stages of grief, it can be more helpful to approach it as a dynamic process with periods of intensity and calm, often described as waves that ebb and flow over time.

If you’d like to understand grief in different ways, you can explore other grief models that look beyond the five stages. These approaches offer fresh perspectives on how people adapt, find meaning, and continue bonds with their loved one.

You can watch this video by Dr Kirsten Smith at The Loss Foundation which discusses “**The Stages of Grief**”.



Making room for grief: practical advice and support

Emotional support

Grief brings a wide range of emotions and challenges, and these resources are here to help you navigate them. You can learn about anger in grief and how to manage it in healthy ways, explore why anxiety often increases after loss and find guidance for coping with grief-related depression.

You can also explore strategies for when difficult memories arise, improving sleep during grief and addressing the everyday struggles that can make re-building your life overwhelming:

Anger in grief



Anxiety in grief



Depression in grief



Difficult memories



Troubled sleep in grief



Everyday struggles



Grief triggers and ongoing adjustment

Grief is often described as coming in waves, and while the intensity may ease over time, it's completely normal for certain moments or reminders to bring feelings of loss back to the surface, even months or years later. These reminders, or "grief triggers," can take many forms:

- **Significant dates** like birthdays, anniversaries, or holidays
- **Familiar places** or routines you once shared
- **Objects or smells** that evoke memories
- **Life milestones** you had planned to celebrate together, such as retirement, travel, or becoming a grandparent

It's important to acknowledge that sometimes you'll understand why you feel triggered, like coming across a photo, and other times it may seem to come from nowhere. These emotional responses are a natural part of grieving, and they don't mean you're going backwards. They're often a reminder of the depth of your love and connection with the person or experience you've lost.

Many people feel a strong instinct to avoid things that remind them of their loss, especially if those triggers bring up painful emotions. This can be a very understandable and self-protective response. It's okay to give yourself time and space to do that, while also being mindful of not making your world smaller over time. However, avoiding every potential reminder can make it harder to re-engage with life and rebuild a sense of meaning.

There is no timetable for when, or if, you should face certain triggers. Grieving is deeply personal, and you can take things at your own pace. Over time, many people find that they are able to re-encounter certain memories or places with greater ease, and that moments that once caused pain can start to feel gentler, or even comforting. Grief doesn't disappear; instead, you grow around it, finding ways to carry it with you as part of your ongoing journey.

When to seek additional support

Grief is a natural process, and it's completely normal to have days, or even long stretches of time, when you feel like you can't cope. But when grief begins to significantly interfere with your ability to function or get through the day, it may help to reach out for additional support.

You might consider seeking further help if:



1. You're struggling to carry out everyday tasks, or take care of yourself



2. You're having intrusive thoughts, distressing memories, or flashbacks related to the loss



3. You feel persistently low, anxious, hopeless, or overwhelmed



4. You're using alcohol, medication, or other substances to manage your feelings



5. You feel unsafe or are having thoughts of harming yourself

Asking for help is not a sign of weakness -

it's a way of offering yourself care when you need it most. Support could come from a GP, a counsellor, a support group, a trusted friend, or a bereavement organisation - whatever feels most manageable for you. You do not have to go through this alone.

Self-kindness and compassion

Many school leaders have spent their lives looking after others, often putting their own needs aside. In retirement, especially after a loss, it can be hard to switch off that sense of responsibility or the internal voice that says you "should be coping better."

It's often easier to treat others with kindness in their moments of struggle than it is to extend the same care to ourselves. Many people living with grief also live with an internal narrative that they "should be managing differently," or "ought to be stronger." But experiencing pain is not a sign of failing - it's often a reflection of deep love and the significance of what you've lost.

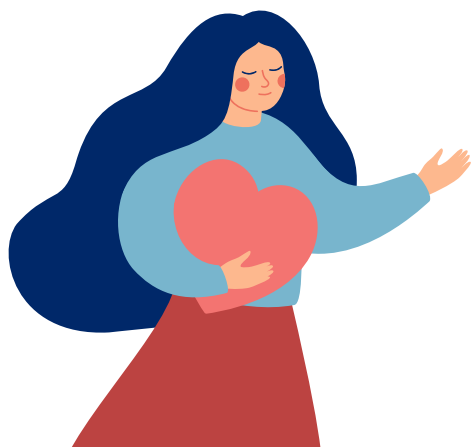
For some, it can be especially difficult if the person who died was the one who offered you comfort or compassion in life. And for those who have been in caring professions for most of their lives, it can feel unfamiliar to turn that care inward. Yet, treating yourself with the same compassion you would offer to a friend is a crucial part of healing.

Small acts of self-kindness such as taking a gentle walk, eating a favourite meal, engaging in a comforting routine, spending time with someone who truly listens, can make a meaningful difference. Letting yourself rest, feel, and receive support is not a sign of weakness - it's part of honouring both your grief and your own humanity. Grief asks for patience, and that includes patience with yourself.



Helpful coping strategies for retired school leaders

- 1. Talking to friends, family or professionals:** opening up can help you process emotions, gain perspective, and feel less isolated during times of change or loss. See a range of free helplines and support groups at the end of this guide.
- 2. Joining bereavement support groups:** sharing experiences with others who understand can offer comfort, validation, and a sense of community in difficult times. See a range of charities offering support groups at the end of this guide.
- 3. Maintaining a routine or structure:** especially important in retirement. A simple daily plan can help provide stability and purpose, making each day feel more manageable and meaningful. Find practical advice in [School leadership to retirement: how to prepare mentally and take care of yourself](#).
- 4. Creative outlets:** writing, art, gardening, sport; activities that involve working with your hands or gentle movement can be particularly beneficial. Expressing yourself creatively is proven to ease stress, boost mood and help you process emotions.
- 5. Time outside or in nature:** fresh air and natural surroundings can have a calming effect, improving both mental clarity and emotional balance.
- 6. Continuing or rediscovering your sense of purpose:** Exploring new ways to contribute, volunteer, or share your experience can help maintain a sense of fulfilment and connection. See our guide above for suggestions and real-life experiences.



Unhelpful coping strategies

- 1. Suppressing emotions:** when grief is bottled the pressure can build and make people feel worse in the long run. Allowing yourself to feel and express difficult emotions is an important part of moving forward.
- 2. Using alcohol or substances to cope:** while they may numb feelings or sensations in the short term, they will make them worse in the long term. See these [free guides](#) designed for school staff on coping with addictions. Finding healthier outlets for stress, such as talking or exercise, will support you better.
- 3. Social withdrawal:** even when you don't feel like it, staying connected to others can prevent loneliness and help you feel supported.
- 4. Overloading yourself with responsibilities to avoid stillness:** rest and reflection are vital; allowing time for some quiet moments can help you process emotions and regain balance.

Supporting a loved one through grief

Finally, you may be supporting others during times of loss or grief. The Loss Foundation shares some tips on how to approach these often challenging conversations, with compassion and understanding, while still taking care of you:

Listen without trying to fix: let people share and try not to “solve” their problems.

Encourage professional or specialist support if needed: sometimes therapy groups or targeted support is needed, especially for complex grief. Don't carry the responsibility alone. Remember, you can signpost to our services and resources below.

Remember grief is unique: even if you experience the same type of loss as another person, you can feel, behave or act very differently depending on your unique relationships and situation.

Further Support

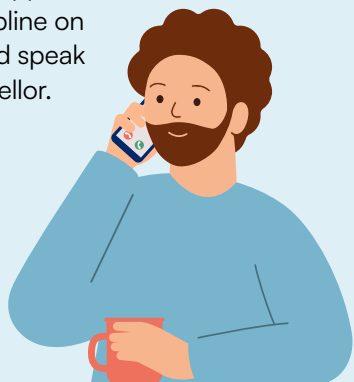
Free helpline numbers

NAHT members:

If you are an NAHT member you can call the dedicated support line for NAHT members. It is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The number is **0800 917 4055**.

Education Support 24hr Helpline:

If you are a retired school leader you can call Education Support's free and confidential helpline on **08000 562 561** and speak to a qualified counsellor.



Specialist bereavement support

1. [Bereavement support for you after cancer loss](#)
The Loss Foundation Cancer Bereavement Support Charity
2. [Suicide bereavement support](#)
Papyrus
3. The [Blue Cross](#) has a specialist pet bereavement support service.

Practical and financial advice

1. [What to do after someone dies](#)
Gov.uk
2. [How to deal with grief after a bereavement](#)
Age UK
3. You can use the [benefits checker](#) for possible council tax reductions
4. Contact the [pension service](#) for information on what you may be entitled to



Who is Education Support?

Education Support was established nearly 150 years ago. We were set up by teachers, for teachers. We're here for everybody working within education, across all four nations of the United Kingdom. Our mission is to improve the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and education staff. We believe that better wellbeing leads to better education. This leads to better life chances for everyone. We provide high quality, evidence-led, support across the sector. We offer support at three levels:

- **Individual:**

We work with individuals to prioritise their own mental health and wellbeing, recognising that everything can't be fixed at the individual level but that people can be supported to make positive change where possible, as workplace and system change take time.

- **Workplace:**

Plenty of evidence indicates that cultures in schools and colleges has a real impact on staff experience, their wellbeing and effectiveness. By helping leaders create great cultures, we increase the number of workplaces where staff thrive.

- **The whole system:**

Individual educators and workplaces exist in a wider system that is facing many challenges. We are working to influence sector stakeholders and the government to create the conditions that support good staff wellbeing across education. Our research activity helps us build evidence around key challenges of national importance, such as staff retention in schools.

Find out more about us at educationsupport.org.uk

Sources

1. [The Loss Foundation](#)
Cancer Bereavement Support Charity
2. [The Loss Foundation](#)
Stages of Grief



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