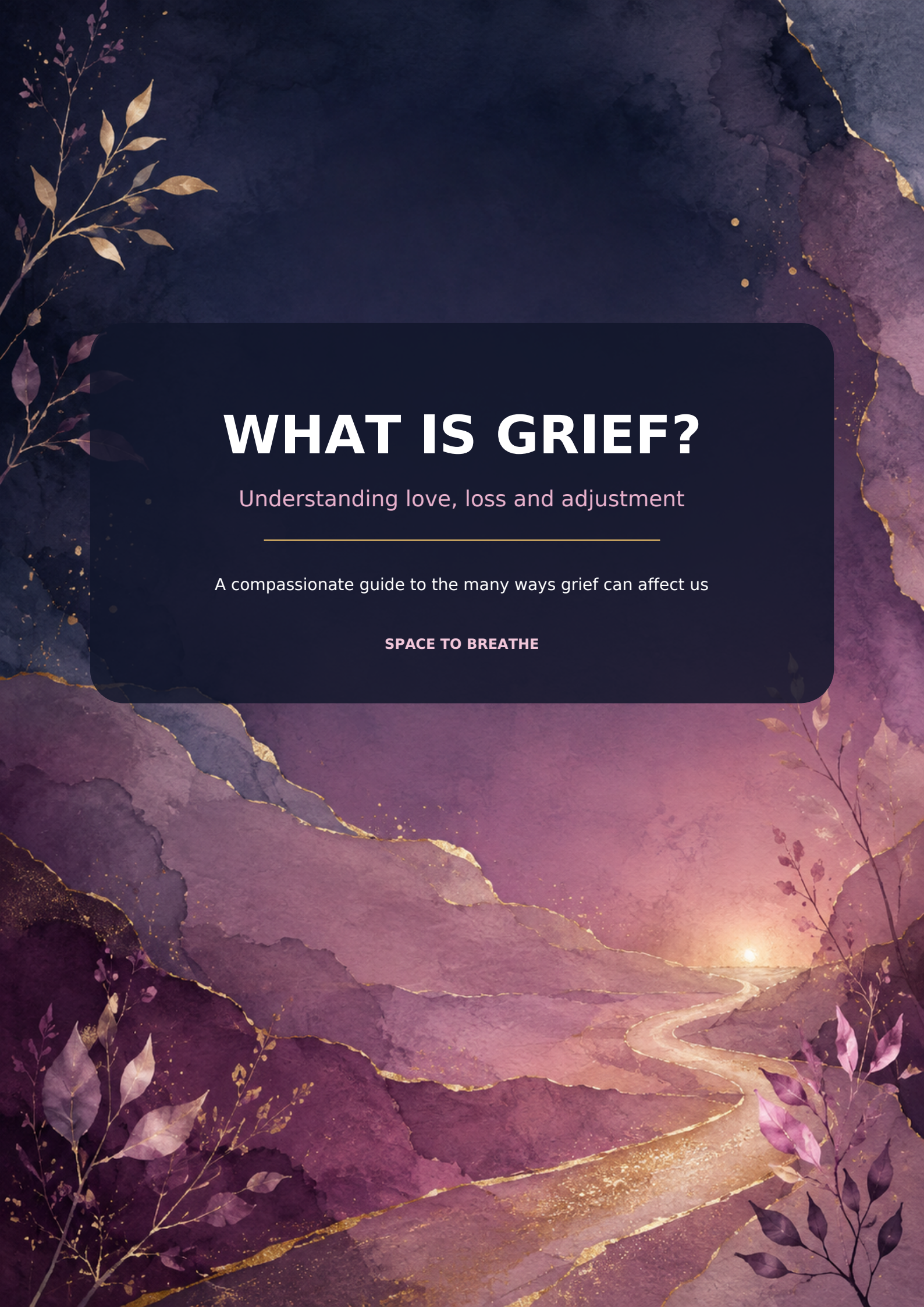




WHAT IS GRIEF?

Understanding love, loss and adjustment

A compassionate guide to the many ways grief can affect us

SPACE TO BREATHE

Grief is a human response to loss

It is personal, changeable and much wider than sadness alone

What is grief?

Grief is the emotional, physical, mental, social and sometimes spiritual response to losing someone or something meaningful. Bereavement describes the experience of someone important dying; grief is the response that follows. We can also grieve a relationship, health, fertility, identity, home, job, ability, future plan, community, pet or sense of safety. The significance of the bond matters more than whether other people recognise the loss.

There is no correct way to grieve

Some people cry often; others feel numb, practical, angry, relieved or unable to believe what has happened. Feelings can arrive in waves, change within minutes or appear long after the loss. Culture, faith, age, neurodivergence, trauma, the circumstances of the loss, the relationship and available support can all shape grief. A different response is not an absence of love.

Grief is not a timetable

The familiar five stages - denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance - may describe some experiences, but they are not a set sequence or a test to pass. People may experience some, all or none of them, return to feelings repeatedly, or hold several at once. Acceptance does not mean approval, forgetting or no longer missing someone.

Loss changes the world around us

Grief may involve losing routines, roles, companionship, shared language, financial security or a future we expected. This is why ordinary moments can hurt: reaching for the phone, hearing a song, cooking for one less person, attending an appointment or facing an anniversary. Grief reflects attachment and meaning; it is not a weakness to be overcome.

How grief can affect the whole person

Emotions, thoughts, body, behaviour, relationships and identity

Emotional experiences

Grief may bring sadness, yearning, anger, guilt, regret, fear, jealousy, loneliness, helplessness, relief, gratitude, love or emotional numbness. Relief can occur after a long illness or difficult relationship and does not cancel love. Laughter and moments of pleasure are not betrayals. Contradictory feelings can exist together.

Thinking and concentration

You may feel foggy, forgetful, indecisive or preoccupied. Time can feel strange. Some people replay events, search for explanations or have strong 'if only' thoughts. Briefly sensing, hearing or dreaming of someone who died can occur in bereavement and is not automatically a sign that something is wrong. Seek support if any experience frightens you, feels unsafe or disrupts daily life.

Physical and behavioural effects

Sleep, appetite, energy and digestion may change. Headaches, tightness, aches, restlessness, nausea, breathlessness sensations or a lowered resistance to illness can occur. You might withdraw, stay constantly busy, avoid reminders, seek reminders, use substances more, or struggle with basic tasks. New, severe or persistent physical symptoms should be discussed with a healthcare professional rather than assumed to be grief.

Social and identity changes

Relationships can shift when others grieve differently or stop checking in. You may feel misunderstood, changed, or unsure who you are without a person, role or future. Disenfranchised grief occurs when a loss is not openly acknowledged - for example an ex-partner, miscarriage, pet, estranged relative, private relationship or non-death loss. The grief remains worthy of care.

Living with grief rather than “getting over it”

Making room for pain, restoration, connection and continuing bonds

Grief often moves between two needs

The dual-process view describes movement between loss-focused time and restoration-focused time. At one moment you may remember, cry or speak about what happened; at another you may work, rest, solve practical problems or experience enjoyment. Moving between these is natural. Taking a break from grief does not mean avoiding love, and returning to grief does not mean going backwards.

Growing around grief

The loss may not become smaller, but life can gradually grow around it. New experiences, relationships and capacities can exist alongside continuing love and sadness. Anniversaries, smells, places, family changes and unexpected reminders may reactivate pain. A strong wave months or years later is not failure; it shows that grief is connected to memory and meaning.

Small forms of care

Lower expectations on hard days. Choose one manageable task, eat or drink something tolerable, and keep essential medication routines. Step outside or change rooms if you feel stuck. Write down what your mind is carrying. Create a memory box, playlist, ritual or regular place to remember. Tell a trusted person whether you want listening, company, practical help or distraction. Rest before you feel you have earned it.

A gentle reflection

Ask yourself: What am I missing most today? What part of this loss is hardest right now - the person, the role, the routine, the future or feeling understood? What would make the next hour five per cent easier? Your answer may change each day. The aim is not to force recovery but to notice the support this moment needs.

Support, warning signs and helping someone else

Compassion is more useful than perfect words

When extra support may help

Consider speaking with a GP, counsellor, therapist or bereavement service if grief feels unmanageable, daily functioning remains severely affected, you feel persistently hopeless, trauma symptoms dominate, substances are becoming a main coping method, or you are increasingly isolated. Some people experience prolonged grief disorder; only a suitably qualified clinician can assess this. Asking for help does not put a deadline on grief.

If safety is at risk

If you feel unable to keep yourself safe, have thoughts of ending your life, or believe someone is in immediate danger, call 999 or go to A&E. In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted free at any time on 116 123. NHS 111 can advise when urgent help is needed but the situation is not an immediate emergency.

Supporting another person

Acknowledge the loss and keep making gentle contact after the first weeks. Use the person's name if the bereaved person does. Listen without searching for a positive lesson. Offer specific help: "I can bring dinner on Tuesday" is easier to answer than "let me know." Respect silence, tears, humour, culture and different grieving styles. Remember significant dates, while allowing the person to choose what they need.

Helpful words - and words to avoid

Try: "I'm so sorry." "I remember..." "There is no pressure to reply." "Would you like company, practical help or some space?" Avoid: "Everything happens for a reason," "be strong," "at least..." comparisons, or telling someone they should be moving on. You cannot fix grief, but you can reduce loneliness within it.

UK information and support

NHS: Get help with grief after bereavement or loss - [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk) | Cruse Bereavement Support: 0808 808 1677 and [cruse.org.uk](https://www.cruse.org.uk) | Mind: [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk). Information checked 21 August 2026.