

A TOUCH OF TENDER
LOVING CARE

*Bereavement care:
Providing practical support for
families and caregivers
experiencing grief and loss*



COLLEGE OF PALLIATIVE MEDICINE
OF SRI LANKA
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A Touch of Tender Loving Care Series

Bereavement care: Providing practical support for families and caregivers experiencing grief and loss

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Preface

Death is a profound and often deeply emotional event. It can bring a range of intense emotions for a bereaved person. When someone passes away, there are numerous decisions and arrangements to be made, often during this period of profound personal distress.

Whether the death was sudden or expected, death of a loved one can still come as a shock. The College of Palliative Medicine of Sri Lanka has developed this booklet intending to provide support and guidance for individuals during the challenging days of their bereavement.





Index

Contents

Preparing for death	1
Advance care planning	2
Grief.....	3
How your body reacts to grief.....	4
Pre death grief.....	5
Death	6
Following the death of a loved one	10
Talking about loss in the family	10
Changing Family roles.....	10
Helping and supporting members of the family.....	11
When children are bereaved	12
Common reactions in children to grief:.....	12
Helping children through grief.....	13
Talking to Children About Death.....	13
Supporting Children returning to School.....	14
Helping Children Feel Safe.....	15
What to expect when children are grieving	16
References	19



"The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it... You will heal, and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to."

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross



Preparing for death

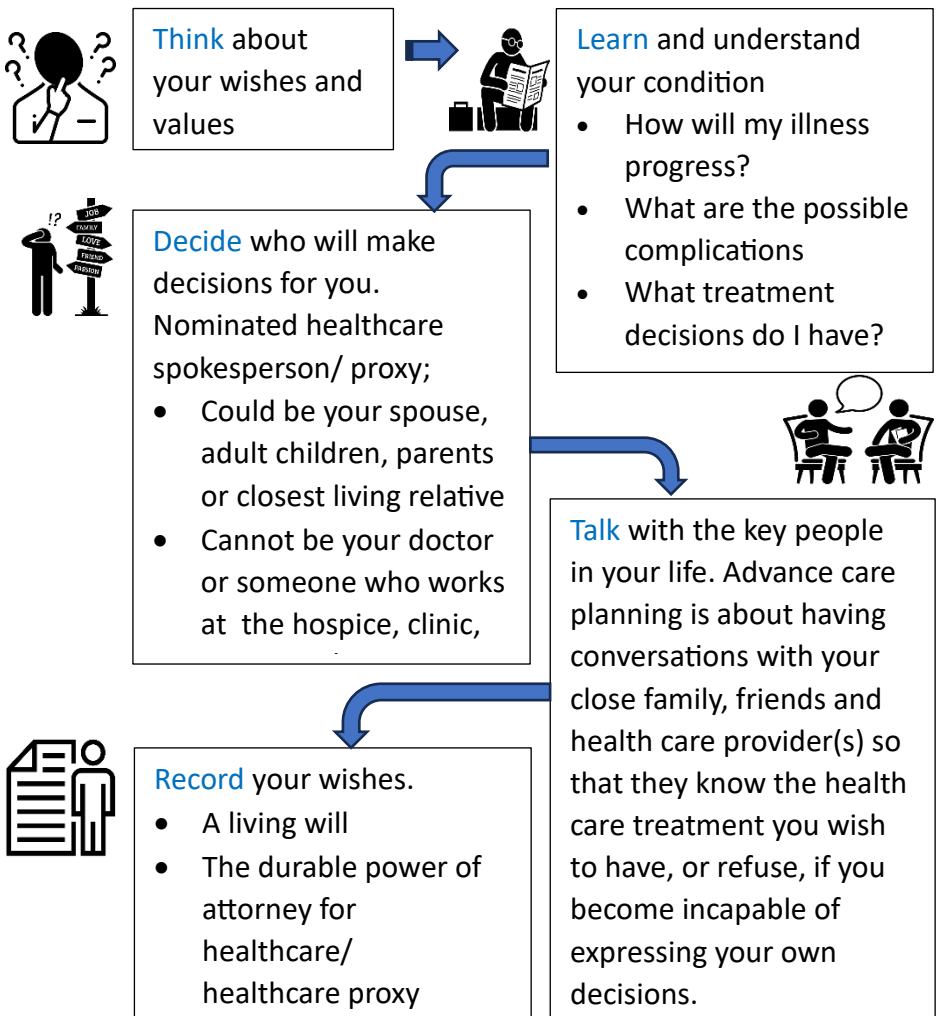
If we can plan, discuss and prepare for the end of life it may help make the death experience more comfortable and provide a greater sense of control when it happens. If someone close to you is nearing the end of life, you can help them to:

- carry out advance care planning with health professionals, family and friends to discuss their wishes, values, beliefs and preferences for future medical treatment. To read more on page 7
- let your treating physician/ health professionals know if emotional and/or spiritual support is needed
- write a will and ensure it is up-to-date and easy to find
- consider who will care for children, other dependents and pets
- start funeral planning if possible and if you are comfortable. Talk about who will be the point of contact for organising the funeral. Think about financial arrangements
- talk about organ and tissue donation, understand what's involved, and let their family know their wishes
- Supporting someone who is dying can be stressful. For suggestions on how you can look after yourself during this time see page 12



Advance care planning

Advance care planning is an opportunity for you to organize and communicate your thoughts and wishes for future medical care.





Grief

When a loved one passes away, grief can affect every aspect of your life. You might feel overwhelmed and scared by your emotions, and your behaviour may surprise you. Irritability and intolerance towards others can become common, and daily tasks may seem insignificant. Sometimes physical illness may accompany your grief. You may question if you have the strength to cope with the pain and emotions you are experiencing. This all-consuming grief can persist for a long time, making it challenging to focus on anything else.

To understand grief better, here are some key points to consider:

- There's no right or wrong way to grieve.
- There's no specific timeline for when you should feel better.
- Don't compare your grief to others. Your grief is unique, even if others are grieving the same person.
- Grief may come in waves, and it can be confusing and painful.
- These feelings are normal. However, if they become too overwhelming, seek support from family, friends, or a professional.



How your body reacts to grief



The distress and stress caused by grief can not only affect your mental health but it also significantly impact your physical health. Grief can weaken your immune system, making you more vulnerable to illnesses, and it may worsen any existing health conditions.

Grief can manifest in several physical ways, including:

- Fatigue and exhaustion
- Frequent crying
- Anxiety, nervousness
- Low energy levels
- Changes in appetite, leading to weight loss or gain
- Sleep disturbances
- Forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating
- Digestive issues, such as an upset stomach or diarrhoea
- Chest pain or tightness
- Heart palpitations and shortness of breath
- Headaches,
- Loss of interest in sex,
- Changes in menstrual cycle



Taking care of both your emotional and physical well-being is crucial when coping with loss.

Pre death grief

Pre-death grief, also known as **anticipatory grief**, is the feeling of sadness and grief before someone dies. It's a natural response to the possibility of loss.

You may feel;

- Sadness and tearfulness
- Feeling like you've lost control of your emotions
- Difficulty accepting that the loss is coming
- Anger at the unfairness of the situation
- Feeling grief for things you won't be able to do together in the future
- guilty or ashamed about some of your thoughts or feelings

The person who is dying may also experience grief. This is known as **preparatory grief**, which is the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual response to the fact that they are approaching death.



Death

Facing the loss of someone dear to us can be one of life's most challenging experiences. Whether the passing was anticipated or unexpected, it often leaves us feeling deeply shaken and vulnerable in many ways. When a loved one dies, there are usually practical responsibilities that need to be addressed. Familiarizing your self with the steps ahead can help you feel more prepared for what lies ahead.

1. First and foremost, **allow yourself a moment** to process what has happened. When you feel ready, consider reaching out to the person's next of kin (if it's not yourself) or other close friends and family members to gently share the news. You may also have to inform a registered medical practitioner to confirm the death.
2. **If the cause of death is uncertain** or seems unusual, it will be reported to a coroner, who might decide to conduct further investigations, such as a post-mortem examination. The police may also do a routine visit to gather information for the coroner.



- 3. Let yourself grieve.** It's very normal to feel sad, confused, relieved, angry or any other mix of emotions during this time.

- 4. Register the death.** To register the death and further information see figure 1.

- 5. Talk to someone who understands you.** It could be a close friend, a family member, or even a therapist or a psychiatrist. You might find it hard to talk about how you feel or even mention the person you've lost, and that's okay. Everyone handles grief in their own way, and there's no right or wrong way to do it.

- 6. Make funeral arrangements.** If the person who passed away left instructions about their funeral preferences, it can make things a bit easier. You might find comfort in knowing we're honouring their wishes.

- 7. Prioritise sleep.** Grief can exhaust a person both physically and mentally. Getting enough sleep can help to support our minds and bodies through the process. Even if you're struggling with sleepless nights, you should still try to get into bed and rest.



8. **Make sure to eat and drink.** Even if you've lost your appetite, it's a good idea to try to eat three meals a day to keep your energy up and keep you going. It's okay to rely on convenient foods like takeaways or ready-made meals and it's better than skipping meals altogether.

9. **Make time for self-care.** It's important to be gentle with yourself and make time for self-care whenever you can. Simple tasks like showering, getting dressed and brushing your teeth/hair might feel like a struggle when you're grieving, but they can make a big difference in how we feel.



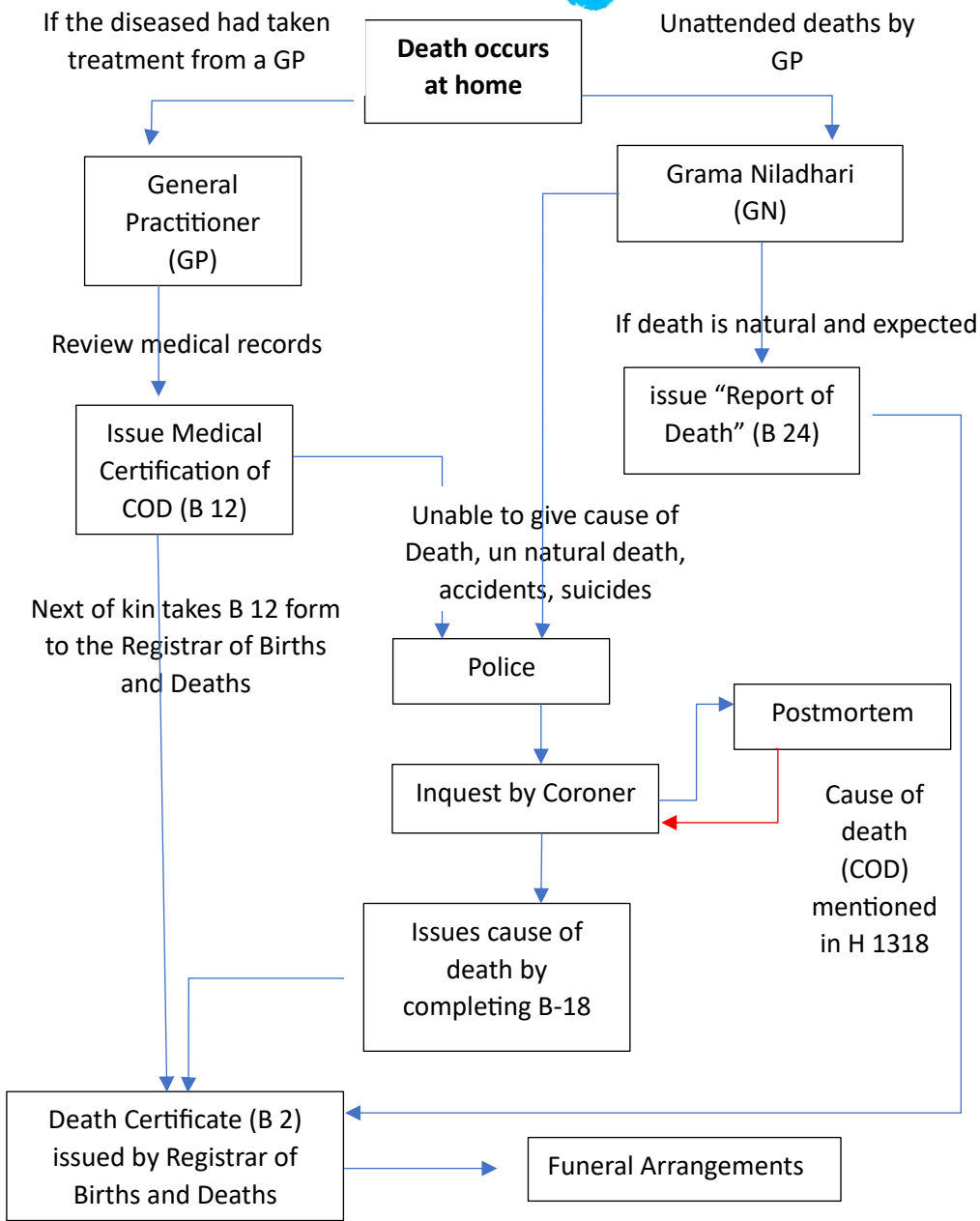


Figure1: The Legal Journey when death occur at home in Sri Lanka



Following the death of a loved one

Talking about loss in the family

- Keeping information from a family member to protect them can lead to mistrust, tension, and feelings of isolation.
- Children and vulnerable family members should be given honest information in a way they can understand.
- Open, gentle communication helps everyone feel supported and connected during a time of grief.
- To express your own feelings sometimes it's easier to talk with trusted friends than a family member, and that's okay

Changing Family roles

- When someone dies, their unique role in the family (caregiver, decision maker, emotional anchor) may leave a gap. Roles and responsibilities need to be changes to avoid overwhelming any one person.
- Important matters like finances, inheritance, or care arrangements should be discussed openly as a family. Decisions made without consultation can lead to resentment and conflict.



Helping and supporting members of the family

- **Be patient with each other:** Everyone grieves in their own way, and not everyone will agree on what to do next. Talk openly about how you're feeling and try to really listen to what others are going through.
- **Ask for help when you need it:** Taking on new roles or tasks can be tough, so lean on others, family, friends, or professionals for support.
- **Spend time together:** Getting together to share stories and memories can help you feel more connected, especially for children who may need that comfort.
- **Lean on your faith or spiritual beliefs:** Religious rituals, prayers, or visiting places of worship can bring peace and strength. Many families find comfort in knowing their loved one is remembered in a spiritual way.
- **If things get tense, talk to someone outside the family:** A counselor or a consultant psychiatrist can help you sort through your feelings and find ways for you to cope



When children are bereaved

You may feel unsure about what to say to children when someone close to them dies. The most important thing is to be honest, but use words they can understand. How children see death, and how they grieve, depends on their age and stage of development. Even very young children often notice more than we think, and they can sense when people around them are sad.

Common reactions in children to grief:

- **Physical signs** : aches and pains, trouble sleeping, bed wetting, headaches, stomach aches, or changes in appetite.
 - **Behaviour changes** : they might misbehave, lash out, or act as if nothing has happened. Sometimes this is because their feelings are too hard to handle.
 - **Trying to be “good”** : some children may take on extra responsibilities, trying to help or protect their family.
-
- Children learn how to cope with death by watching adults.
 - It’s okay to cry in front of children. But let them know why you’re upset, so they don’t feel scared or confused.
 - Talk openly about the person who has died and encourage them to share their feelings.



Helping children through grief

Talking to Children About Death

- **Tell them early:** It's best if children hear about the death from a parent or someone close, not from others.
- **Keep it simple:** Use clear words like “died” or “dead.” Avoid phrases like “gone to sleep” or “gone to a far away place” which can confuse or scare young children.
- **Explain gently:** For example, “Father was very sick. The doctors tried hard, but his body couldn't work anymore and he died.”
- **Help them understand sickness:** Teach them the difference between small sicknesses and big ones, so they don't fear all illness.
- **Reassure them:** Let them know the death wasn't their fault, even if they had a fight or said something hurtful.
- **Listen and talk often:** Be open to their questions—even if they repeat them. It's how they process what happened.



- **Let them see the body (if they want):** It can help them understand the person has really died. Prepare them gently and stay with them. Do not ask or tell them to do things that makes them uncomfortable.

Supporting Children returning to School

- **Prepare them:** Help your child find simple words to explain what happened to friends.
- **Talk to teachers:** Let the school know what's going on so they can support your child.
- **Check in regularly:** Talk with your child regularly about how they are finding school. If you feel additional support is needed reach out to school counselors,





Helping Children Feel Safe

- **Stick to routines:** Familiar daily habits help children feel secure.
- **Show love and care:** Remind them they're still part of a family and will be looked after. Give them lots of attention and love which will comfort them.
- **Watch for changes:** Some children may wet the bed, act out, or become very quiet. These are normal reactions to grief and are usually temporary
- **Be patient:** These behaviours usually pass. Help them name their feelings and set gentle boundaries.
- **Get extra help if needed:** If you're worried, talk to a counselor or child psychiatrist for guidance.





What to expect when children are grieving

Age Group	What to Expect	What You Can Do
0 – 2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't understand death, but react to separation • Sense anxiety/distress of carers. • Irritable, clingy, quiet, or withdrawn. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Care for them with familiar people. • Keep mealtimes/bedtimes consistent. • Stability provides security.
2 – 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think death is temporary (“asleep/away”). • May search for the person, feel insecure • May believe they caused the death. • Clingy, tantrums, regression (bed-wetting, bottles). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk simply and honestly. • Use storybooks, drawings, memory boxes • Keep routines steady. • Extra affection and reassurance.



Age Group	What to Expect	What You Can Do
5 – 8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand death is permanent but may misunderstand details.• Strong curiosity about cause, burial, coffin.• May worry the dead person feels cold/lonely.• Imagination may create scary ideas.• May act as if nothing happened.• Angry outbursts, clinginess, disturbed sleep.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Involve them in funerals/memorials.• Share memories, talk openly.• Encourage play, scrapbooks, art, writing.• Use clear words (“dead”, “died”)• Reassure and keep routines.
8 – 12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand finality/universality of death.• Aware of long-term consequences.• May imagine worst if not told truth• Worry about own/others’ death.• May feel unsafe, protective of parent.• Feel different from peers.• Anger, questioning “why me?”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Give clear, honest information.• Reassure about safety and care.• Allow safe anger expression.• Don’t pressure to talk.• Ensure wider support network.



Age Group	What to Expect	What You Can Do
Adolescents & Young Adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experience adult-like grief (shock, sadness, guilt, anger).• May withdraw, confide in friends not family.• May blame others, argumentative.• Some take on adult responsibilities.• May feel guilty if conflict existed with deceased.• Feel different from peers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reassure grief is natural.• Respect space but stay available.• Involve them in decisions.• Encourage safe outlets (journals, art, trusted adults).• Keep routines and boundaries.• Support return to normal activities.• Protect from excessive responsibilities.



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