

Understanding bereavement therapy:

When is the best time to start?



What is it?

Losing a loved one is one of the most painful experiences a person can endure. While grief is a **natural process**, for some, it can become **overwhelming**.

Bereavement therapy, or grief counselling, offers a **supportive space** to explore emotions, develop healthy coping mechanisms, and navigate the complexities of loss. As Counsellors, we understand that grief is a deeply personal and non-linear experience, with **no definitive timeline** for healing. But when is the best time to start bereavement therapy?

Lucy Thalayasingam, one of our Counselling Clinical Leads, shares her expert insights.

When should bereavement therapy be started?

Bereavement services often recommend a period of waiting, known as "watchful waiting", before beginning grief counselling. This allows individuals to naturally process the many phases of grief and adjust to their loss before deciding whether structured therapeutic support is needed.

Grief therapy models often acknowledge seven non-linear phases of grief, which individuals work through in a normal grief reaction. The initial stage is shock and denial, often coupled with the practicalities of dealing with a loss. During this stage, grief can cause neurological changes in the pre-frontal cortex and limbic system, areas of the brain responsible for emotional regulation, memory, organisation, and learning. This can lead to decreased cognitive functioning, affecting the ability to fully engage in therapy if undertaken too soon after a bereavement.

There is no evidence-based timeline dictating when someone should begin grief counselling- some may feel ready within a few weeks, while others may need months or even years. Therapy may be beneficial if grief becomes prolonged or significantly impacts daily life.

Losing somebody is painful and can feel unfair. You may feel angry or frustrated. And you might want to find something or someone to blame for the loss, to try to make sense of it.

What can you do?

Indicators that bereavement therapy may be helpful

1. Prolonged or unresolved grief

If grief persists for months or years without improvement, it may indicate complicated grief, which can benefit from professional support.

2. Difficulty functioning

Struggling with daily tasks, work, or relationships can signify that grief is overwhelming and support is needed.

3. Physical symptoms

Grief can manifest physically, leading to fatigue and sleep disturbances. If these symptoms persist, therapy may help.

4. Intense guilt or anger

Overwhelming emotions of guilt or anger that hinder the healing process can be explored and processed in a therapeutic setting.

5. Avoidance of grief

If someone is suppressing or avoiding their grief, therapy can provide a safe space to confront and process these difficult emotions.

6. Worsening mental health

If grief exacerbates conditions such as depression or anxiety, therapy can offer tools to help manage both grief and mental health challenges.

Fact:

Grief is a natural response: It's not a disease, but a normal human reaction to a significant loss.

The role of bereavement therapy in healing

While grief is a natural response to loss, bereavement therapy can provide guidance, emotional support, and coping strategies to navigate this difficult journey. Early interventions may be beneficial for some, particularly if grief becomes overwhelming or interferes with daily life. However, it is essential to recognise that grief unfolds uniquely for everyone, and the right time to seek therapy will vary.

At Teladoc Health UK, we offer bereavement support tailored to individual needs, ensuring compassionate and professional guidance during this challenging time. If you are struggling with grief, our team is here to help you find the support that best suits your journey towards healing.

“Grief can be a burden, but also an anchor. You get used to the weight, how it holds you in place.”

Sarah Dessen

There's no time limit on grief. It varies hugely from person to person. It may depend on the type of relationship you had with the person who died, how close you were and how they died. It could also be affected by previous experiences of loss or grief.