



Supporting clients through grief

Advice for staff based in Westminster.

Understand the Nature of Grief

Grief for people who are rough sleeping is often shaped by trauma, instability and exclusion. It's important to recognise:

- **Grief may be hidden** – people may avoid expressing emotions to survive or avoid being seen as weak.
- **Loss is frequent** – repeated deaths of friends, pets or partners can cause grief fatigue or emotional numbness.
- **Stigma adds pain** – society often ignores the grief of those sleeping rough, making people feel invisible.
- **Friends are like family** – street bonds are deep. Losing a friend may feel like losing a sibling.
- **Losing a pet** – Losing a pet can be deeply upsetting, as they provide vital companionship, comfort, and a sense of normality in difficult circumstances.
- **Trauma is often retriggered** – especially for people with past experiences of bereavement, abuse or abandonment.
- **Disenfranchised grief** – there may be no access to mourning rituals, funerals, or a safe space to grieve.

Recognise Common Grief Responses

Grief doesn't always look like sadness. Look out for:

- Anger or irritability (even toward services or other clients).
- Withdrawing or going quiet.
- Increased drug or alcohol use, or risky behaviour.
- Hypervigilance or sleeplessness.
- Guilt: "I should've done more" or "It should've been me".

Create Space to Talk

- Be present and patient – just listening is often the most valuable thing you can do.
- Use their words – avoid jargon like "bereavement" if it doesn't fit.
- Validate their feelings – "it's okay to feel sad, angry, nothing, or everything".

Offer Practical Support

- **Support memorials or rituals:**
Light a candle, share memories, help with a small gathering or attend the funeral. Consider group conversations or informal memorials with others who knew the person. Request that the individual be included in [CSTM's Annual commemoration](#) (November) and Doctor



Hickey's garden of names. MOH has an online memorial (<https://dying-homeless.museumofhomelessness.org/>).

- **Create safe spaces:**
Signpost to quiet day centres or libraries where people can sit, reflect or talk.
- **Provide grief resources:**
Carry leaflets or helpline details (e.g., Samaritans: 116 123), Groundswell's [You have the right to feel ok guide](#).
- **Help with disruption:**
If the death occurred in a shared space, help find alternatives or speak to housing teams.
- **Support closure:**
Help someone find out what happened if appropriate. Proceed gently, without making promises.
- **Reintroduce structure:**
Encourage a gentle return to routines—hot meals, washing, and casework check-ins.
- **Respect beliefs:**
Ask if the person marks loss in a particular way—avoid assumptions.
- **Support action-based grieving:**
Some may want to help pack belongings, attend funerals or make remembrance gestures.
- **Monitor risks:**
Look out for increased substance use, suicidal thoughts or mental health decline. Escalate where needed.

Helpful Phrases

- "I'm sorry to hear about [name]. That's a big loss."
- "You're not alone—we're here if you want to talk."
- "It's okay to feel how you feel. There's no 'right' way to grieve."

When Someone May Need More Help

If someone talks about wanting to die, seems emotionally overwhelmed, or is unable to cope, help them access support:

- ☎ Samaritans – 116 123 (24/7)
- ☎ Joint Homelessness Team - 020 7854 4206
- ☎ Cruse Bereavement helpline - 0808 808 1677
- 🐕 Blue Cross Pet support - 0800 096 6606 (8.30-8.30pm)

Useful Resources

- **HHCP directory:** [Mental Health Services](#)
- **HHCP Toolkit** [Supporting Staff When a Client Dies](#)