

# Bereavement

Support after a death

Health &  
wellbeing



*Age UK is the new force combining  
Age Concern and Help the Aged.*

*With almost 120 years of combined  
history to draw on, we are bringing  
together our talents, services  
and solutions to do more to enrich  
the lives of people in later life.*

*The Age UK family includes  
Age Cymru, Age NI and Age Scotland.*

This information guide has been prepared by Age UK and contains general advice only, which we hope will be useful. Nothing in this guide should be construed as specific advice and it should not be relied on as a basis for any decision or action and is in no way intended as a substitute for professional medical advice specific to any individual case. Age UK does not accept any liability from its use. We aim to ensure that this information is as up to date and accurate as possible, but please be warned that certain areas are subject to change from time to time. Please note that the inclusion of named agencies, companies, products, services or publications in this information guide does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement by Age UK. Please seek medical advice for guidance regarding appropriate exercise levels and precautions. It is particularly important to seek such advice if you suffer from an ongoing medical condition that may be affected by exercise.

Every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained in this guide is correct. However, things do change, so it is always a good idea to seek expert advice on your personal situation.

Date of publication: March 2011 © Age UK 2011

Age UK is the new force combining

**AGE**  
*Concern*

and

**HELPTHEAGED** WE WILL



**Mixed Sources**

Product group from well-managed  
forests and other controlled sources  
[www.fsc.org](http://www.fsc.org) Cert no: TCOC-002340  
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

# Contents

Introduction	2
Grief	3
Your feelings	4
Your thoughts	4
Your body	5
Getting used to the death	8
Difficult times and feelings	10
Memories of other losses	14
Picking up the pieces	15
Looking to the future	17
Useful organisations	19

# Introduction

You are probably reading this guide because someone close to you has died recently. Although bereavement is a highly personal and often distressing event, many people go through a range of recognisable reactions and emotions when someone they are close to dies.

Sometimes people are shocked and upset by their changing and powerful emotions when they are bereaved. Realising that these feelings are quite normal may help. This guide gives you some idea about the range of experiences many people go through. If you want practical advice about the things that need to be done after a death, see our free guide *When someone dies*.

Throughout this guide you will find suggestions for organisations that can give further information and advice about your options. Their contact details can be found in the 'Useful organisations' section (see pages 19–22). Contact details for local organisations can usually be found in your local phone book. If you have difficulty finding them, your local Age UK/Age Concern\* should be able to help.

As far as possible, the information given in this guide is applicable across the UK.

## Key

---



This symbol indicates where information differs for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.



This symbol indicates who to contact for the next steps you need to take.

---

\*Many of our local partners will remain Age Concern for a while yet.

# Grief

Grief knocks you off-balance emotionally, physically and mentally. If the death was expected, you might be telling yourself you should be able to cope, yet you can't. Perhaps you think you should be over it, but you're not. Or you think you should feel all right because you have family and friends looking out for you – but you don't, because no one can replace the person who has died.

When you are bereaved, you have to cope with a world that can feel as if it's fallen apart. In practical terms, your life may have changed dramatically. You may have less money, have to eat, sleep and live alone for the first time, or be faced with household tasks that you haven't done before. Losing a close family member or old friend can mean that you don't have anyone to share childhood memories or family jokes with.

The biggest changes are probably the emotional ones. It can seem that everything you took for granted has gone and you've lost your sense of identity and self-worth. You may feel that you've lost almost everything and haven't much left to fall back on or look forward to. And you may feel like this even if you have loving friends and family around you.

Grief can make you feel many different things. It's important to remember that these feelings are not bad or wrong. They are simply how you feel.

## *Your feelings*

At first you may be too shocked to feel anything, even if the death was expected. Many bereaved people say that, in their initial shock, they felt a sense of numbness and disbelief.

As you get over the shock and start to grasp the reality of what has happened, you may go through some of the most powerful feelings you have ever had – perhaps high or excitable one minute, in despair the next. You may feel that you can't control your emotions, can't concentrate, can't organise yourself to make a phone call or a cup of tea. It may seem as though everything you knew has gone and nothing will ever make sense again.

You may feel that you don't care whether you live or die, because you cannot imagine living without the person who died. Your loss may feel overwhelming and you are likely to be reminded of it constantly.

## *Your thoughts*

Many bereaved people find it hard to concentrate, and feel confused and forgetful. Your thoughts may constantly return to the person who died, with painful questions and fears running through your mind. Alongside this, you may have a sense of relief if they died at what seemed the right time for them.

As you think and talk more about the person and listen to what relatives and friends say, you are likely to start building a fuller picture of them than you had before. As it grows, you will probably find that this picture becomes a part of your life and a source of comfort.

# Your body

Physical changes after a bereavement can include difficulty getting to sleep, vivid dreams and long periods of wakefulness. You may lose your appetite. Some people feel tense and short of breath, others feel edgy and restless, while others feel very slow and lethargic.

You are likely to feel exhausted, especially if you were caring for the person who died or had been through an anxious time before their death. Strong emotions and dealing with all the things that need to be done after a death can also make you tired and drained.

The stress of grief can make you more susceptible to colds or other infections, or make you more accident-prone. Take extra care of yourself – try to eat well and get extra rest even if you can't sleep. Take some gentle exercise if you can. Be kind to yourself – don't try to do too much while you're grieving.

## what next?

Contact your local Age UK/Age Concern\* to see if it offers a befriending service. This can provide one-to-one support for people who feel lonely or isolated.

\*Many of our local partners will remain Age Concern for a while yet.

---

***‘When I was feeling more confident, we started going to a day centre where I met other people, some of whom were in a similar situation to mine.’***

---

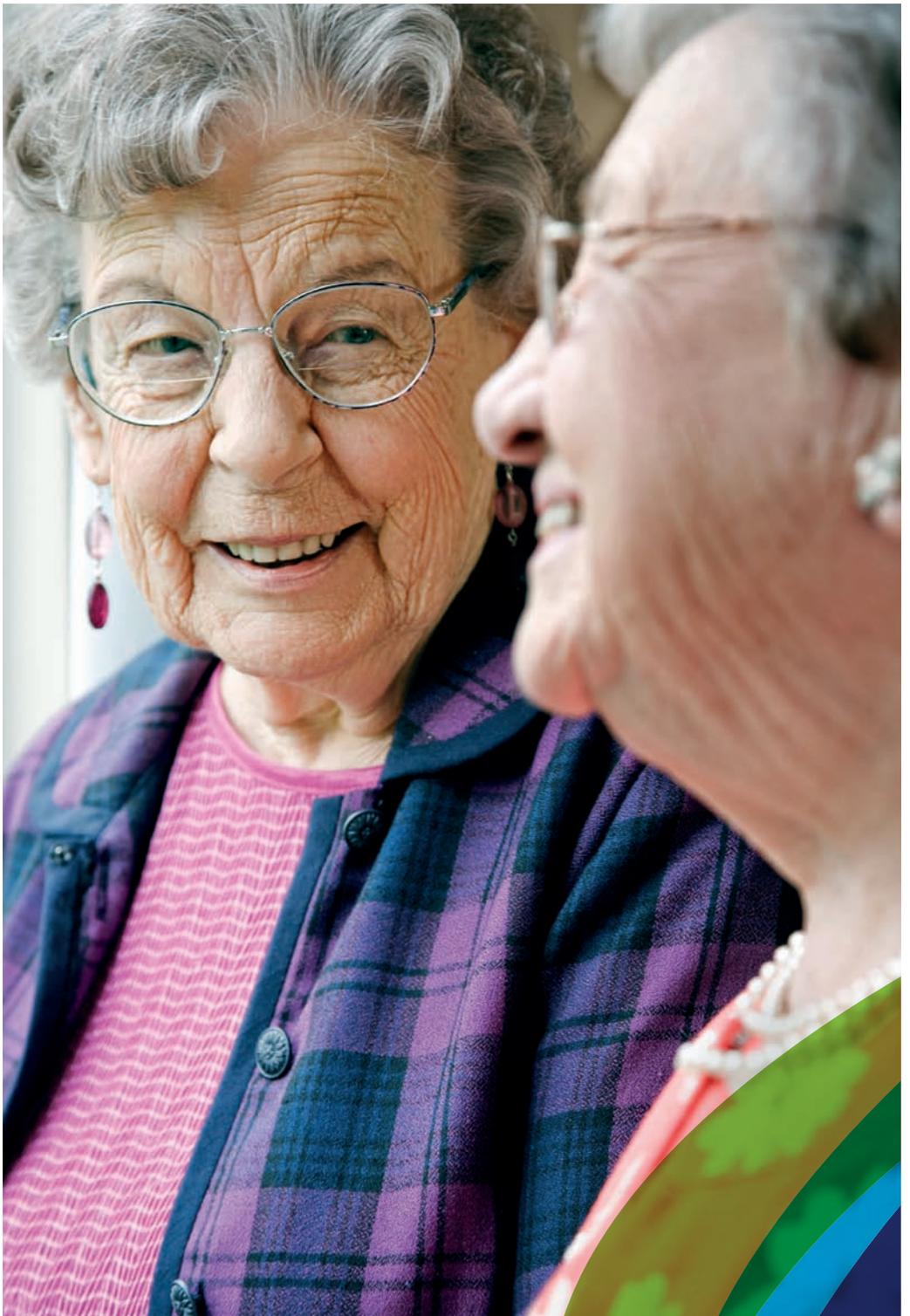
**When Maria’s husband died, she found herself struggling to cope emotionally.**

‘When my husband died two years ago, it was as if my whole world fell apart. We’d been married for over 50 years and I couldn’t imagine my life without him. He’d been ill for a while so while his death wasn’t unexpected, it still came as a huge shock to me. My daughters live abroad so when they left, after a couple of weeks, I felt very alone.

‘I remembered seeing a sign in my library saying that my local Age UK offered a befriending service, and I thought it couldn’t hurt to contact them. I got in touch and they arranged for someone to visit me once a week, just for a chat and a cup of tea.

‘It made such a difference to know someone was coming round. When I was feeling more confident, we started going to a day centre where I met other people, some of whom were in a similar situation to me. It was good to talk to them and realise that my feelings were normal.

‘Now I’m getting back on my feet, it’s my turn to help others. I’ve volunteered as a befriender and soon I’ll be going out to see people who need a bit of comfort and support at a difficult time.’



## Getting used to the death

Getting used to a death happens differently for everyone and is often not as simple as it sounds, especially if the person who died was your partner or a childhood friend. Or you may have lost a younger relative, perhaps your son or daughter, or grandchild. When a young person dies, it reverses the natural order of life and death and can seem particularly unjust.

Allowing your feelings to come out can help you get used to your loss. Talking about the death and the person who died, dealing with the practicalities of your new situation, and trying to think of the present as well as the past can all help you get used to the reality of the death and get through some of the anguish you feel. You will slowly begin to find a way of living without the person alongside you, but very much with you in your thoughts and memories.

### what next?

If you were acting as a carer, see our guide *Advice for carers*, which has a section on what to do when the person you cared for dies. If the person who died was your partner, contact Cruse Bereavement Care for help and support (see page 20) or the London Friend LGBT Bereavement Helpline (see page 21).

If you have lost a child or grandchild, contact The Compassionate Friends (see page 20). They are a self-help organisation – parents who have been bereaved themselves offer friendship and support to other bereaved parents, grandparents and their families.

If your grandchild has lost a parent, you may want to contact Winston's Wish. They provide support to bereaved children, young people and their families (see page 22).

---

*You will slowly begin to find  
a way of living without the  
person alongside you, but very  
much with you in your thoughts  
and memories.*

---



# Difficult times and feelings

You will probably go through a range of emotions after the death, though you may not experience them all, and they may not occur in any particular order.

## Emptiness and depression

Feelings of depression and meaninglessness can hit you when the reality of the death begins to sink in. Just when you think you've started to move on and are feeling better, you may hit rock bottom and feel that life is endlessly bleak and empty. Surprisingly, although it may feel almost unbearable at the time, this seems to be a period when some inner healing takes place. Afterwards, people say, they feel lighter, more in control of their lives and better able to look forward.

Sadness is a natural response to bereavement, and usually lifts of its own accord. But if it doesn't, you may be clinically depressed. This can be managed and you should see your doctor for help and advice. Our guide *Healthy living* has some more information about depression and mental health.

### what next?

If you have thoughts of suicide, talk to your doctor or someone you trust. Remember that you can phone Samaritans, day or night, on 08457 90 90 90 (see page 22).

-  In Northern Ireland, you can also contact Lifeline for support (see page 21).

## Anger

Some people feel angry after a bereavement and it can be the hardest feeling to cope with. You may feel anger at the injustice of your loss, or anger at the lack of understanding in others. You might be angry at yourself and at the person who died – the person you need most, who has left you to feel abandoned, frightened and alone.

This anger is usually a result of feeling hurt and unhappy. These feelings are normal and you can often get rid of your anger in a way that doesn't hurt you or someone else. Some people have a shouting session, dig the garden, or write their thoughts on paper and then destroy the pages. Don't bottle up your feelings – try to think about the reasons for your anger. Talking about your feelings with someone who isn't emotionally involved in your own loss can help.

## Fear

Feeling fearful and anxious is very natural – your familiar world has been turned upside down. You are likely to feel that you have little control over your life, or over your thoughts and feelings. Feeling out of control is likely to make you feel vulnerable and afraid. But as you get used to coping, you will become more confident.

You may have fears about practical issues, such as how to manage on a smaller income and handle household tasks. Our guide *Care at home* and our benefits guides *More money in your pocket: a guide to claiming benefits for people over pension age* and *Claiming benefits: a guide for people of working age* may help.

## Mixed feelings

It is normal to have mixed feelings when someone dies. You may think about things that you wish had been different, or ask yourself endless ‘what ifs’ about decisions you could have made. Mixed feelings of regret, guilt or anger aren’t easy to deal with. Try to reach a point where you are realistic about the past. This can be hard if the relationship had turned sour or was always a mixture of good and bad.

When a difficult relationship ends with death, any chance of mutual understanding or reconciliation is lost. But if you suppress any upsetting thoughts or feelings, you risk becoming angry, bitter or depressed. It can help to get a better understanding of the relationship by thinking about what was good and what was not, and what you each contributed to it.

Don’t be too hard on yourself or anyone else. No one is perfect and we can only do the best with the situation we are in. With time, you are likely to reach some acceptance of the past and move towards a more rewarding present.

---

*Don't be too hard on yourself  
or anyone else. No one is perfect  
and we can only do the best  
with the situation we are in.*

---



## Memories of other losses

A bereavement can trigger memories of earlier losses that you thought you had got over. Perhaps you didn't realise at the time how deeply affected you were, or maybe it was difficult to talk about your feelings. You may find memories of these unhappy times rushing back and this can be extremely distressing.

For example, some people are only just beginning to grieve for losses that happened in the war years. Others who had a stillborn baby or a miscarriage, a child who died, or a sibling who died young, may only now start to grieve openly. Fifty or so years ago we didn't used to talk about such deaths and children's feelings were often overlooked. You may have gone through life with an unspoken burden of sorrow.

You may feel the need to mourn these losses and talk about your experiences before you can come to terms with your more recent bereavement.

### what next?

If you can, talk to friends and family about how you're feeling. See your GP if you feel you want to talk to a grief counsellor. Contact Cruse Bereavement Care for more support (see page 20).

## **Picking up the pieces**

Over time, you have probably developed beliefs and ideals that have helped give meaning to your life and influenced the decisions you have made. Your thinking and beliefs may be based on a particular faith, religion or philosophy, or may have been very much your own creation.

Your beliefs can comfort you and continue to give your life meaning, which can be very helpful. But you may find that they don't live up to the challenges presented by your bereavement, leaving you feeling let down and lost. This can be unnerving, but is also a chance to look at life afresh. It could lead to a strengthening of your beliefs and views, or you may decide to explore other ways of giving meaning to your life.

### **Other people**

Some people will be more sensitive to your feelings than others. If the death was expected, some people may think that you will not be too affected by it. Others may not want to get involved with your feelings because they fear saying the wrong thing. Some may also try to avoid facing up to the fact that one day they will be in a situation similar to yours.

Sometimes the people who help most aren't the obvious ones – someone you're not that close to could be the one who helps you through the bleak times. There are befriending and other support services in many areas – ask at your place of worship, if you have one, or your local Age UK/Age Concern,\* doctor's surgery or local library.

\*Many of our local partners will remain Age Concern for a while yet.

## Looking after yourself

It can take a long time to recover from the shock of a bereavement. It is important to look after yourself, eat properly and get plenty of rest while you're grieving. Avoid making any major decisions while you're still in a state of shock. Try not to hurry the healing process – take it at your own pace and try not to hide your feelings.

### what next?

Cruse Bereavement Care offers a telephone helpline as well as face-to-face support (see page 20).

-  If you have lost your husband or wife, contact the National Association of Widows to find out about the support and friendship they can offer (see page 21).

---

***Try not to hurry the healing process – take it at your own pace and try not to hide your feelings.***

---



## Looking to the future

When you lose someone you love, you can feel that your life doesn't have much meaning, or that you no longer have anything to offer. Looking back at your life and taking stock of your contribution to the world can help you realise that death doesn't take that away. Remind yourself of all that you are and of what you've made of your life; think about the people you cared about and who cared about you.

It is also important to look forward, however difficult this may be. Whatever your age, you still have something to offer the world. It is worth making the most of every opportunity to spend time with other people, keep in touch with friends and family, have a holiday or volunteer to help out with a good cause. You can volunteer for Age UK, Age Cymru or Age NI in one of our shops or offices. Call Age UK Advice or visit the website to find out more (see page 19).

It is probably best not to make any major decisions, such as moving house or changing jobs, until at least a year after the bereavement. People often jump into decisions when they are particularly vulnerable and emotional, but more changes in your life could add to your stress.

There are no magic answers. It takes time to regain confidence, feel less overwhelmed by your loss and start to make sense of the world again. Help and support from others, especially those who have gone through a similar loss, may help you work your way through to recovery. And in time, you may be the person who can help others through difficult times.

**what  
next?**

Our free guide *Going solo* has information on how to manage on your own – financially, practically and emotionally.

***It takes time to regain confidence, feel less overwhelmed by your loss and start to make sense of the world again.***



# Useful organisations

## Age UK

Age UK is the new force combining Age Concern and Help the Aged. We provide advice and information for people in later life through our Age UK Advice line, publications and online.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65  
[www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)

In Wales, contact

**Age Cymru:** 0800 169 65 65  
[www.agecymru.org.uk](http://www.agecymru.org.uk)

In Northern Ireland, contact

**Age NI:** 0808 808 7575  
[www.ageni.org](http://www.ageni.org)

In Scotland, contact

**Age Scotland:** 0845 125 9732  
[www.agescotland.org.uk](http://www.agescotland.org.uk)

## Armchair Advice

Website with a range of information about bereavement, including information about reactions to death, the grieving process, coping with depression and where to go for help.

[www.armchairadvice.co.uk/bereavement](http://www.armchairadvice.co.uk/bereavement)

### **The Compassionate Friends**

National self-help organisation. Parents who have been bereaved themselves offer friendship and support to other bereaved parents, grandparents, and their families.

Helpline: 0845 123 2304

Northern Ireland helpline: 028 8 77 88 016

Email: [helpline@tcf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@tcf.org.uk)  
[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)

### **Cruse Bereavement Care**

Offers free information, advice and support to bereaved people. It provides a telephone helpline and face-to-face support.

In England and Wales, contact

Helpline: 0844 477 9400

Email: [helpline@cruse.org.uk](mailto:helpline@cruse.org.uk)  
[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

In Scotland, contact Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland

Tel: 0845 600 2227

[www.crusescotland.org.uk](http://www.crusescotland.org.uk)

In Northern Ireland, contact Cruse Bereavement Care  
in Northern Ireland

Tel: 028 9079 2419

[www.cruseni.org](http://www.cruseni.org)

### **Lifeline**

Provides support for people in distress and despair in Northern Ireland. It can also provide follow-up support including counselling and complementary therapy.

Tel: 0808 808 8000

Textphone: 18001 0808 808 8000

[www.lifelinehelpline.info](http://www.lifelinehelpline.info)

### **London Friend LGBT Bereavement Helpline**

Dedicated helpline offering support and practical information to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender callers who have been bereaved or are preparing for bereavement. Trained volunteers also welcome calls from affected family, friends, colleagues and carers.

Tel: 020 7837 3337

[www.londonfriend.org.uk/bereavementhelpline](http://www.londonfriend.org.uk/bereavementhelpline)

### **National Association of Widows**

Membership organisation that offers support, friendship and understanding to men and women who have lost their partners. There is a confidential telephone service where you can talk to another bereaved person. You can also join a local branch.

Tel: 0845 838 2261

Email: [info@nawidows.org.uk](mailto:info@nawidows.org.uk)

[www.nawidows.org.uk](http://www.nawidows.org.uk)

### **Samaritans**

Confidential support for people who are despairing or suicidal. Lines are open 24 hours a day.

Tel: 08457 90 90 90

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

### **Winston's Wish**

Offers support, information and guidance to people caring for a bereaved child or young person.

Helpline: 08452 03 04 05

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

# Can you help Age UK?

Please complete the donation form below with a gift of whatever you can afford and return to: Age UK, FREEPOST LON13041, PO Box 203, London N1 9BR. Alternatively, you can phone 0800 169 80 80 or visit [www.ageuk.org.uk/donate](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/donate). If you prefer, you can donate directly to one of our national or local partners. Thank you.

## Personal details

Title:	Initials:	Surname:
Address:		
Postcode:		
Tel:	Email:	

By providing your email address and/or mobile number you are agreeing to us contacting you in these ways. You may contact us at any time to unsubscribe from our communications.

## Your gift

I would like to make a gift of: £

I enclose a cheque/postal order made payable to Age UK

## Card payment

I wish to pay by (please tick)  MasterCard  Visa  CAF CharityCard  
 Maestro  American Express

(Maestro only)

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	Signature <b>X</b>				
Expiry date	<input type="text"/>	/	<input type="text"/>	Issue no. (Maestro only)	<input type="text"/>	

## Gift Aid declaration

(please tick) Yes, I want Age UK and its partner organisations\* to treat all donations I have made for the four years prior to this year, and all donations I make from the date of this declaration until I notify you otherwise, as gift aid donations. I confirm I pay an amount of income tax and/or capital gains tax at least equal to the tax that the charity will reclaim on my donations in the tax year. Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_ (please complete). \*Age Cymru, Age Scotland and Age NI



We will use the information you have supplied to communicate with you in line with Data Protection guidelines. Age UK (registered charity no 1128267) comprises the Charity, its group of companies and national partners (Age Cymru, Age Scotland and Age NI). If you would prefer not to hear from them or carefully selected third parties, let us know by phoning 0800 107 8977.



---

*Grief can make you feel many different things. It's important to remember that these feelings are not bad or wrong. They are simply how you feel.*

---

---

# What should I do now?

---

For more information on the issues covered in this guide, or to order any of our publications, please call Age UK Advice free on **0800 169 65 65** or visit [www.ageuk.org.uk/healthandwellbeing](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/healthandwellbeing)

Our publications are also available in large print and audio formats.

The following Age UK information guides may be useful:

- *When someone dies*
- *Wills and estate planning*
- *Going solo*

The Age UK Group offers a wide range of products and services specially designed for people in later life. For more information, please call **0800 169 18 19**.

If contact details for your local Age UK/Age Concern\* are not in the box below, call Age UK Advice free on **0800 169 65 65**.



\*Many of our local partners will remain Age Concern for a while yet.

Age UK is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England (registered charity number 1128267 and registered company number 6825798). The registered address is 207-221 Pentonville Road, London N1 9UZ. Age Concern England (registered charity number 261794) and Help the Aged (registered charity number 272786), and their trading and other associated companies merged on 1 April 2009. Together they have formed the Age UK Group, dedicated to improving the lives of people in later life. The three national Age Concerns in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have also merged with Help the Aged in these nations to form three registered charities: Age Scotland, Age NI and Age Cymru. ID8830 03/11