**Autism and Bereavement Factsheet**

* Some autistic people grieve in exactly the same way as neurotypical people – the following does not really apply to them.
* For other autistic, grief often limited, and restricted to feeling sad inside. This can be problematic when dealing with relatives who may be put off, or even upset, that you aren’t visibly sad.
* Some autistic people will go into denial about feeling sad at all, and should be “given permission” to feel sad *as an autistic person*.
* Common external responses are to cry for a short time, often in private.
* Best approach to take is an intellectual one, and to suggest making arrangements “in case” of grief, rather than assuming it.
* Autistic people will take the deaths of pets and fictional characters a lot harder than the deaths of human beings. This may result in some feelings of guilt, and resentment towards relatives who do not understand this.
* Funerals are often stressful because it is an unstructured social situation which requires social interaction when the bereaved would much rather be left alone to reflect on what is happening. Giving them a role in planning or participating is a good way of dealing with this.
* Offering some words and phrases that people can use when dealing with grieving relatives can be a good way of reducing stress and preventing resentment, i.e. “Sorry to hear that”, “I hope you’re ok.” “Is there anything I can do?”, gently touching the upper arm.

**Descriptions of autistic grief (from WrongPlanet.net)**

“When a loved one dies I'm usually very saddened, but don't seem to express my emotions outwardly. When talking about it I usually speak very bluntly, probably causing others to see me as cold or uncaring. Other times I can cry unexpectedly. I have always hated funerals and viewings because there will be a lot of people crying, hugging, shaking hands, and I can never seem to get that close to somebody in a social situation. Though I genuinely want to comfort them I can't seem to get over my social awkwardness.”

“When such a big thing happens, I grieve like others (at least I think I do). But I always try to to focus on my normal tasks like my job and my friends. In some ways it is easy, since I can separate myself from these emotions, but I still have to deal with them.

The more difficult part for me is to look out for friends or family who have more difficulty. Seeing that is the most difficult thing, because I do not notice it or show my sympathies. I learned myself some things to do or to say. That is a bit 'acting', but the thought behind it is genuine.”

“My experience has been much like this. Grief is internalized, I wouldn't know how to express it on the surface as others do. They cry and emote while I stand in the corner and watch uncomfortably. My own emotion will erupt later, when I'm alone, sometimes prompted by something that would seem to anyone else completely unrelated. I do not feel the need as NTs seem to, to share the experience of my grief with others. But just because I'm not reacting visibly, it doesn't mean I feel nothing. It’s just a very private and internal experience. I can go on about my daily routines, but the emotions are digesting slowly in the background.”

“When I've lost pets, the reaction was immediate and straightforward. When I've lost people, it was much more complex and difficult for me to sort, and others assume I'm not mourning at all.”

“Don't think I'd describe anything I've felt about him since he died as "grieving". It's more like the feeling I get when someone I know hasn't been in touch for a while. And in reality, he hasn't. ”

“I've lost 2 grandparents in the last couple years and both time I pretty much just shut down. I withdraw into myself even more, even less talkative and less social than normal even around close friends and family and I'll do little outside of what's required of me (eating, work if I couldn't take off). The strongest effects seem to last one or two days but lingering effects can last up to a week or so.”

“I spend time alone and try to use my perceived coldness to prop up anyone who has become a wreck.”

“My mother died when I was 10 years old and I was talking recently with my younger sister about my AS-driven emotional responses, when she reminded me of something I'd said to her on the evening we'd been told that "Mum won't be coming home any more". (as if *that* isn't confusing enough already! )

She was in her bedroom, crying her eyes out, and I was in mine - feeling more and more annoyed at the noise she was making. So I just shouted at her to "be quiet - it's not *that* bad". Apparently she hated me for weeks after that...

Fortunately, years after the event and as an adult, she now understands why I did it.
Which is more than I did at the time. It went something like: Mum has gone; that's that - I won't be seeing her again and I understand why not. So why is there so much noise coming from my sister? What's to continue screaming about?

Cold? No, just incessantly logical...”

“Like a lot of autistic people I've met, I not only relate to other animals without putting them in a hierarchy below humans, I also relate to plants and "inanimate" objects without treating them as if they are... dead, flat, unreal somehow. I am not talking about anthropomorphizing. I'm talking about a certain kind of instinctive respect and connection to things as they are, not as they would be if they resembled humans in most ways. There's a common stereotype that runs that since autistic people spend so much time relating to objects, then we must spend our lives in a world that is empty, lifeless, dry, grey, and cold somehow (and that we must even view humans this way). But I (and a large number of other autistic people I know, though certainly not all) relate to *the entire world*, objects included, in a way that is vibrant, colorful, and full of life everywhere. We just don't happen to restrict this experience to humans, or even to animals, or even to living things. And so, as usual, people assume the very opposite.”

“Don't really grieve, or if I do, it's very mild. People keep trying to fit my experience into some form of grief that happens to be a little nonstandard like "the five stages don't have to all happen or happen in that order" (after I described the strange process of completely coming to terms with my grandfather's death in a couple of hours-- he died at... oh, around 6 pm in the spring, and by the time it was dark I was over it-- by feeling very strange with my thoughts, emotions and body, but only one at a time-- so calm and thinking about it, thinking normally but feeling sad, then neither thinking about it nor feeling anything but my body doing what it usually does when you feel sad) or recounting a story of someone not feeling grief for a while and then grieving normally after a time delay.

But I came closest to grief for my grandfather. It upset me for a while. At least, for a human. I grieved a whole day for a certain cat I loved. (Loved my grandpa just as much. More.) But the cat I just felt an uncomplicated sadness and nostalgia for. Then it was over. That's all. (Wasn't even my cat.)”

“I just lost my husband of 15 years two months ago, of a sudden cardiac arrest. He was only 42 years old, and we did NOT see this coming, at all.

I've been able to compare myself to other widows from the beginning, since I joined a young widow's support forum right after he died. There's no doubt about it: I'm grieving differently.

I'm not normally a crier, but I did cry a lot right after, and most of the first day. After that, each day I cried a little less, and on the day of the funeral, I only cried when they were actually lowering his casket into the ground. That was rough. They were playing one of his favorite songs, and our 8-year-old son started to cry too.

But since then, I've been pretty much okay. I miss him terribly, but I'm able to think about him and talk about him and look at pictures at this point, and only feel a little sadness. Just a little ache in my chest. After the funeral, I got right back into my regular routine with no problems. People kept offering to bring food, and I was like, why would I need food? I haven't lost my ability to cook.

The morning after he died, I had to do a load of laundry and started to cry seeing all his clothes in the basket, but less than a week later, I was able to bag up almost all of his things with no problem.

By contrast, there are widows on the forum whose husbands died months ago and they still break down every time they open the closet. A lot of them are still wearing their rings several years later, or saying they'll never marry again. I'm much more pragmatic than that. My perspective is that a lot of the women on that board are wallowing in grief, but maybe they're the normal ones, and I'm not.

My feeling is basically: He died, it really hurts and really sucks, but I'm still alive. I've still got a life to live and a child to raise, and it will do me absolutely no good to remain mired in grief. FWIW, he always told me that I was cold-hearted about death, because I never cried at funerals and because if I heard someone died, I would be very matter-of-fact about it. Everybody dies, it's a fact of life. It's shocking and tragic when it happens to someone so young (especially someone with a small child), but it happens. I never thought it would happen to us, but it did. My job is to move on and keep living.

Now, two months later, I feel pretty much back to my old self. I got through Christmas and New Year's fine, actually enjoyed some of it. A few times I've acted sadder than I really am, because people seem to expect me to be miserable. For instance, somebody will ask me with that look of pity in their eyes, "How are you holding up?" and my impulse is to tell the truth and say "good" but I have a feeling that wouldn't go over too well, so I play it down and say something like, "Well, I made it through the holidays..."

Some of the people close to me say that I must still be in shock, or in denial, but I know in my heart I'm not. I think I'm just rebounding more quickly than most people would. And I think that's a good thing.”