



Coping with the death of a loved one

Information written with you in mind.

This information guide has been produced with the help of older people, carers and expert peer reviewers.

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What this guide is about

The death of someone close to us can be one of the hardest things we ever have to go through. Whether it's expected or not, it can affect us in lots of different ways and, unfortunately, all we can do is cope as best we can.

Grief is very personal and there's no right or wrong way to deal with losing someone you care about. But this guide explores how you might be feeling, why you might be feeling that way, and some of the things that could help – now and in the future.

“It took me a long time to come to terms with my husband’s death, but talking about it really helped. I’d encourage anyone in my position to talk to someone. I wish I’d done it sooner.”

Cassie, 73



You might not feel ready to read this guide now – and that’s OK. You might decide to come back to it at a different time. You might also prefer to look at it with someone you’re close to, or with a bereavement counsellor.



This symbol indicates where the information differs for Wales and Northern Ireland. As far as possible, the information given in this guide is applicable across the UK.

This might help

After a loved one dies, there are certain practical things that need doing, such as registering the death and arranging a funeral. Some people find getting on with practicalities a welcome distraction – while for others it’s the last thing they want to think about.

To try and make things a bit easier, our guide **When someone dies** takes you through the practical things you might need to think about.



Coping with a bereavement

Unfortunately, as we get older, it gets more likely that we'll experience a bereavement. This might be the death of a parent, a friend, a partner or even a child. How we react is likely to depend on our relationship with the person and the circumstances of their death.

Grief is very personal, and it can take some time to come to terms with how you feel. The emotions you experience might feel overwhelming at times but things do get easier – even though it might not feel possible at first. Talking to someone is often the best way to start feeling better – whether they're a loved one or a professional, such as a doctor or bereavement counsellor.

Dealing with grief

Grief is the often conflicting mixture of emotions you experience when someone close to you dies. It can be overwhelming – but it's important to remember that there's no right or wrong way to feel. Everyone grieves in their own way.

Grief is natural and it can last a long time. How you feel might be influenced by several things – such as your personality, past experiences, beliefs and relationship with the person who's died, as well as how they died.

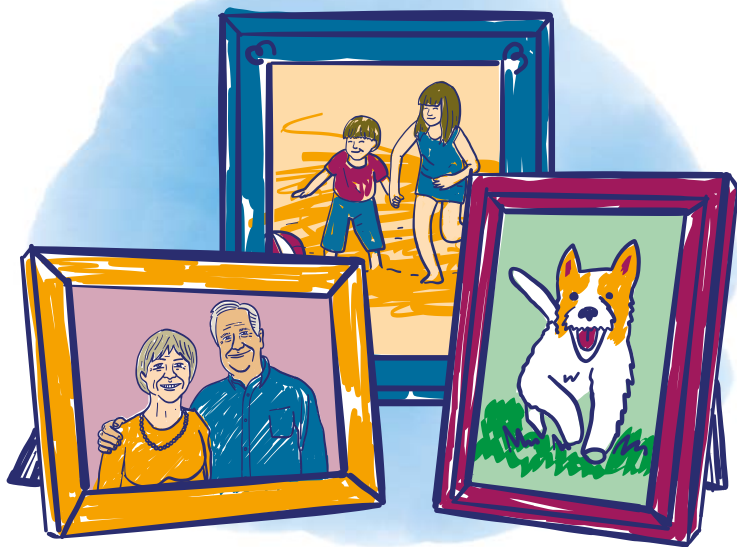
After the death of someone you care about, it's important to talk about how you're feeling with someone when you feel ready to. This could be a friend, a relative or a professional. There's no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to seeking support – the important thing is to do what feels right for you.

Lots of us can be reluctant to open up about our emotions, but there's information on page 16 that can help you talk through how you're feeling.

This might help

There are support groups and professionals that can help you deal with your loss – many of which are listed at the end of this guide. Whatever your feelings, you don't need to deal with them alone.

When you're ready, *AtaLoss* (page 28) can direct you to the right bereavement support services for you.



The coronavirus pandemic

The death of a loved one can be particularly difficult to cope with when you're unable to say goodbye and grieve in the way that feels right to you. Sadly, this was the case for many people during the coronavirus pandemic.

Due to restrictions, you might have been unable to see the person before they died, or to hold the funeral service you know they'd have wanted. This might've left you feeling that things are still unresolved, or that you didn't say a proper goodbye. You might also have been kept from seeking comfort in the company of family and friends – at a time when you really could've done with a hug.

“After my daughter died, it often felt like I’d go through all the emotions in a single day.”

Anita, 80



Your feelings of grief could be further complicated by knowing that restrictions prevented your loved one spending time doing the things they enjoyed with the people they cared about.

You might also feel that your loss has been overlooked or lessened because of the circumstances of the pandemic. But each person who died is loved and missed – and your grief is valid. It’s as important as ever that you look after yourself and reach out for support if you need it.

This might help

There are organisations that offer support to those who experienced a bereavement during the pandemic. You can contact Cruse Bereavement Care (page 28) or The Good Grief Trust (page 30) for more information.



How you might be feeling

The emotions you experience as you grieve can be intense, and you might feel some more strongly than others. There might be days you cope better and days you feel overwhelmed.

You might cry a lot – and that’s OK. Lots of people find that they feel better after crying. Equally, you might not cry at all – and that’s OK too. There’s no formula for how to respond to the death of a loved one. There are no right or wrong emotions. And with time, and the right support, feelings of grief tend to become less intense, and you can start to adjust to the loss.

Numb

After a loved one dies, you might feel a sense of numbness and disbelief, even if the death was expected. You might feel like you’re in a daze. As this initial shock passes, you may experience other strong emotions.

Empty and sad

The feeling of emptiness that can follow someone's death might feel overwhelming and like it'll never go away. At this time, sadness can come in waves – some days or weeks might seem easier to cope with than others. This is a natural response when someone dies.

It's during this period of sadness that some healing can take place, even if it doesn't feel that way.

But some people find that this sadness doesn't pass, and it develops into depression. If you feel depressed, if you can't think about anything but the person who's died, or you're struggling with things like eating and sleeping, talk to your doctor or a loved one. It's important to get support if you need it.

This might help

If you're feeling depressed or you're worried about how you're feeling, you can call Samaritans (page 29) at any time of the day or night on **116 123** if you need someone to talk to. In Wales, you can also contact the C.A.L.L. helpline (page 28). In Northern Ireland, you can also contact Lifeline (page 29).

Your emotions might be so overwhelming that you feel you might hurt yourself in some way. If so, you should talk to someone as soon as possible, whether that's your doctor or a specialist helpline.

If you've harmed yourself or you think you're about to harm yourself, call **999** or go to A&E.

“I don’t think I’ll ever really get over losing Pauline, but with time I’ve learned to cope and enjoy life again.”

Michael, 78



Afraid

Fear and anxiety are natural emotions to experience after a bereavement. You might worry because your thoughts and feelings seem hard to control. You might feel anxious about what’s coming next, such as the person’s funeral. Or you might feel scared of losing someone else in the future.

If you’re scared, overwhelmed or anxious, it could help to talk to someone. If you’re worried about coping with practical day-to-day things, see page 17.

Angry

You might feel angry with the person who’s died for leaving you. You might feel angry at yourself – questioning whether you could have done more or regretting things you said or did. You might feel angry at those around you for a lack of understanding. You might find yourself feeling irritable, and not even know who or what your anger is directed towards.

Those of faith feel angry too – and might even find themselves questioning their faith at such a difficult and emotional time.

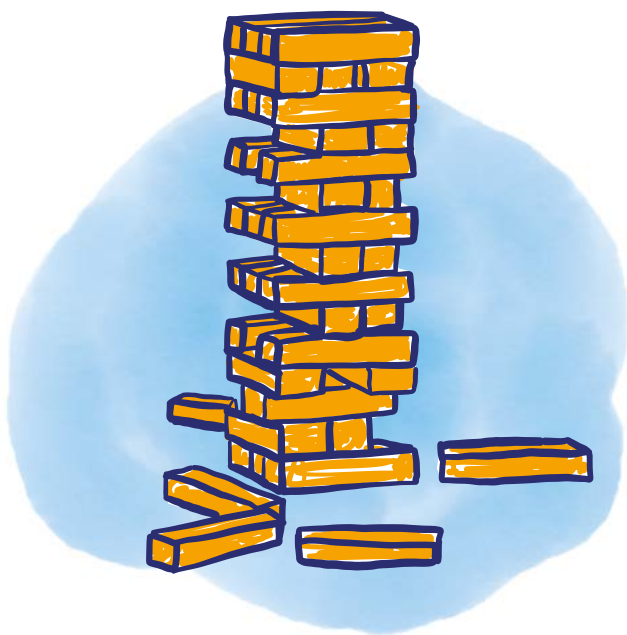
Dealing with anger can be challenging, even though it’s perfectly natural. Some people find it helpful to write their thoughts down. Others find that talking to someone helps – whether that’s someone you’re close to or a professional, such as a doctor or bereavement counsellor.

Guilty

It's common to experience feelings of guilt when someone you're close to dies. You might wonder whether you could have done more to help them, or regret something you said – or didn't say – when they were alive.

Try not to be too hard on yourself or anyone else. With time, you're likely to reach some acceptance of what's happened and be able to move forward with positive memories.

However, if your sense of guilt doesn't go away or becomes more powerful, you should try and talk about it with someone you're close to, or with someone who specialises in bereavement support.





Relieved

You might experience feelings of relief when someone you love dies. This can be unexpected and unsettling, but there are lots of reasons you might feel this way. It might be because the person is no longer in pain or distress – perhaps after a long illness. It might be because the person themselves had said they felt ready to die. Or it might be because you're no longer experiencing the stress and worry of caring responsibilities.

The reasons people feel relieved after a death are very individual to them and their relationship with the person who's died – but whatever your situation, it's nothing to feel guilty about. It's very normal to feel this way.

This might help

You can access bereavement support even if you're experiencing feelings of grief while someone is still living. This is sometimes called 'anticipatory grief' and is commonly felt when a loved one has a life-limiting condition.

Isolated

Losing a loved one can make you feel very lonely. This might be because you were very close to them – for instance, they were your partner or spouse – or because you were their carer for a long time. Or it might be because you can't face talking to other people or socialising like you used to.

Whatever the reason, feeling isolated can affect your confidence. If you can, talk to others about how you're feeling and try to stay connected to friends and family.

If you were very close to the person who's died, other people might not know how best to be there for you. If you feel able to, reaching out to ask for help or to let them know you're ready to talk could make them more confident in offering support.

“At first, I stopped doing all the things I used to do. Eventually I started going back to bingo and actually felt much better for it.”

Kay, 85



This might help

If you feel isolated, there's information on page 22 that could help you practically and emotionally.



Talking about your feelings

However you're feeling, it's important to talk about it. This can be easier said than done, as many people feel uncomfortable talking about death – whether they're bereaved themselves or trying to support someone who's lost a loved one.

But death affects us all. Talking to someone about how you're feeling, or just talking about the person who's died, can make you feel better. It's also a chance to remember the person and celebrate their life and what they still mean to you.

Starting this kind of conversation with others can help them feel more comfortable talking to you about what's happened. You never know, it might also give them the opportunity to discuss feelings they've felt unable to share.

It isn't easy. While there might be some days you enjoy talking about the person who's died, there might be days when it just feels too difficult. It might also be some time before you feel able to talk about them and how you're feeling. Some people might never really feel ready.

You don't necessarily have to talk to someone you know. You might feel more comfortable talking to someone else – and the good news is there are lots of support groups and professionals that can help you deal with your loss. You can find many of them listed at the end of this guide on pages 27-30.

Looking after yourself

Bereavement can have a physical impact as well as an emotional one. It can leave you feeling exhausted and unmotivated. But it's important that you continue to do what you can to look after yourself.

Sleep and rest

Grief is tiring – whether it's arranging the practicalities, travelling, sleepless nights or just being overwhelmed with everything going on. Even if you can't sleep, or your sleep is disrupted, be kind to yourself and rest when you can.

The charity Mind (page 29) gives practical tips on how to improve sleep on its website.

Food and drink

It might be the last thing on your mind, but try to eat and drink regularly. Even if you've lost your appetite, it'll help keep you healthy and boost your energy levels. Don't worry too much about eating a balanced diet – eating anything is better than eating nothing.

Sometimes, drinking can become an escape from a difficult time – so it's good to be mindful of how much you're having. If your drinking is becoming unhealthy, or you notice that someone else is starting to rely on alcohol to cope with their grief, talk to a specialist organisation such as Drinkaware (page 28).

This might help

Our guide **Healthy living** has more information on keeping yourself in good health.



Self-care

It can feel difficult to take care of yourself following a bereavement. This might mean you don't wash as frequently as you used to, you don't take your medication, or you miss doctor's appointments. But it's important to look after yourself.

If you find yourself neglecting your care needs, or you notice loved ones neglecting theirs, it's worth talking to someone you're close to or a professional such as a doctor.

If the person who's died used to help you with things like washing or getting to the doctor or the shops, see page 22 for information about where to get support.

Staying connected

After a loss, you might find yourself becoming more withdrawn, avoiding social situations and staying at home more. But it's important to try and stay connected with friends and loved ones, even though it might feel difficult.

It can feel hard to talk to others, especially when you might not feel like being social. But if someone was close to the person who's died too, they might be feeling a similar way – so a chat over a cuppa might help you both.

There might be a bereavement support group in your local area. These groups can offer a safe and comforting environment to talk about your experiences with people who've also had a bereavement.

When you're ready, is there a course or class you'd like to try? It can be a great way to lift your mood and meet new people – some of them may be in a similar position to you. If it'd make you feel more comfortable, you could ask someone you know to come with you.

Some people find their faith a great comfort when someone close to them dies. If you have a faith, being actively involved with your local place of worship can help socially, emotionally and spiritually.

Volunteering can also be a great way to meet new people and stay connected, and you can help a cause that means something to you. Timings are often flexible too, so you can start out doing what you feel able to and build on this over time.





Those around you

You often share the experience of bereavement with loved ones. Family dynamics can be tricky at times like this – but there can be lovely moments that you all share together too.

Supporting loved ones

While everyone grieves in their own way, having people around you can be a great support – and you can be a great support to them too. If possible, encourage your loved ones to share how they're feeling and reassure them that they're not alone. Talking, listening and sharing stories about the person who's died can help you all begin to feel better.

Finding the right words

Talking to someone about your feelings can be easier said than done, and it often feels difficult to talk to someone who's lost a person close to them. Many people don't know what to say, or worry that they might say the wrong thing, and so avoid the topic altogether. But that's doesn't necessarily mean they don't want to offer support.

Sometimes it can be helpful to bring up what's happened in conversation – this shows the other person that it's OK to talk about it.

Talking to young children

Speaking to grandchildren or other young children about death can be difficult, especially if it's the first time they've experienced a bereavement. But it's important to talk, be open, and answer any questions they have. Try to encourage them to ask questions and answer them as honestly as you can, even if it's difficult for you.

“Talking about Carol is actually a great comfort to me. I make sure I tell my grandson all about his grandma.”

Mark, 64



This might help

Organisations such as Winston's Wish (page 30) offer support, information and guidance to people caring for a bereaved child or young person. Cruse Bereavement Care (page 28) runs an initiative called Hope Again, aimed at bereaved young people.

If you're now alone

If someone close to you has died and you're adjusting to being by yourself, things can be particularly difficult. It might feel like you don't have anyone to talk to about your emotions. You might feel lonely and isolated.

There are helplines you can call if you want to talk to someone – see pages 27-30 for details. You can also ask your doctor or GP practice about what support services are available locally to help you cope.

If the person who's died was someone you relied on day-to-day, then you might be struggling with things like cooking, shopping or dealing with finances. If that's the case, contact your local council about having a care needs assessment and explain what you need help with.

If you'd like companionship, there might be things going on in your local area. Get in touch with your local community centre to see what's available. Getting involved with some new activities can be a great way to meet people.

Age UK also has a range of friendship services, both in person and over the phone. See page 26 for more information.

This might help

If you need help with practical things, such as money or legal issues, health or housing, you can contact the Age UK Advice Line (page 27) for support. In Wales, contact Age Cymru Advice (page 27).



When Maria's husband died, she found herself struggling to cope.

'I started going to a day centre where I met other people. Some of them were in a similar situation to me.'

'When my husband died two years ago, it felt like 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 – but even though 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. So I got in touch – and they arranged for someone to chat to me each week.

'Knowing someone was going to call made such a difference. And when I was feeling more confident, I started going to a day centre where I met other people. Some of them 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 to have a chat with people who need a bit of comfort and support at a difficult time.'

Past bereavements

If you've lost someone close to you before, you might have expected to experience similar feelings again. But different losses can affect us in different ways. Some emotions may be stronger after the death of certain people, or you might experience emotions you haven't felt before.

Bereavement can trigger memories of past losses, too, and you might find these unhappy times coming back to you particularly strongly. It might be that emotions weren't as openly discussed at the time, for instance, or that your feelings as a child were overlooked. A miscarriage or the death of a child may have been particularly hard to cope with at the time.

You might feel the need to mourn and talk about these losses before you can start to cope with your more recent bereavement. If you can, talk to friends and family about how you're feeling. If you'd prefer to talk to a professional, you can see your doctor or a bereavement counsellor.

This might help

You can contact specialist organisations for more help. Sands (page 29) supports those who have lost a child during pregnancy or after birth. The Compassionate Friends (page 30) supports people who've been affected by the death of a child of any age.

The armed forces charity SSAFA (page 30) specialises in helping those who have served or lost someone who served.

Looking ahead

It can be difficult to think about the future while you're grieving, and there's no rush to – do everything at your own pace. But looking after yourself and talking about how you're feeling can help you start to look ahead.

You might feel guilty at first, but finding enjoyment in life isn't a betrayal of the person who's died, or a substitution for the life you had with them. Life will never be quite the same again, but that doesn't mean it can't be lived to the full. Spend time with those close to you and do things you enjoy. It might be a good time to learn something new, take up a new hobby and make new friends.

Give yourself things to look forward to. You might not feel ready for this for a good while, but when you do, booking a trip or an activity might be a nice break from your day-to-day routine.

Birthdays, anniversaries or other dates that are significant to you and the person you've lost can be particularly difficult. You might find it helpful to consider how you'll deal with them in advance. You might want to use them to celebrate the person's memory with others – for example, by sharing stories or raising a toast – or you might prefer to have time on your own to remember them privately.

Most importantly, remind yourself that there's no formula for grief and you may have strong and unexpected feelings. This is perfectly natural – losing someone can be the start of an incredibly emotional time, and everyone reacts differently. But if you do find yourself struggling to cope or if you'd like to talk to someone, there's help and support available.

Age UK friendship services

If you're looking for some companionship, Age UK has a range of friendship services that you might like to try – whether it's a regular call or just a little chat when you need one.

- **The Telephone Friendship Service:** If you'd like to receive a weekly call, our Telephone Friendship Service matches people with a friendly volunteer. You can search 'telephone friendship' on the Age UK website or call **0800 434 6105** to find out more. You need to be over 60 and meet eligibility criteria.
- **The Silverline Helpline:** If you'd like a friendly chat, you can call The Silver Line on **0800 4 70 80 90**. It's a free, confidential telephone service for older people and it's open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.



In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI (page 27) to find out about the Check In and Chat telephone service.

There might also be befriending services available through your local Age UK – they can arrange for someone to visit you for a cup of tea and a chat. Contact your local Age UK to find out about their befriending services. In Wales, speak to your local Age Cymru, or contact Age Cymru Advice (page 27).



Useful organisations

Age UK

We provide information and advice for people in later life through our Age UK Advice Line, publications and website.

Age UK Advice: 0800 169 65 65

Lines are open seven days a week from 8am to 7pm.

www.ageuk.org.uk

In Wales, contact Age Cymru Advice: **0300 303 44 98**

www.agecymru.org.uk

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI: **0808 808 7575**

www.ageni.org

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland: **0800 124 4222**

www.agescotland.org.uk

AtaLoss

Website that helps people find the right bereavement support services for them. You can filter results by the type of loss you're experiencing, your age, and your location.

www.ataloss.org

C.A.L.L. Mental Health Helpline for Wales

Confidential support and listening service for mental health and related issues in Wales.

Tel: **0800 132 737** (or text 'help' to **81066**)

www.callhelpline.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care

Supports bereaved people across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Services include a website, helpline and online chat function, as well as in-person support.

Tel: **0808 808 1677**

www.cruse.org.uk

Department for Work and Pensions Bereavement Service

Checks surviving relatives' eligibility for benefits. It also takes claims for bereavement benefits and Funeral Payments.

Tel: **0800 151 2012**

Textphone: **0800 731 0464**

Drinkaware

Provides information and advice on responsible drinking. They also have the Drinkline helpline if you'd like to speak to someone about your or someone else's drinking.

Tel: **0300 123 1110**

www.drinkaware.co.uk

Lifeline

Helpline service for people experiencing distress or despair in Northern Ireland. It can also provide follow-up support, including counselling and complementary therapy.

Tel: **0808 808 8000**

www.lifelinehelpline.info

Mind

Provides advice and support for anyone experiencing a mental health issue.

Tel: **0300 123 3393**

Email: **info@mind.org.uk**

www.mind.org.uk

National Bereavement Service

Offers straightforward information and guidance to people who have lost a loved one. It can guide you through the practical arrangements you need to make after a death, while offering emotional support.

Tel: **0800 0246 121**

www.thenbs.org

Samaritans

Helpline offering confidential support to people in distress, 24 hours a day.

Tel: **116 123**

Email: **jo@samaritans.org**

www.samaritans.org

Sands

Provides support to parents, grandparents and their families when a baby dies during pregnancy or after birth. You can get in touch at any time after the loss – even years later.

Tel: **0808 164 3332**

Email: **helpline@sands.org.uk**

www.sands.org.uk

SSAFA, the Armed Forces Charity

Offers support and advice to anyone who has served in the armed forces or anyone who has lost someone that served.

Tel: **0800 260 6767**

www.ssafa.org.uk

The Compassionate Friends

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

Tel: **0345 123 2304**

Email: **helpline@tcf.org.uk**

www.tcf.org.uk

The Good Grief Trust

Provides advice, support and contact details for other organisations that help people affected by grief in the UK.

Email: **hello@thegoodgrieftrust.org**

www.thegoodgrieftrust.org

Winston's Wish

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

Tel: **08088 020 021**

Email: **ask@winstonswish.org**

www.winstonswish.org

Help us be there for someone else

We hope you found this guide helpful. When times are tough, it's so important to get some support. Did you know you could help us reach someone else who needs a little help? Here's how:

1

Give your views on guides like this

Our Readers' Panel helps make sure the information we produce is right for older people and their families. We'd love you to join. Go to www.ageuk.org.uk/readers-panel.

2

Donate to us

Every donation we receive helps us be there for someone when they need us. To make a donation, call us on **0800 169 8787** or go to www.ageuk.org.uk/donate.

3

Volunteer with us

Our volunteers make an incredible difference to people's lives. Get involved by contacting your local Age UK or at www.ageuk.org.uk/volunteer.

4

Campaign with us

We campaign to make life better for older people, and rely on the help of our strong network of campaigners. Add your voice to our latest campaigns at www.ageuk.org.uk/campaigns.

5

Remember us in your will

A gift to Age UK in your will is a very special way of helping older people get expert support in the years to come. Find out more by calling **020 3033 1421** or visit www.ageuk.org.uk/legacy.

What should I do now?

You may want to read some of our relevant information guides and factsheets, such as:

- **When someone dies**
- **How to be an executor**
- **Your mind matters**

You can order any of our guides or factsheets by giving our Advice Line a ring for free on **0800 169 65 65** (8am-7pm, 365 days a year).

Our friendly advisers are there to help answer any questions.

All of our publications are available in large print and audio formats.

There's plenty of really useful information on our website, too. Visit **www.ageuk.org.uk/bereavement** to get started.

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



0800 169 65 65
www.ageuk.org.uk



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