

Coming to terms with grief

Death has no favourites and rarely, it seems, is there any logic attached to our loss. Furthermore, it can't be graded: any loss is painful whether it be a child, a husband, parent or friend. The only certainty is that we're left with an aching void known as grief.

Helen Travis tackles a subject that affects us all...

'No-one told me that grief felt so like fear' said C S Lewis in his book 'A Grief Observed' on the death of his wife after a long fight against cancer. A committed Catholic, his wife's death for a time made him question the whole being of God. Yet for the most of us, the rituals of funeral and burial are still closely linked to religion, even if we don't consider ourselves to be 'religious'. It is, for most people, a form of expression, as are the cards and flowers that arrive in hordes whenever anyone close to us dies.

In Britain, we have a 'stiff-upper lip' attitude when it comes to death. After all, that's what we've been taught: to 'be brave' and hide our feelings at all times. But talk to anyone who's lost someone and they'll inevitably say, 'I just wish that people wouldn't act as if it simply hadn't happened'. So there is an important role for each and every one of us to play – whether or not we've actually experienced bereavement first hand.

What purpose?

Your child, a brother or sister, your husband, a parent, a close friend – it's virtually impossible to see a purpose to death, especially if the person was young, or the death occurred as the result of a pointless accident or medical quirk of fate. And, probably, there's no point in trying, because death can be cruel, merciless and pointless. But there is a point in grieving fully for your loss. For surely if you don't allow yourself to do so – and make sure others allow you to, you won't eventually gain the insight and wisdom that ... to a tiny degree ... makes the whole experience seem not entirely wasted.

Whatever private hell you may be going through, grief need not be – is never – negative or wasted. Grief is a part of saying goodbye to the person you've lost. It will heal you and help you adapt to life without the dead person. There may always be an ache, a feeling of sadness, but the shock, the disbelief, the anger and raw hurt doesn't last forever.

But shouldn't I be over it now?

Getting over a death takes time...longer than many people think. You can't expect to get over, say, the death of your husband who you may have known for 20 or 30 years in as many weeks. Society sees the funeral as the 'good-bye:' but it's only after the funeral that the bereaved person has time to allow the enormity of loss to sink in. Death is a busy and expensive business. There's the funeral to arrange, financial affairs to sort out, possessions to be gone through, people to write to. This too, is a process of completion – doing as much as you can for the person who's died. But it's when there are no more practical things to be done that the days

seem their longest and most pointless; your hurt most bitter. And what of the first Christmas, birthday, anniversary, holiday? These are all milestones, especially in the first year ...' this time last year we were ...'

Ironic, then, that whilst people rally round in their dozens during those first few weeks, the phone calls and visits soon tail off. Of course, no one can live their life through someone else indefinitely, but if you know of someone recently bereaved remember that it might be just when you think they don't need you any more that they need you most. Because we tend to put a time limit on grief, they may be going around with a brave face, yet be crumbling away inside. What if you're the one struggling on alone at this time, feeling isolated and desolate? And maybe feeling slightly guilty, too, at your 'weakness;' that you should be over it by now. Well, it's important that you swallow your pride and your conception of what is reasonable grieving time and talk to someone. Whether it be a relation, friend, your GP, a counsellor, the Samaritans – don't keep your feelings bottled up. Because by doing that and pretending that everything is all right, you're denying yourself the healing, grieving process.

Sue, now 42, lost her husband Tom when she was 29, leaving her alone with two small children to bring up. Tom was only 37 when he died from a heart attack. She tells her story:

'It was very sudden – he was playing cricket and he collapsed in the middle of the match. He had been quite fit although he did go to the doctor on the previous Tuesday because he said he didn't feel well. The doctor thought it was the recurrence of an ulcer he'd had, and didn't look any further than that.....'

I remember the day very well. I was perming my mum's hair on a Saturday afternoon. The kids were playing; it was very hot. There was a knock on my front door and it was the secretary of the cricket club. He said, "Tom isn't very well, jump into the car and I'll take you to see him." By the time we got to the club I knew Tom had died – because they'd stopped the match and they wouldn't do that unless something dramatic had happened. He'd been taken to hospital and when we got there they told me he'd died in the ambulance.

They didn't want to let me see him, but I insisted. I'd never seen a dead body before, but I would never have come to terms with Tom's death if I hadn't kissed him goodbye, and was then taken home.

It wasn't until I walked in through the door and I realised he wasn't going to be there any more that it really hit me and that I was going to have to tell the children. I don't think I cried – I was completely and utterly numb. What I do remember is that from that night onwards I could never sleep in our bedroom again. I felt I had to move.

The next day was Father's Day so I had to tell the children then, because they'd got him presents. I just told them that their Dad had been very ill and that he'd died and wasn't coming back. We couldn't have the funeral for about two weeks because there had to be a post-mortem. After the funeral I went back to Northern Ireland with my mother-in-law.'

The 8 stages of grief

The problem with losing someone dear to you is that if you haven't experienced bereavement before, you simply don't know what to expect. So it can help to know that there are various 'normal' stages of grief. So however strange you feel, you're not going mad – our feelings are all necessary in enabling us to start the long process of healing.

Numbness

Around the time of someone's death and throughout the funeral, for days or often weeks – a numbed feeling of disbelief carries you through the immediate sense of loss. Accept that you are in a state of emotional shock and that the sense of unreality is your body's way of protecting you in the early days. The numbness often means you will be able to complete tasks efficiently, but try not to make too many important, long-term decisions at this time because your judgement may not be as astute as normal.

Disbelief

A refusal to accept someone's death is also a very common reaction in the early days. Sometimes you cannot even remember the funeral very clearly, because your mind is telling you that it can't be true. The other reason for disbelief is that the death of someone we know brings us face to face with our own mortality. After all, if it happened to him/her, it could happen to me.

Presence

You walk down the street and suddenly you see him in the distance – he turns around and all too soon you realise that it is someone else. You're drifting off to sleep at night and you could swear he's lying there beside you. You even smell his aftershave or her perfume. Your subconscious is playing tricks with you, willing to happen what you want more than anything else: for the person you've lost to be back with you. Again, this is a normal reaction – you may think that you're going mad but, really, you're not: it's all part of the process.

Anxiety

Once the numbness and disbelief have worn off, you could find that, far from feeling calm and without emotion, very strong physical symptoms of anxiety come on. Your throat feels tight, your heart pounds, you feel breathless, frightened – but you don't know why. Everyday tasks, previously done automatically, now appear to be insurmountable obstacles. The anxiety, loneliness and vulnerability felt when a partner dies can make you feel almost childlike again – fear of sleeping alone in an empty house, for example, even if you've stayed there on your own before the death. Tell other people how you're feeling – everything seems more normal and less frightening if you can only talk about it. Thoughts spinning around in your head with no outlet take on mammoth proportions.

Anger

Anger is a natural reaction to any loss, and death is without doubt the most potent loss there is. The anger can be against anyone – the doctors at the hospital; the policeman who brings you the dreadful news; a couple laughing together, hand-in-hand; a mother with a healthy baby; two sisters chatting together; a father and daughter together. But often the strongest anger is against the dead person: 'How could he leave me like this?' Don't feel guilty about it. The anger will pass and it's a necessary part of the grieving process, which needs to be let out. It will pass, but be on your guard in case it becomes a pattern of thought that is a habit, then replaced by long-term bitterness, which can only be destructive for you and those around you. It can help to remind yourself that very few of us live the perfect, trouble-free lives that advertisements of happy families seem to suggest. Most people are carrying some sort of personal grief or loss around with them.

Guilt

All the 'if onlys': 'if only I'd been more understanding; made him go to the doctor sooner; hadn't lost my temper....' The list is endless, and maybe the most difficult aspect of this remorse is that you'll never have the opportunity to put things right. One very painful sense of remorse is when you've nursed someone through an illness, only not to be there the moment the person dies – to hold hands, to help them through. But most people face death with surprising calm and acceptance when the time comes, and, after all, it's simply not humanly possible to stay with someone 24 hours a day. So common are the emotions of guilt and remorse that it's been labelled 'survivor guilt'. In time, you'll be able to come to terms with all the regrets and to see them in perspective instead of blaming yourself for circumstances that were out of your control.

Yearning

Once the numbness wears off, there's the realisation that the person you've lost really isn't going to come back. There's the difficult process – whether you've lost a partner, child or other close relative – of adapting to a different lifestyle; a life without them where once they played an important role. This can cause real despair: 'I'll never, ever get over this, what's the point of life, how on earth am I going to cope?' The sheer physical weariness can be overwhelming. Even getting out of bed can seem a real effort.

Acceptance

But after the first year or two passes, you realise with a start that you're regaining some interest in life. This too can be accompanied by guilt: 'I don't want to feel better or forget him'. But gradually the acute pain and hurt dull to a sadness; you no longer wake up thinking the person is still alive; you suddenly realise that there are times when you forget your loss – something which may have been unthinkable only months ago. Slowly, life regains its meaning.

Needing help

When does the mourning stop? There's no easy answer – it takes some of us longer than others. But you're well on the way when you can think of the person you've lost, of course with sadness, but without the feeling of physical pain, the heart-wrenching hurt; when you get a bit of zest back for living and start giving and contributing to life again.

However long it takes, at some stage you may feel you simply can't cope on your own ... no matter how supportive friends and family are. But there's no need to struggle on in silence if you consider counselling. This doesn't mean you're inadequate, weak-minded or mentally ill. It is purely and simply an opportunity to speak freely to a trained person who will help you to reach your own solutions – practical and emotional. And it can be tremendous relief. We all know how guilty we feel when we've 'burdened' someone with our feelings: 'That's enough about me, I've gone on long enough' and so on. But when you've been through such a profound loss, it can be a relief to know that you can talk solely about your feelings – whether they are hurt, anger or despair – without feeling awkward. This is the role that counselling can play. Go to your doctor, or contact one of the support groups that are there to give advice to, and help people specifically in your position.

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