

Helping yourself through grief

However overwhelming your feelings of grief, you will find ways of moving forward and coming to terms with what has happened, says experienced counsellor Julia Samuel.

Go gently with yourself. Grief is a messy, exhausting and relentless business, but it is survivable. As human beings we have infinite resources within ourselves to heal and move forward, if we only allow ourselves the time to express the pain first.

Talking helps

It is helpful to talk, both to family and friends. And you may find that you need to repeat and repeat the events of the death in order to make some sense of what has happened.

Often it is those closest to us, our relations, with whom we have most difficulty communicating when someone dies. This can leave you feeling misunderstood, unrecognised, hurt and angry. You may be able to help your family support you by being explicit about what you would like and what is missing.

In families that have histories of poor communication, you may just have to accept that you will not be able to change things and acknowledge that, on the whole, the intentions are good, even if the expression of them is poor. Find other people outside the family to give you the support you need.

Ways to avoid isolation

Grief can be very isolating. Finding out information through books and videos, or joining a support group, can help you realise you are not the only one and that what you are feeling, painful as it may be, is normal.

Writing a journal can be a cathartic way of expressing feelings on your own. It is also helpful to have a record for you to look back on the process of your grieving. Accept that you may not be able to function as effectively as you normally do. You may be tired, have a poor memory, and find it difficult to concentrate, or feel that nothing is important.

Ask for support from friends, make a note of those things that you worry you will forget, and set yourself one achievable task a day. We grieve in our bodies as well as our hearts and minds so exercise, even a gentle walk, can help release some of the physical tensions. Massage can also be releasing and healing when the pain inside feels jagged, like a physical wound.

One of the most difficult aspects of grieving is the feeling of being out of control. Try putting some structure into your day by, for instance, doing essential chores in the morning, exercise in the afternoon. Give yourself a break from the pain. Plan treats or diversions, like seeing a film that will distract you for a few hours.

Wait before you act

You may have a strong desire to remove all the objects - photographs, clothes and so on - of the person who has died because you hurt so much every time you look at them. It is not a good idea to throw anything away until your feelings are less intense. Then you will be able to decide more rationally what you would like to keep. That goes for big items like houses too - although, of course, finances may be the deciding factor here.

If you feel furious and don't know what to do with your rage, try finding ways of expressing your anger physically, such as hitting a pillow, tying a knot in a towel and whacking something unbreakable! Jumping on ice is satisfying, so is kicking the water in the swimming pool or the sea. Kick-boxing is fine if you are up to it.

The physical accompanied by the verbal is good: shout or yell at the same time. Make sure that you are safe and cannot hurt yourself, that you are private and cannot be heard. If you have been angry on your own, find someone to comfort you afterwards. Some people believe expressing anger ignites more anger, rather than releasing it - but others do not share this experience. See for yourself whether this works for you.

Set your memory to work

Find ways to remember the person who has died. You may feel too raw initially, but looking through albums, recalling experiences or visiting places you went together can help focus your grief when you are feeling at a loss and hurting too much.

When you cry, remember tears are there for a reason, both to let others know you need support and to release chemicals that calm you.

In time you may want to plant a tree or a shrub in memory of the person who has died. You may want to paint or write something as a tribute to them if that feels right for you.

Some people find comfort in having a memory box - which you can either buy or make – in which to keep precious possessions: These could be cards, dried flowers, photographs and other special things relating to the person who has died.

Condolences express care

Replying to condolence letters can be cathartic and warming. Remember, they are written as an expression of care for you and the person who has died, not as a rod for your back. Only reply if that is really what you want to do.

Humour can break through - often things that happen are so macabre, or things people say so fantastically unhelpful, the only thing to do is to laugh. That is all to the good. Thinking of past times which amused you can be a welcome, restorative break.

Returning to work

When you go back to work, find ways of supporting yourself. Perhaps you could ask a work colleague to accompany you to the office on the first day. Let people know whether you want to talk about what has happened or not. You can change your mind once you have been back for a while. Make sure that people know as much about the death as you want them to know, so you do not feel they are whispering behind your back.

Ideally, you should go back to work gradually, working just mornings initially or a few days a week. Do not expect to be able to perform at your usual capacity; try to take on manageable, short-term tasks: big projects can seem overwhelming. Work can be a useful distraction from grieving, but you are unlikely to be able to switch off completely. Give yourself short breaks in the day to go for walks and have moments of peace, or a time for a few tears.

There are no rules in grief. These guidelines may be useful to you, they may not. You are your best guide. Listen to yourself; learn what works for you and what drives you crazy. Accept that what helps initially may not do so after a few months.

Whatever happens, be kind to yourself, give yourself time to heal and trust that, although it may initially seem impossible, there is light at the end of the tunnel.