

# *understanding and managing grief*



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## INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been put together specifically for those who have experienced bereavement after a death from cancer. The impact and progress of each person's grief is unique but there is enough common ground for us to know that it can help to describe the general effects of such a loss and some of the stages of recovering from it.

However lonely this path seems at times, it is trodden by an unexpectedly large number of people. The statistics are stark. There are around 600,000 deaths recorded in the UK every year and more than 160,000 are attributable to cancer. That's more than one in four of all deaths. When you consider how many people may be deeply affected by each death, you see the true scale of mourning in our society and how much of that is brought about by cancer.

We hope that within these pages you will find insights into the process of grief and helpful advice on the way forward.

*Death leaves a heartache no one can heal,  
Love leaves a memory no one can steal —  
Irish Proverb*

# FINDING THE WORDS

At some time in our lives, we will all experience the death of someone close to us. This can often leave us unprepared because death isn't something we often talk about. We live our lives as if we are immortal, always planning, not really thinking about the fact that one day our lives will end. 'It will happen one day, but not just yet.'

Often, when a death occurs, we are not ready. We don't know what bereavement feels like or what we are supposed to do. And yet every one of us will experience it at some point.

When the death of a loved one - a husband, wife, partner, parent or child, a loved relation or a close friend - touches our lives, we can feel overwhelmed by the enormity of our feelings of loss. We enter a world of bereavement, of grief and mourning, a painful world where our lives are changed forever.

Our lives change in a moment. Sometimes we may be able to talk about our feelings but at other times we may not even be able to put words to our grief. We all grieve in different ways and even within our own family we may feel isolated and alone. Friends and family may find it awkward and not know what to say.

This booklet aims to help map a path through grief, to name some of the feelings we may never have experienced before. Some of these feelings will be similar for anyone affected by a major loss or the end of a relationship. How do we take care of ourselves? How do we honour the person who has died and find ways of remembering them? How do we move forward in our grief and take the first tentative steps to embracing life again?

## Bereavement

Bereavement describes the time when someone dies and we are without them. There are many ways of describing the death of someone close. Some people find it very hard to say the word died and prefer to use terms like *slipped away*, *gone to sleep* or *passed over*.

The effect of bereavement will be different for everyone, depending on their own experience of

life and loss. There is no one way of describing what has happened. We cope as best we can, according to our own beliefs and life experience, and we react in ways that may or may not always make sense to us.

## Loss

Part of bereavement involves loss, the permanent loss of someone who has been a part of our lives. The loss is complete and cannot be undone. Sometimes this can have such an impact that we have to find coping strategies to try to ease the pain. We may feel numb, in denial: *This hasn't happened; I will wake up from this dream; They will walk through the door and all will be well*. We have to deal with the loss of a shared future, plans we had made, shared goals and aspirations that we must now face alone. We may have looked forward to fulfilling dreams of travel, to watching children grow up and having lives of their own.

## Grief

Grief is the word we use to describe the feelings and reactions a person may have when they lose someone they love and care about. It happens after any loss but most powerfully after the death of someone close to us. Other words may express that grief - sorrow, anguish, pain, distress, suffering and heartache, to name but a few. Grief is a burden that we carry, not an event but a process to be lived through, and it may change from moment to moment, hour to hour. Every person who grieves will grieve differently and in their own time. There is no time limit on grief.



# THE PATHS OF GRIEF

There are so many parts to grief. Some researchers believe there is a timeline of different stages that that we go through. This is not always the case and it is a very individual process.

At times we can feel helpless, a burden to others and those we rely on when we lack control and experience that sense of helplessness.

Grief can be overwhelming with so many emotions appearing. One minute we can feel one thing, the next something completely different. Sometimes the intensity and confusion we feel may even make us believe we are going mad.

The circumstances of death can sometimes change how we feel. Was it sudden and unexpected? Was it after a prolonged period of illness or suffering? Were we able to say the things that we wanted to before they died or do we have regrets about things we might have said or done in the past?

Grief and mourning are normal reactions to loss. Our ability to process this and give it words might be difficult because, as a society or culture, we don't often spend time talking about death and bereavement. When someone close dies it may give us pause for reflection on our own life's journey.

*Who am I? What am I doing here? Where am I going?* These are some of the deepest questions for us as human beings which philosophers have been trying to answer for generations. After the period of reflection or after the funeral, our lives return to the busyness of everyday life.

**What are some of the thoughts and feelings we might experience on the death of someone we love?**

## Shock and disbelief

When someone we love dies, our body can go into shock and we can find it difficult to comprehend.

*How can someone be there one minute and not the next?*

It can feel like you are in a bad dream. You hope you will soon wake up and all will be as it was.

An inability to process the enormity of what has happened and the shock response might manifest itself in physical symptoms. We might shake or cry uncontrollably, be unable to eat or drink or just feel completely lost and at sea without an anchor point.

A sense of numbness and disbelief can help get us through those first incredibly painful days when there is so much to organise, so many people to contact and preparations to make for the funeral.

## Yearning

This is the feeling of intense longing for the person who has died, an ache for their presence and a deep desire to see them, even though you know it's not possible. You might think you see them in the street or continue to lay a place for them at the dinner table. You want things return to normal, to how they were before the person was ill or had died. We wish things could be different and the person could still be here with you.

*My feet will want to walk to where you  
are sleeping, but I shall go on living —  
Pablo Neruda*

## Loneliness

One of the things people often say when they experience a loss is that they feel alone. You might be surrounded by family and friends, especially when the person dies or around the time of the funeral. Then other people's lives seem to move on and there can be a foreboding, a sense of isolation and intense loneliness. When we have shared our lives so intensely with someone, we can feel their absence so deeply and a sense of incredible loneliness can creep in.

## Pain

The death of someone we love can be intensely painful. We often hear that someone is heartbroken and in despair. Often we can feel physical as well as emotional pain. Our heart aches or our body can be wracked with pain as we endure the intense sadness of losing someone we love. How do we cope

with or express that pain? We might feel grumpy or tearful, irritable or distracted or overwhelmed by our feelings.

## Guilt

Guilt can often accompany a death. Did we do enough? Maybe we could have been kinder and done more for them. Maybe we lost our temper or became angry at times. It might be that we carry guilt at not recognising the signs of the illness earlier, that we couldn't stop what was happening. Some people may experience survivor guilt.

### *Why am I still here and they are gone?*

Sometimes there might be a sense of relief that the person has died and that it is now over. This feeling of relief is natural and very common.

You may revisit that place of exquisite pain where you did not want the person to suffer anymore and yet, you did not want them to die.



## Anger and irritability

Anger can be a common reaction to the death of someone close. It may be directed at medical teams or the GP for not making a diagnosis earlier when treatment might have made a difference. It may be directed at God for allowing it to happen or at ourselves for not being able to stop it. Sometimes it might be directed at the person who has died for leaving us alone.

You might feel anger at people for not understanding what you are going through or for saying something insensitive. You may feel angry at the world carrying on as if nothing has happened when your whole life has been turned upside down.

You might find yourself uncharacteristically snapping at people or getting irritable at things that normally would not bother you.

You might feel a sense of injustice or anger. *When there are so many 'bad' people in the world, why are they still here and my loved one has died?*

Not everyone who has been bereaved will experience anger but it can be a common response to feeling a lack of control.

## Agitation

You might feel restless and agitated, unable to sit still for long and needing to be on the go all the time. What will happen next? How will I cope and go on? If we sit still we can feel overwhelmed so being constantly active can be a coping strategy. It doesn't give us time to think. The agitation can sometimes express itself in panicky moments or in symptoms of anxiety. By keeping busy and distracting ourselves, we can try to avoid the pain of loss and separation.

## Sadness

With bereavement can come a deep sadness. You may feel there is no point to life any more. Life has changed forever and you don't know where you belong any more. Sorrow is a sense of deep distress. Experiencing sadness after experiencing grief can be a part of the healing process.

## Tearfulness

You might find yourself crying a lot. Crying can bring relief and can be an outlet for emotions. It can sometimes feel as though you are crying about nothing at all or over things that might seem totally unrelated to your loss.

Some might find it difficult to cry or express emotion.

## Envy

You might find yourself envious of others who seem to be unaffected by loss or those who still have their loved one with them. You might envy others for what you don't have - a friend, lover, mother, father or sibling.

## Loss of appetite

You may not feel like eating or that your heart is too full to even think about it.

## Exhaustion

Grief is one of the most tiring and exhausting life events. The feeling of being overwhelmed and perhaps a lack of sleep can leave you tired beyond words.

Daylight may bring relief because we can distract ourselves but the night can be a difficult time. Things can seem worse during the hours of darkness.

## Inability to cope

Ordinary, everyday tasks might seem impossible and you can feel completely helpless and unable to cope. In everyday life our partner may have attended to financial or practical issues, other domestic duties and cooking. When a person dies we have to start to do things on our own. A feeling of helplessness is understandable.

## Flashbacks

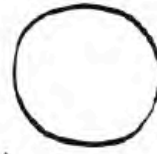
You may experience flashbacks from the time of your loved one's death. This can be very distressing. It can help to look at old photos or recall a positive, happy time that can replace the difficult memory when you need it.





# Growing Around Grief

A grieving woman drew a circle to represent herself



and then shaded the entire circle

The shading, she said, represented her grief.

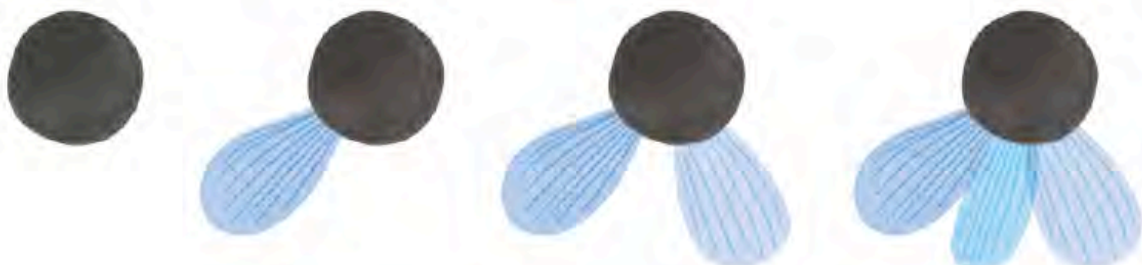


In the first weeks and months after her loss her grief consumed her completely. It was there when she woke in the morning, as she went about her day, and often, in her dreams.

People told her, of course, that 'time would heal' her grief, and as time went by, she expected that it would become smaller and that she would not be so overwhelmed by it. But, for her, it didn't happen that way.



Her grief stayed the same but...  
her life grew around it.







When people experience a major loss, they often can't imagine how they can ever be happy again. But as time goes by, other people and other experiences come into their life, and they find themselves taking pleasure in living again; not because they have 'forgotten' or 'got over' their loss, but because it has become part of who they are.

There will always be times when something will trigger their grief - a photograph, the smell of flowers perhaps, an anniversary, or a song - and they will feel themselves almost completely taken up by their loss again.

But as time passes, these things become a little easier, and the world grows large around the loss again more quickly.



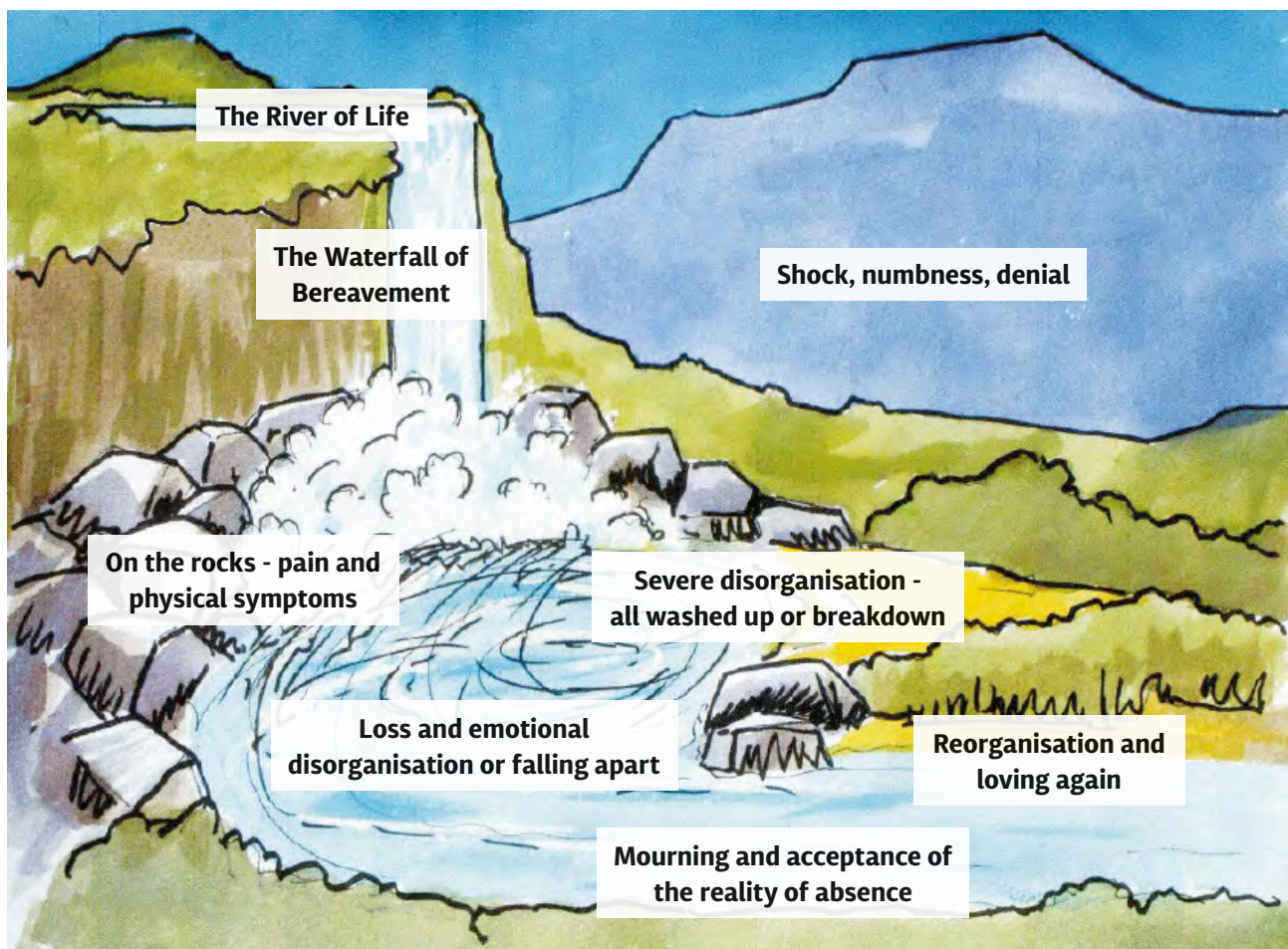
# VISUALISING

Grief can be like a whirlpool. We can be going along in life and then something radically changes when we know someone has a life-limiting illness. We want to steer our little boat against the tide, willing for the inevitable not to happen. There can come a moment of exquisite pain when we don't want our loved one to suffer but we don't want them to die either. We feel our life is torn apart. After death, it can be like we have fallen off a cliff. We fall into a

whirlpool of emotions. We can feel that life as we know it has broken down and nothing will ever be the same. The emotions can change from moment to moment and it can feel like we are going mad. With time comes acceptance of the reality that our loved one has died and we can start the long, slow progress towards reorganising our life as our life grows around our grief.

## *The Waterfall of Bereavement*

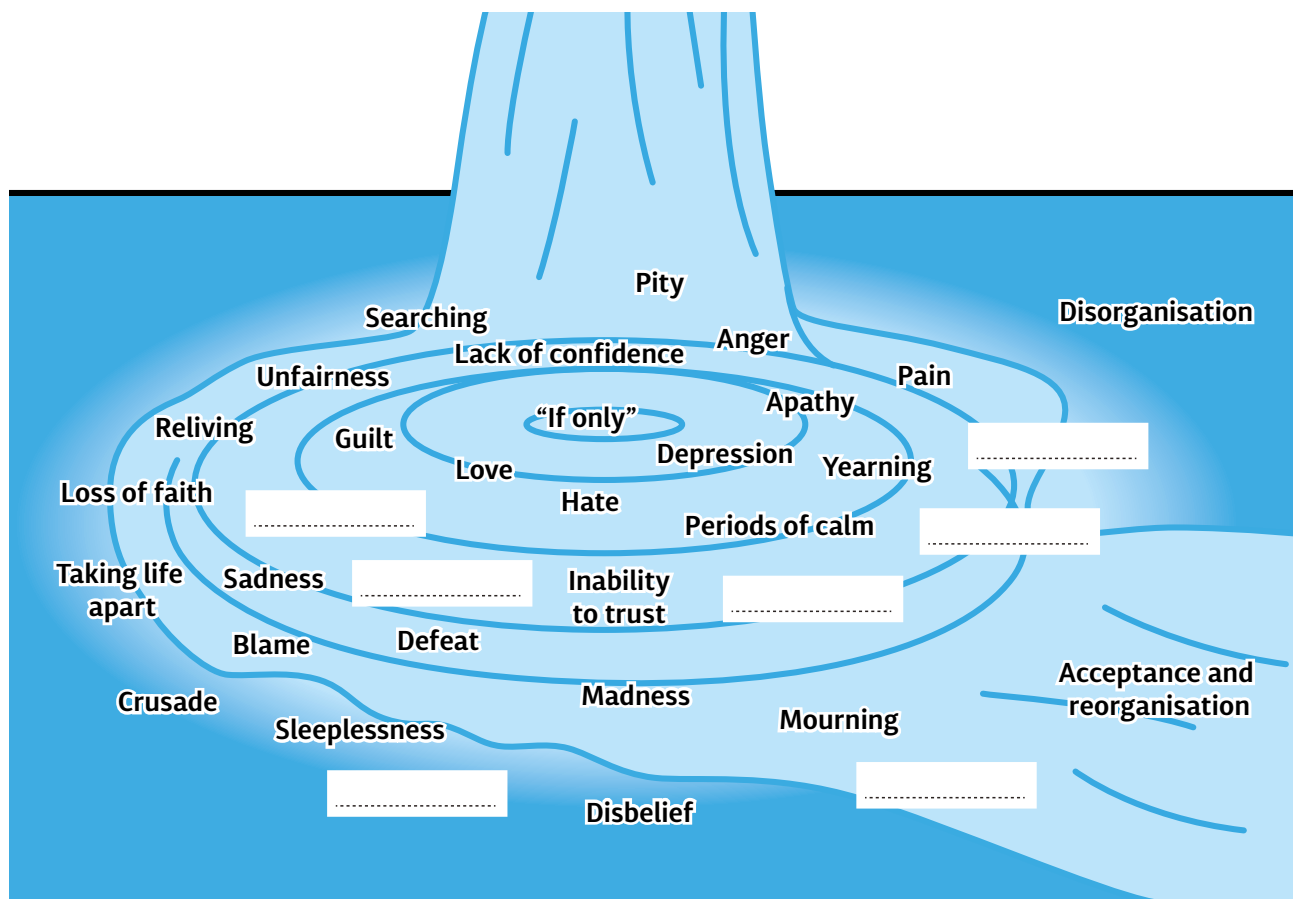
Dr Richard Wilson



**Bereavement is what happens to you; grief is what you feel; mourning is what you do.**

## *The Whirlpool of Grief*

Add in any other feelings you may think of on the dotted lines.





# THINGS THAT MAY HELP WHEN YOU ARE GRIEVING

While we are mourning the loss of a loved one, it is important to try to take care of ourselves. That is easier said than done, especially at a time when nothing seems normal any longer and our whole life has changed.

## Talk about it

Try not to bottle up your feelings. Talk about it. Sometimes you might feel that people are too busy to hear you or you don't want to burden others as they have their own lives. But talking can help to relieve isolation and help you make sense of some of the things that are going around inside your head.

## Belief systems

There are many belief systems and all of them could provide food for thought as we try to understand and make sense of the death of a loved one. Reading about other people's beliefs can be both comforting and challenging as we try to find meaning and understanding when nothing makes sense. Faith communities can be a source of support and comfort. Talking with a minister can be helpful and give us the opportunity to explore faith and belief and what it has to say about life and death. Many bereaved people take comfort from the fact that their faith is centred on the idea of an afterlife, a paradise where the soul of the person who has died will know happiness. These beliefs can also offer the hope of an eventual reunion with loved ones. For others it might be about exploring religion or philosophy for the first time and trying to find meaning for themselves through this.

When a young woman dying from secondary breast cancer was asked how she was managing to live with the enormity of her life ebbing away, she simply said: *'What is happening is happening and I can't do anything about it. My body is failing but I know that when I die I will become stardust and scatter in the lives of my children.'* What an amazing way of making sense of how she will be connected with her children.

It has been said that we are the light of the millions of stars that have died but will always keep shining because the universe is infinite. One wonders if that young woman made sense of her situation after hearing this or maybe it was an integral part of her own belief system.

How do we make sense of the belief held by some that when someone dies, it is a natural ending and there is nothing afterwards? Do we explore how we re-engage with life? Can we find meaning and comfort through the person who has died living on in our memories and our thoughts?

## Looking after yourself

The anxiety, pain and guilt that come with grieving can mean you don't look after yourself properly and can even lead to depression. At the same time, the wear and tear of mourning can make you feel tired and listless. It is important to find a place for exercise, a good diet and a structure to the day to try to keep as healthy as you can.

Try to get up in the morning, even if you don't feel like it. If you wake up feeling really low, try to break it up your day by setting yourself tasks and goals. One might be the very act of getting out of bed, then having breakfast, even if it tastes like cardboard! Once you have completed a task, set yourself another one. Eventually you will get absorbed into the rhythm of your day and hopefully you won't be concentrating on your low mood.

Exercise uses up excess energy and just gets you out and about. It may be the last thing you feel like doing but it can often help you sleep. Your mind can be in overdrive, thinking about so many things and you feel absolutely drained. Exercising and getting physically tired can really help.

It is important to find ways to express and work with your grief to help with how you are feeling. Beyond what you do yourself, there is help available from places like FORCE.



## Support

Friends and acquaintances can make a crucial difference and be a great support. You may feel let down by friends you thought would be there for you. The greater number will hopefully come through. Just being there, providing a sense of continuity in your life and offering a sympathetic ear can be enormously helpful. In some cases, you may find that you have to give support in turn, for example, returning to your role as a parent, friend or colleague; taking the lead in breaking the silence caused by fear of saying the wrong thing. Talking does help. If your friend or family member was going through bereavement, you would want to be there for them.

Your GP may be able to offer advice on other things that might be of benefit - medication (for example

antidepressants) or counselling. Wellbeing checks might help you monitor how you are feeling and guide you to seek help if you are struggling.

Counselling is offered by a number of organisations like CRUSE Bereavement Care. Meeting with a group of other bereaved people can provide an opportunity to talk about your own experiences as well as listening to others. This might be the first time you have the opportunity to talk openly and emotionally about what has happened to you, to find the words and listen to the accounts of others going through similar experiences of loss and bereavement.

Yoga, exercise and relaxation classes can help with anxiety and are also companionable ways to combat loneliness.

Everyone grieves in different ways. For some, it could take longer or shorter. I do know it never disappears. An ember still smolders inside me. Most days, I don't notice, but, out of the blue, it will flare to life —

Maria V. Snyder

## ***Some helpful hints***

*Call a friend when you are feeling low*

*Remember to take time to eat*

*Try to get enough rest even when you can't sleep*

*Try to exercise daily*

*Try to spend time with family and friends*

*Try and keep a journal about your feelings*

*Allow others to help you*

*Be patient with yourself if you can*

*Try not to stay in bed all day,  
even when you don't feel like getting up*

*Try not to isolate yourself*

*Accept invitations to go out, even when you don't feel like it*

**Gloria Lintermans**

Author of 'The Healing Power of Grief: The Journey Through Loss to Life and Laughter'





# REMEMBRANCE

To remember the person who has died is to honour and celebrate them and your relationship with them, to hold on to them and the parts of your life you shared with them. There are many ways of doing this, such as formal memorials, personal rituals, keeping special things that are particularly full of meaning to you or a range of craft and artistic creations.

**From a churchyard with a headstone to a woodland burial site**, there are many choices for interring a coffin or ashes. Many people scatter their loved one's ashes in a place of special significance or keep them for a future joint burial or scattering. Some people incorporate ashes into a special piece of jewellery, like a brooch or a ring.

**If the person you are remembering enjoyed** a particular view, played a particular sport, supported a charity or an educational activity, you could place a memorial, a seat or a bench with a plaque, donate a competition trophy, hold a charity event or set up a bursary or scholarship.

**You might like to revisit special shared places** – cities, buildings, beauty spots. You might find the visits painful at first but eventually consoling, bringing back memories of what the person loved and shared with you.

**Clothes are often a difficult area to cope with.** Many people feel they have no choice but to get rid of things as soon as possible while others agonise about finding the right time. Clothes can be used to make things like patchwork quilts, teddy bears or cushions, which may be a one-off or multiple gifts for other close family members. You may also want to wear something belonging to the loved one you have lost – a scarf, necklace, watch or tie.

**Memory boxes and jars** are a way of collecting small items with special meaning as reminders of the person who has died. These might include perfume or aftershave, jewellery, photos and letters. Sometimes people write memories on a piece of paper and place them in a jar to read again when they want to feel close to the person.

**Art can offer ways of expressing emotions** and commemorating someone. Portraits, abstract art or representations of favourite landscapes can be created or commissioned. One bereaved daughter created a book featuring watercolours of her mother's jewellery, textiles and other objects surrounded by hand-written text, describing the memories these objects held.

**Keeping a journal of your thoughts and emotions** can help you to remember and express what the relationship and the loss have meant to you. One of the hardest things for a bereaved person to cope with is the desire to hear the voice of the person who has died or communicate with them. Writing a series of letters might be really helpful and cathartic. You may find it helpful to put down in a letter the thoughts and feelings you would have shared with the person. Many people write memoirs, life stories or poetry about the person, their relationship or their experience of loss.

**Photographs and videos** can be organised into albums, shared as copies or in online folders or made into books, all capturing something of your times together, the holidays and special moments.

**Sometimes it's enough to sit for a while** with a photograph, a lit candle, a vase of their favourite flowers, and simply remember.



## LOOKING FORWARD

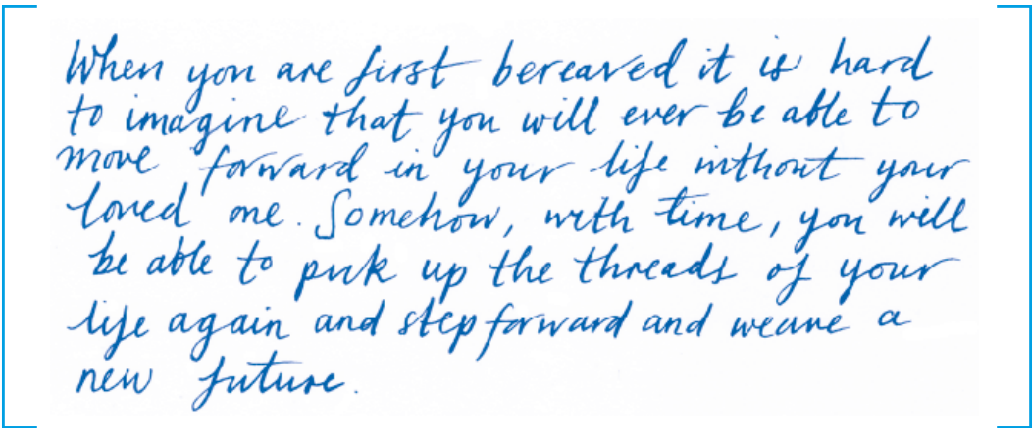
Finding things to help you fill your time and create a new focus can be incredibly hard. What's the point? Life will never be the same again. But finding something to join, something to occupy you and get you out of the house can help you through the grieving process. Re-engaging with people or activities that might have been put on hold while you were caring for your loved one is important.

There is no need to rush things – putting a house up for sale, for example, or making other major life decisions. Thinking about the future longer term, such as planning a holiday or starting a new activity, may help you get some sense that life continues.

Your loss will always be there but you can surround it with new experiences, the distraction of new

interests or hobbies. You can never 'get back to normal' but you can find a new rhythm of life and a new normal. Life will never be the same but there are things that can help you move slowly forward and take the first steps in coming to terms with what has happened. Loss is not something you can get over easily but it is something that you learn to live with.

There will be new challenges to face, hurdles to overcome, and the support of family and friends can be incredibly important. The grief will always be there and sometimes you will feel the pain of loss completely out of the blue. You will never forget the person you have lost. Your relationship with them is a part of who you are and always will be, whatever happens in the future.



When you are first bereaved it is hard to imagine that you will ever be able to move forward in your life without your loved one. Somehow, with time, you will be able to pick up the threads of your life again and step forward and weave a new future.

# WHAT CAN YOU SAY OR DO TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO ME?

When someone we love dies, our world will never be the same again. We all need help in the days and months immediately after the death of a loved one but there is no guide to how people can support you. We've all been in that awkward situation where we don't know whether we should say something and if we do, what should we say. Here are some thoughts which might be helpful.

***Please don't cross the road to avoid speaking to me, this really hurts. I would rather you gave me a hug and admitted you didn't know what to say, than purposely avoid me. I can feel lonely in a crowded room, isolated from the rest of the world, so to avoid me is to isolate me further.***

*Please give me the time and space to talk about my loved one. Sometimes people feel that I will only get upset so they avoid talking about what has happened. I need to talk about the person who has died and need time to share memories, funny stories, things they have said and done and sometimes I need to do that over and over again.*

***I struggle with the clichés - Time heals; It will get easier; You'll get over it; There are people worse off than yourself; They had a good innings. These don't help in the early stages of grief and seem merely to be something people say when they feel they must say something.***

*Please try not to say you know how I feel. Unless you have experienced a similar loss, you can't know how I feel, and, even then, feelings are very personal. Just ask me how I am. I may cry a lot but don't worry as that is normal for me now. My whole world has changed and nothing feels secure anymore. Sometimes just sitting with me and holding my hand or making a cup of tea is all I need.*

***If you ask me how I am, please don't shy away from my answer. Sometimes my heart is so full that I can't speak and other days I just need to tell you how it is. My world has crumbled around me and some days I don't know how to put one foot in front of the other. There is the counselling definition of FINE, that I am Fearful, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional...not far off the mark most days at the moment. I might look like I am coping but often I wear a mask that says that I am ok when I am broken up inside. Allow me sometimes to take the mask off and be who I am.***

*Sometimes you might feel that I am doing ok and not contact me. Each and every day I feel alone and sad. I might put a mask on which seems to say to everyone that I am ok, that I am fine when I most certainly am not. A phone call or a letter or card to say you are thinking of me will enter my world of loneliness and make me feel that people do care and notice my sadness, even when I try to hide it.*

***Sometimes I will find it difficult to cook and even think about preparing food or, at times, even eating. Offering me a cooked meal would make all the difference and is another way of letting me know that you care for me. Invite me for a meal or for coffee and cake. Taking the decisions away from me and just asking me can really help. I find decision-making really difficult at the moment.***

*Sometimes people say 'You know where I am if you need me.' It appears a really helpful thing to do but, to be honest, it seems, at times, that I don't know what I need or even what to ask for. A better way for me is to be in regular contact and simply take me shopping, suggest we go out for a walk, cook a meal for me or just listen to me for a while. I might not feel like talking today but please keep in touch, I may need you tomorrow.*

***Sometimes I feel completely alone and when I go out it seems that everyone else I see has a partner. Sometimes it feels like I am the fifth person out of four when I go out with two couples. I feel the odd one out because I haven't got a partner to share with. Keep inviting me though. I need time to adjust. I might not feel up to it but, if you can, encourage me and if I don't come this time, please keep inviting me.***

*Please try not to tell me what I need to do! I have no idea what I should or shouldn't be doing. This is new territory for me and at times it is bewildering. This is a process of grieving that I am in, not something to be got over quickly, and it is so personal and different for everyone.*



***Sorting out clothes can be incredibly hard and it is very personal when we do this. Some people might want to sort them out straight away, for others it might take years. I might sort some of them out and have cushions or teddy bears made or a memory quilt or I might just keep some special clothes or possessions that will mean something for me. I will know when the time is right for me to start to tackle these things.***

*I am grieving and I don't know when things will feel different for me. I am devastated by my loss but also grieve for the life we had together, the person that I was when I was with them and also the loss of my hopes and dreams.*

***Please just accept me as I am today, without my mask of normality on, in my 'sadness' and 'brokenness' and just allow me 'to be.'***

---

*When we are weary and in need of strength  
When we are lost and sick at heart  
We remember them*

*When we have a joy we crave to share  
When we have decisions that are difficult to make  
When we have achievements that are based on theirs  
We remember them*

*At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter  
At the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring  
We remember them*

*At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer  
At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn  
We remember them*

*At the rising of the sun and at its setting,  
We remember them*

*As long as we live, they too will live for they are now a part of us,  
As we remember them*

# VOICES

*People often speak about the 'talking cure.' Talking to other bereaved people, listening to their stories, gives special insights. Here are some voices, typical of those you might hear.*

**M**y wife Ann died more than two years ago. She was 68. We'd been together for 42 years, married for nearly 40. Grief does strange things to facts and figures, to time and memory. The moment, never to be forgotten, of her last breath seems both very recent and impossibly long ago, while the 42 years together, the greatest part of my life in all senses, are hard to account for. I often think, if only I'd been paying more attention, if only I'd remembered and recorded and photographed more moments, more memories. But memory needs to shed detail to go on functioning and to record every moment would be to spend every moment recording, rather than living.

Yes, Ann was just 68, which, in terms of life expectancy these days, is no great age. She was vital, sparky, opinionated, compassionate. She came from a big, affectionate Liverpool Irish-American family and created, in her turn, a close family of her own. She was an artist, with an artist's eye, forever enhancing my life and that of others by spotting what we all missed. She loved the world but was often dismayed by it.

She was trodden on by a police horse in an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in Grosvenor Square, arrested for cutting the fence at Greenham Common. She taught fine art, art history, life drawing. She was amused to think, in her last days, that she'd no longer be an older woman and I'd be outliving her.

I say that she died. This is how she would have wanted me to express it, for she had no time for euphemisms about her own condition. She wasn't passing on or going to a better place or answering God's call for a special angel. If I've learned anything since though, it's that we need to find our own language for our own loss, while being careful not to impose it on another's situation. When she died, I said, 'She's gone', which was profoundly true. I talk of 'loss' and 'losing' because I know it means more than just being 'mislaid.'

Only a few weeks before Ann's diagnosis, we attended her mother's funeral. She was 96, clear-minded to the end, and Ann had made numerous trips to the Wirral to see her in her care home and hospital. Ann's cancer must already have been developing but she always said that there were no symptoms then, or at least nothing that couldn't be attributed to stress or grief. Then abdominal discomfort took her to the GP for a blood test. When the results came we were summoned to the surgery and, in just a moment, our world went into a tailspin.

Indicators showed the presence of tumours on the liver, in all likelihood a spread from a primary cancer elsewhere. Further investigations established a colon cancer. The spread to the liver was already too large for surgery and the cancer already beyond cure, though Ann was offered chemotherapy as a way of extending life by shrinking the tumours. Weighing up the effects of this treatment on her body for weeks and months and inevitable regrowth and spread of the cancer, she decided to let the disease take its course. She stayed at home rather than hospital and was well enough to go out for walks and car excursions, field visitors, laugh at TV and direct operations round the house. She was looked after by our



*Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak  
whispers to the o'er-fraught heart and bids  
it break - William Shakespeare*

daughter and myself, with our son traveling to be with us when he could. She died 10 weeks after diagnosis, with only the last two nights of her life spent in the hospice.

So, over the 10 weeks, we had the time and clarity to say everything to each other, about what we meant to each other, how rich and (Ann's word) blessed our lives had been. I could have done with saying it all again of course. On the day before she died there were family all around the bed and a new niece dandled over it; on her last day our two children and I were there as she slipped away, with her favourite songs being played.

Then, of course, there was numbness and disbelief - the disbelief goes on for quite a while - but also arrangements to make. There was a funeral to organise and get through, a will to enact, official records to make or alter. I got through all that - our children were great, I would say an indispensable support - and it was, I think, useful to have this business to grapple with, though I can see how it would become overwhelming. My daughter was able to stay on for a while and I hope I helped her even half as much as she helped me. Then I went back to my life.

But it was a different life - altered forever. So much of it seemed strange, so much of my experience seemed booby-trapped with sudden emotion. Grief is adept at ambushes. So a song or a piece of music, a film, a TV programme, a visit to a place we'd been to, could seem electrified, shocking. There was guilt too - memories of what I'd said or done, or not said or done, or what I hadn't, despite my efforts, been able to prevent. There was anger, rather unfocussed, but mainly on Ann's behalf, for the stretch of life unlived, though confusion, bewilderment and lack of meaning to my life made me intermittently tetchy. There were Ann's possessions - should I do something about them? She had made some inroads into the clothes, shoes and jewellery in her last weeks - there were

surprising numbers of pairs of shoes - directing them to family or charity shops, and we had a further half-hearted cull after she died. But most of it is still with me, waiting until I move house. You can do these things too quickly.

And there was loneliness. Ann and I had our own spheres and interests, we enjoyed our own small stretches of mornings or afternoons of doing our own thing, but we did everything else together and when we both retired there was a lot to do. Nothing delighted her more, for example, than our outings in the camper van. In ordinary evenings we cooked and sat together, talking or watching TV or just reading in companionable silence. So I crossed the border into loneliness, a state beyond just being alone, which persists even when you're in company, and involves an awareness of something missing, of a yearning.

I tried to get out as much as possible during the day, for the house only seemed comfortable in the evening. During the day it seemed full of painful memories, at best a kind of museum. I was also encountering people in my outings and found that I was inclined to edit my account of how I was doing, partly because I had no confidence in finding the words, the vocabulary to talk about what I was feeling, partly because I wasn't sure that people would be comfortable with a candid reply. After a certain amount of time with people, there was even a wish/need to get away and be on my own. I was literally 'not fit for company.' Only with my daughter, gradually, did I start to talk in more depth about how I felt.

There was business to see to and also, I returned to the things that were more separately mine - running, poetry readings, writing - and the things that had been our joint activities - playing boules, travelling, going to see films and plays, visiting art exhibitions. The first time for each activity was difficult but I felt that these activities had to be reclaimed, though it could be upsetting and an



absence was always felt. There were dinners with friends where I was the only singleton, there were encounters with people who didn't know what to say or asked whether I was getting over it now. There were people who vanished for a year or two and one I saw dodging into a shop to avoid me. But I also learned that until you've been bereaved you don't really know what's going on in the grieving mind.

One important milestone was a guided walk from Porto to Santiago de Compostela - the Portuguese wing of the Pilgrims' Way or Camino. Porto was the last place Ann and I visited abroad and we'd talked of walking at least one of the roads to Santiago as a future project. We weren't people of a religious faith but we were sensitive to history and landscape and things of the spirit. When Ann was ill, I found details of the Portuguese walk and promised to do it, which Ann was very moved by. I undertook it and completed it and something changed, adjusted, in the middle. It seemed I still had places to see and things to do with my life - and also I felt I was never, in the deeper sense, alone on the walk. There was a voice, there was an enhanced perception of what was around, that was worthy of Ann.

So what have I learned and where am I now, two and a half years later? Firstly, that the support of my family has been everything - a family now augmented by a grandson, the grandchild Ann never saw but who bears some of her genes. Secondly, that grief needs to be talked about for understanding and ultimately for mental health. To be able to talk to someone in a similar situation can be a safe place to exchange stories and issues.

Thirdly, that grief is not a linear process - the onward passage through levels and phases - but much messier and more repetitive, for which the

image is a whirlpool. Grief does however change - the early numbness and feeling of helplessness does pass - and it carries you on until, as someone said, it's done with you. This means that there's no timetable; it takes as long as it takes. It can't be hurried along nor should the big decisions, such as dispersing the possessions and moving house, be rushed. Fourthly, that you will always be bereft but it gets gradually more bearable because other, new things will grow around the loss.

Someone asked my daughter and me recently, 'Are you happier?' And the answer is I am until I'm not. And then I sit for a while and then go on. Go on, forward, but always taking my cherished past with me.

*No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear—*

*C. S. Lewis*





“**M**y name is Alys. I am 38. I was 35 when all this happened, and the last few years of my life have passed without me noticing. I am single, and don't have kids of my own (yet). I think I was still pretty umbilically attached to my Mum.

My Mum was Ann. She was good fun. We were extremely close. I won't get into how wonderful she was as we could be here all day, and my Dad has given his account of the person she was, but it is safe to say I love her beyond measure and she poured love into us every day, so the hole left in our lives is monumental. When she died it felt like my world was bulldozed to ruins.

#### **Gran**

In June 2015, my Gran died, my Mum's mum, she was 96. It took three long weeks for her body to stop. My Mum and I were with her as she died. It was upsetting and harrowing at times, but it was a privilege too, a relief for her not to suffer anymore, and a long and full life lived. I shared a double bed in a hotel room with my Mum that night; we lay in bed and cried and held each other. I obviously felt very upset myself, but I was so heartbroken for my Mum. To lose one of your parents just seemed a grief I couldn't bear to contemplate.

#### **Mum**

Two months later in August 2015, feeling like the sudden weight loss and tiredness were maybe not just grief, my Mum was diagnosed with advanced secondary liver cancer. It almost happened overnight. Blood tests on Wednesday, scan on Thursday and diagnosis on Friday. I knew at the moment of diagnosis that she would die, as the doctor said the liver cancer was very advanced. The pain of grief I felt in that moment felt like I was being ripped apart. It was such a shock.

Mum was 68, fit and active, full of energy, seemingly living life without ever being ill. I never even questioned that she wouldn't live until she was in her 90s too. It was always my Dad I worried about as he has had heart problems since I was in my early twenties.

I moved home so I could spend as much time as possible with her. As a family we had golden times, we talked and tried to prepare, though you never can, can you? I was in awe of her acceptance and stoicism; she said that there are so many things worse than death. I think now how generous it was of her, to trust me so unconditionally and let me care for her, as it was such a role reversal. She knew I would need to do everything I could to care for her in the best way possible in order to be able to live with myself afterwards. From diagnosis to death was less than 10 weeks.

She died on the 8th November 2015 at 12.15pm, it was mercifully fast and we were with her.

There are few regrets about this time. Mum said she had had a lucky, lovely life but there are wider regrets. She didn't live long enough to see me or my brother have kids. She would have been such a great Grandma. My brother had a son exactly 13 months later. I just regret we didn't have more time with her, that she didn't have more time with my Dad, that she hadn't had enough time on this earth. Death is so unfair; she just had a lot more living to do.

#### **Bereavement**

Bereavement and grief were nothing like I had thought. I have lost my grandparents, uncles, aunts and friends and I have felt these as deep losses but nothing prepared me for this. It had been so confusing and scary and I have felt like I am on a runaway train on many occasions. The lack of control over my emotions was completely bewildering.

## 5 Stages

The five stages of grief - the first myth I came across. I quickly came to dismiss that. Grief is not linear and is different for every person. I would often be asked **'What stage are you at?'** by well-meaning friends who hadn't been bereaved. I just said, **'I'm in the grief stage'** and explained the whirlpool analogy to them.

### Whirlpool

This analogy has helped me a lot. I just couldn't think I'm in the eye of the whirlpool again but the currents will throw me to the side again, I won't always be right in the centre of it. I am in there a lot less these days, but just gingerly paddling at the edge, waiting for the current to take me there again. I just accept that it will.

### Grief and love

I came to realise quite quickly, I had to stare grief in the face, to almost make friends with it, as we would be together forever. Grief to me is just love, I feel the huge pain I feel because I have the huge love I shared with my Mum.

### Numbness

I felt numb for a long, long time. I think I was so burned out by caring for Mum and helping organise the funeral/death administration that I just shut down. I was bone aching tired. This lasted for most of the first year. I think also the numbness helps in some way as to feel everything all at once would be too much. Reality has to drip back in slowly. At night time I had terrible night terrors. Again I think this was my brain processing what had happened. I thought at times **'Will I ever sleep well again? Will I always have dark, panic laden dreams now?'** I did get my peaceful nights back and now, when my Mum appears in my dreams, it is often happy. It is just so nice to see her again.

### Anger

I was also angry; I found this the most confusing emotion, as I didn't recognise myself in it. Platitudes and clichés would incense me. I had to be able to talk about death, the realness of it. Expressions like **'She is watching over you'** or **'Walking alongside you'** would make me furious. There was a lot of tactlessness that I can forgive. People just don't know what to say, especially if they are not in the 'grief club.' If people say **'Everything happens for a reason'** it hurts. The anger is fleeting, I don't hold on to it.

## Family roles

Within the family, we have grieved very differently. I'm reluctant to speak for my Dad but it is probably fair to say at the time he thought I was being self-indulgent and wallowing in it and, in turn, I felt like he was dealing with it too silently and I felt shut out and alone in it all. I just wanted to talk.

We both acknowledge that we grieve differently and respect each other's methods and timescales and so have a much better understanding of each other now. We are even closer, still a team. We laugh a lot.

As the only woman in the family now, it has been difficult. I miss her so much. The void in my life can't be filled by anyone but her. My Dad's and older brother's roles are the same, but I didn't know how to be. They both leaned on me more than before and that was a lot to absorb as the youngest member of the family. They both still have a Paterson woman in their lives but I sorely miss the maternal nurture and guidance.

I realise now I tried to look after my Dad too much. I probably suffocated him with too much care and attention. Now I realise I can't take his pain away, I can't stop him from dying too and that is very hard to live with. But I concentrate on having good times with him and cherishing our time together.





### Identity

Another issue I have dealt with is a loss of identity. Who am I now? I feel a lot more serious these days. I feel untethered and searching for someone to anchor to.

I am an illustrator and I could not draw for 18 months, so had to get other jobs in the meantime. I felt so far away from myself. My Mum was an artist too and I wonder if that had something to do with it. It was a shared love; we had so many. I just couldn't summon anything up; my mind was blank and uncreative, back to the bulldozed wasteland again.

### Sketchbook

Someone suggested I draw some of my Mum's things. I have one of those weird memories where I can remember my childhood vividly. It makes going through Mum's things very laborious. I get sentimental about EVERYTHING.

So I did that and I found it to be very therapeutic. I just drew an object and the memories would come thick and fast. I feel very close to her since I started the book. I haven't done anything for a few months as it kick-started me into doing illustration work again but I know that I can do many of these sketchbooks over my life and can always have one on the go. My Dad writes poems, my brother plays music and finds Mum's mannerisms in his baby. We all find ways to feel close to her.

### Since

It's been two and a half years now. I think the past six months have seen a bit of a shift. I often still have hard days but I can feel a purpose coming back into my life. The image of the flower with its petals is true. It might be a bedraggled, wilted flower but it does have petals and it will have more petals in time. I know that now in a way I could not have believed just after Mum died.

### Helpful?

Do one thing every day that you enjoy. I really love being out in nature or seeing art, doing something that feeds my soul in some way.

I talk to my Mum in my head pretty much all the time.

I now reach out to anyone else in the same boat and just listen to them, sit with them in their grief, go at their pace.

Rituals can help. Lighting a candle at night time. I buy myself flowers every week. I don't have a grave to put them on, so I have them on my mantelpiece instead.

Griefcast podcast is such a great listen. Two people chatting about their loss, makes you feel less alone, that all feelings are normal.

'*Grief Works*' by Julia Samuel is a good read, as it has a lot of people's stories. It made me feel more 'normal' when I was being hard on myself.





The only cure for grief is to grieve —  
Earl Grollman

It's been 21,744 hours, 906 days, 129 weeks, two years and five months since I watched Darren, my husband and father of my two young children, take his last breath in Exeter Hospice. Six months after his 40th birthday and three months before mine.

For us, the cancer journey wasn't long. Eighteen months from his renal cell carcinoma diagnosis to his untimely death, leaving me widowed after 16 years together (nearly 12 of those married) with two children who, at the time, were six years old and 16 months.

Immediately following his death adrenaline, of course, kicked in to deal with the immediate issues like calling relatives/friends and the undertaker but eventually the adrenaline wore off and, of course I wasn't prepared. But then, you never can be.

How was I going to carry on without him? How was I going to tell my six-year-old son that his dad, his best friend and his hero, had died? The barrage of emotions that followed were unprecedented.

The pain started that evening. I chose to be alone with my kids that night. I had to get used to it, lying in a big, empty, cold bed all alone. The gut-wrenching pain of loss is not like any stomach ache I have ever experienced or would want to again. Ibuprofen doesn't work and the pain eventually made me physically sick. It almost felt as if something was eating me from the inside. I felt helpless, so low, in a daze almost as if I was in a sliding doors moment (Gwyneth Paltrow) and that my life would flip back to what it was eventually and that this had all been a bad dream.

The continuous hard sobbing and crying physically hurt and drained me of any energy. It takes away any normality or enjoyment out of life. I felt lost, I had a permanent feeling of missing something. Everything was foggy and hazy and I could not make any decision, not even what was for tea.

I entered a Groundhog Day, constantly reliving the final moments of his life and the questions over what I could have done. What should I have done? Could we have found it sooner?

After his cancer diagnosis my life went on hold but after his death, I got my life back. Just not the one I wanted. My new life was now without him, which I didn't like. So much so that at times I questioned whether it was worthwhile carrying on. In addition to all of this, I had to deal with the normal, everyday issues like simply getting out of bed and eating. Dealing with school/nursery, explaining that their father had died and trying to do that without breaking down. Feeling that people were talking about me behind my back or whispering about me as I walked in to school/nursery/work and even the shops. I never had been one to care about what people thought of me but the loss of Darren changed me as a person. Part of me died with him. I became vulnerable and felt very alone.

I remembered getting the constant line, '*If you need anything just call.*' I called these empty promises because I simply didn't know what I needed. I hadn't been in this position before. How the hell would I know what I needed? Of course, I didn't call and as time passed, the calls and visits became less frequent and the pictures of my beloved husband that everyone posted on Facebook to honour him, changed. It almost felt as if everyone else was able to get on with their life apart from me. Everyone was able to put him to the back of their mind apart from me.

You certainly work out who your friends are. Your friends are the ones who call you and meet with you no matter how many times you say no or that you feel low.

Sadly, relations with some of my husband's family became strained and have been cut. Anger and grief makes people react in different ways. As if losing the love of your life prematurely was not enough. As a result, I was forced to move nearer to my support network - my family. Although a move not very far, I had to do it alone with two children. I had to move my eldest to a closer school, taking him away from all of his friends.

Every time my patience is tested, I feel really deflated, miserable and hopeless. Everything is pointless because I have no-one to share the problem with, to halve it. Feeling under the weather and not being able to stay in bed to recuperate. Feeling sick but still having to cook for the kids. Problems at school with behaviour and having to explain to my now nine-year-old that his daddy's death cannot be used as an excuse for bad behaviour. Splitting my time between two children wanting and needing my attention. Having two boys and no male influence. Not being able to fix anything in the house and that awful marital status question you have to fill out on application forms. I hate the word widow. I am still married. He's just not here.

Some may disagree with me when I say I believe that the journey does get easier. Of course, you never forget and why would you want to but the pain becomes less frequent, the sobbing becomes less frequent, your decisiveness will return gradually, you learn a new normality. You might not like it but at least you get to feel normal, you get to learn a new you. This may or may not involve doing new things that perhaps you would never have done if you were still in a partnership.

I thought I would finish with some tips on what my journey has taught and continues to teach me:

- It is ok to be upset and to cry, and to acknowledge that losing a loved one is really shit.
- Grief is a journey with no destination.
- There is no manual or map for your journey.
- No two bereavements are the same. Try not to compare yourself to others and how others are dealing with their loss and their journeys.
- You are not alone.
- What you are experiencing and feeling is entirely normal
- Be open and honest with everyone, including children. If people ask how you are, tell them the truth – don't just say fine. Those that care stick around to listen.
- You may realise who your true friends are. When you do, make time for them.
- Talking about your loved one is the best thing that you can do in order to keep their memory alive. Memory making and journal/creative writing can help with this.
- Live in the here and now. Don't think ahead. Concentrate on what you have to do for today. You do it, great; you don't, it doesn't matter. You will gradually learn to take sneaky peaks at the not too distant future and it won't be scary.
- Try not to take on board inappropriate comments from do-gooders who put their foot in it. There is no malice intended. They simply don't know what to say to you so they will say things that they think you will want to hear.
- Life is too short. Do what makes you happy; just because you are grieving, do not feel you are not entitled to feel happy or that you are not allowed to seek enjoyment. You are, so sod what people think. Remember the saying, 'When they have walked the walk, they can talk the talk.'
- Most importantly, in the anxiety of grief, try and look after yourself and be kind to yourself. Try not to have any expectations on how you are supposed to feel or behave. In the immortal words of Ronan Keating and a terrible cliché, **'Life is a roller coaster... just gotta ride it.'**

*Grief, I've learned, is really just love. It's all the love you want to give but cannot. All that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat and in that hollow part of your chest. Grief is just love with no place to go.*

*Jamie Anderson*

*Mourning is a learning process. We need to understand the finality and consequences of loss.*

“**M**y husband Murray died just over four years ago. It was a second marriage for us both. Coincidentally, we'd each previously been married for 24 years. When we met I was quite sure that I didn't want to marry again! Yet it turned out to be one of the best things I've ever done. We had 20 rich and wonderful years together. Our two families became one, my son and daughter and his two sons. My daughter could not have become closer to him had he been her real father and we had the joy of sharing grandchildren from birth. Although sadly he was to miss, by four months, the birth of his first biological grandchild.

Murray was born into a large loving family of eight children. He loved the sciences and had a lively curiosity and enthusiasm about the world; how it all works. He managed to enthuse others. He cared about people and was generous with his time. He was an academic and after his death I discovered how much he'd inspired his students, how he'd been loved by colleagues and admin staff alike. He was witty, wise and immensely kind, could be stubborn and was the most unmaterialistic person I've ever known. He was all these things yet so much more. How do you sum up a person or a relationship in just a few words?

He was 69 when he died. Before his cancer diagnosis I'd never known him ill; he was always so active and strong. But within a few months we were given the devastating news that his cancer was terminal. He'd already had major surgery in the hope of a cure but a scan revealed a spread to the bones. Prostate cancer is categorised as being either the 'pussycat' or the 'tiger' variety. Murray had the tiger.

We were told that with treatment he could live for another three years; it turned out to be two. And we were so thankful to have that time. My father had died when I was 14 from a sudden, single heart attack, and I can remember the 'if onlys.' If only we'd had one more month, week, day even. So now we wanted to make the most of what was left. Make each day count.

Murray made courageous decisions about which treatment to have. It was a long and difficult road through chemotherapy, radiotherapy, a clinical trial, and a couple of emergency admissions to hospital; one at midnight in the middle of a snowstorm! Even the palliative stage included a further operation. I hated to see him go through it all, but he never complained. He was always so philosophical and accepting.

And for much of the time he still had a reasonable quality of life and was able to carry on pretty much as normal. We tried, as best we could, to live in the present. Surprisingly, even with all hope gone, we had really happy and sustaining times.

But, of course, there was a gradual decline and we began passing a series of 'last time' milestones. I heard him acknowledge to a friend that yes, his walking days were now over, and knew what that cost him. He felt that this part of his life was about learning to let go. We talked, we always had; and gave each other comfort and strength. We talked of all we meant to each other, how lucky we'd been; he said he now felt very much at peace.







We talked about how he felt to be living with a terminal illness; how he felt to be dying. He wanted to talk about my life after he'd gone; how he wanted me to live it to the full; things I was not ready to hear. We shared our perspectives of the journey we were on. In many ways it was, as he said, a very special time. Yet I felt dread too and a kind of exquisite pain in losing him by degrees over such a long period.

There was a sudden and rapid decline and sepsis developed. It meant he could not die at home as we'd both hoped. So he was admitted to the hospice for his last two weeks. They looked after him wonderfully well and we were thankful that they kept him rather than transfer him to hospital. I spent my days there and latterly nights, family coming most days when they could. My eldest step-son and I were with him when he died. He had had to be heavily sedated yet his eyes were open, and they changed at that moment in a way I find impossible to describe. He had always had beautiful eyes but nothing quite like this.

I'd been bereaved before so I thought I was prepared. Yet nothing prepares for that final parting. When the end came I was numb with shock. The trauma of his last few weeks was to stay with me for a long time and I felt guilt for all that I had been unable to prevent. I found his total absence so difficult to process; he had been my husband and my greatest friend, my constant companion. We had been so happy, shared so much of our daily lives and inner landscapes. The loss felt indescribable.

But there was all the usual business to see to and I was weeks away from completion on a small property which had to be sorted through and packed up. Family had done what they could; for the last few weeks of Murray's life I had been on crutches with a broken leg and they had helped at a crucial stage. Now work commitments and small children inevitably needed attention. We are a close family but my daughter and I found that we grieved very differently. I needed to talk but she could not so we had to give each other the space to deal with it in our own way. A good friend, twice



widowed, suggested coming to stay, but I was not ready for that yet. And so I carried on coping, or so I thought...

Everyone was telling me how well I was doing! Yet I was unable to cry and felt isolated and alone in my grief. I had no words to express how I felt. And running through my head was a repetitive film of Murray's last few weeks, continuing into dreams. A year passed before I realised that this was not the usual protective numbness; I needed some help. I imagine it's rarely this easy but amazingly it took only three sessions with just the right counsellor, plus an appointment he arranged with the hospice consultant. Something inside me was released. I became part of a bereavement group and the relief of sharing experiences and beginning to articulate my feelings and talk them through was hugely therapeutic. The film in my head gradually ground to a halt and I began to sleep well at night. Memories of happier times slowly started coming back.

As others have found, grief did not follow a neat and tidy progression through designated stages. And whilst I knew there would be psychological pain, I hadn't realised it could be so visceral; a constant physical ache and yearning. I felt restless and that my life lacked meaning. I seemed to have lost the person I used to be. Concentration, confidence and memory were in short supply. Loneliness came to stay, the specific kind engendered by the loss of intimacy and companionship of a life shared. Coming home to an empty house was difficult. Someone kindly suggested leaving the radio on when I went out. Unfortunately mine didn't greet me with a hug on my return and besides, I knew it was only the radio talking. It was well-meant, but the way I felt at that time, little helped. I felt utterly bereft.

The love of family sustained me the most and only with them did I find a sense of purpose and normality. I knew I had to be strong, to try to make life as loving and normal as possible for us all. After all, I was now the matriarch as my daughter told me! My grandchildren loved to talk about Grandpa; at first with tears, later with laughter. Sometimes my daughter would join in; we still grieved very differently but were able to hold and comfort each other when needed. Our family is evolving; we have three new members, including the joy of a new grandson. We laugh a lot, we always have. Murray still feels part of it and lives on in our memories.

And friends rallied round and were supportive, even those I'd not known so well before. At first I was just going through the motions but I began to enjoy new experiences as well as old; and holidays both with family and a friend I've known most of my life. Keeping busy and trying to be positive has kept me going. It's been a lifeline really.


Other things have helped too. I get a great feeling of peace from being in nature, a sense of continuity, that it will be here long after I too have gone. I have favourite places I go. It helps get things into perspective. I find it healing. I love the small things too, the birds coming into the garden to feed, the first spring flowers.

I have a faith and believe in a life after death, whatever form that might take. And yes, that has helped, but for me it doesn't provide answers and platitudes seem just a way of avoiding the reality of grief and suffering. There are still so many questions in my mind – Where is Murray now? Is he happy? Does he suffer grief too? Does he even have a memory of this life? And will I ever see him again? - to name but a few. It's said that the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. And I wanted certainty! Yet I have learnt to live with the mystery, trust in a sense of a spiritual dimension. Sometimes at home I still talk to him; whether or not he can hear seems not to be the point, it just helps as they say to 'continue the conversation.'

So here I am, four years on. I have had to learn a new kind of life, one that no longer involves 'we' and 'us.' The flower analogy, with the black spot at its centre, resonates. Sadness and loneliness are still there and can hit hard at odd times. Yet new life growing around brings them into a different perspective. Happiness and laughter are now back in my life.


I have learnt acceptance - something I never thought to say! I cannot go back and standing still is not an option; I can only go forward. Yet going forward, like grief, is not linear; I have found that it can only be done in bite-sized chunks; that it involves a kind of letting go (perhaps of grief itself), which is painful and cannot be rushed.

I know that that part of my life has gone, yet Murray and all that we meant to each other remains part of who I am and comes forward with me into the future. A future I hope to have the courage to live as fully as I can; and I want it to be defined, not by his death but by going forward with love and gratitude for all that we shared in our life together.



Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It's an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity.





*Grief comes and goes like waves in the ocean  
there will be stormy times and calm times.*

# READING ABOUT IT

There are many books on bereavement and as we are all different, some will be of more help than others. All the books listed are available from shops or on the internet and we suggest you check information about their content and read reviews before deciding whether a particular publication may be helpful for you.

A number of gifted writers have been able to chronicle and reflect on the progress of their illness and they offer insights into what terminal cancer entails.

**Christopher Hitchens: *Mortality*.**

Trenchant memoir by the celebrated contrarian and atheist.

**Oliver Sacks: *Gratitude*.**

Short meditations by the award-winning psychologist on the end of life, written before and after his diagnosis of terminal cancer.

**Kate Gould: *Late fragments: everything I want to tell you (about this wonderful life)*.**

Chronicle by a young mother about what matters in the face of a terminal diagnosis.

**Lisa Lynch: *The C-word*.**

Book about her experience of the treatment for breast cancer, made into a memorable TV film.

**Ruth Picardie: *Before I say goodbye*.**

Another moving book collected from the newspaper columns written by a young mother with breast cancer.

**Paul Kalanithi: *When breath becomes air*.**

A young neurosurgeon describes the progress of his terminal cancer; the book is completed by his widow.

These are memoirs of bereavement, all memorable in their different perspectives on loss and its aftermath.

**Lindsay Nicholson: *Living on the seabed: a memoir of love, life and survival*.**

The partner of a journalist who died of leukaemia at a young age writes about her grieving process.

**Barbara Want: *Why not me? A story of love and loss*.**

Raw, honest, unresolved memoir about life after the death of her husband, radio presenter Nick Clarke.

**Meghan O'Rourke: *The long goodbye: a memoir*.**

What it means to lose a parent, and the difficulties of grieving in modern society.

**Linda Feinberg: *I'm grieving as fast as I can*.**

**Caroline Doughty: *If there's anything I can do*.**

**Susan Wallbank: *The Empty Bed*.**

**Sylvia Murphy: *Surviving your partner*.**

**Kate Boydell: *Death and how to survive it*.**

**Nell Dale: *What colour is grief?***

**Ken Wilber: *Grace and Grit*.**

**Virginia Ironside: *You'll get over it*.**

**Elizabeth Harper Neeld: *Seven Choices*.**

**Brook Noel and Pamela Blair: *I wasn't ready to say goodbye*.**

**Julian Barnes: *Levels of life*.**

The final section is an elegant, succinct but unsparing account of the author's grieving following his wife's death.



There are now many good and accessible books about the nature of dying, of cancer and of the counselling process. They include:

**Atul Gawande: *Being mortal: illness, medicine and what matters in the end.***

We have lost touch with the reality of mortality; we look to medicine as a solution for aging and dying when it has its limits. What matters most to the patient?

**George Johnson: *The cancer chronicles: unlocking medicine's deepest mystery.***

A readable summary of what cancer is, how it develops and what progress cancer research is making.

**Julia Samuels: *Grief works: stories of life, death and surviving.***

A grief psychotherapist uses stories from her casebook to show how bereaved people can move through their grief towards healing.

### **Books for bereaved parents:**

**Nicholas Wolterstorff: *Lament for a Son***  
ISBN 978-0802802941

**Sarah Williams: *The Shaming of the Strong***  
ISBN 978-1573834070

**Gloria Hunniford: *Always With You***  
ISBN 978- 0340953976

**Barbara D. Rosof: *The Worst Loss***  
ISBN 978-0805032413

**Harriet Sarnoff Schiff: *The Bereaved Parent***  
ISBN 978-0285648913

### **Books for those widowed:**

**C. S. Lewis: *A Grief Observed***  
ISBN 978-0571066247

**Kate Boydell: *Death and How to Survive It***  
ISBN 978-0091902575

**Liz McNeill Taylor: *Living With Loss***  
ISBN 978-1841191058

**Xenia Rose: *Widow's Journey***  
ISBN 978-0285650985

**Sylvia Murphy: *Surviving Your Partner***  
ISBN 978-0955051203

**St John Greene: *Mum's List***  
ISBN 978-0718158330

### **DVDs**

***Last Orders***

***The Way***

***Truly Madly Deeply***

***The Art of Catching Lobsters***

***P.S. I love you***

# HELPFUL LOCAL CONTACTS

## **Cruse Bereavement Care**

3 Palace Gate  
Exeter EX1 1JA  
Tel: 0300 330 5466  
Email: [devon@cruse.org.uk](mailto:devon@cruse.org.uk)

The local operation of the national Cruse charity offers support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies and works to enhance society's care of bereaved people.

## **Hope Again**

A CRUSE website for young people living with loss.  
Helpline: 0808 808 1677  
[www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk)

## **Balloonscharity.co.uk**

Basepoint Business Centre  
Yeoford Way  
Marsh Barton  
Exeter EX2 8LB  
Tel: 01392 826065  
Email: [admin@balloonscharity.co.uk](mailto:admin@balloonscharity.co.uk)

Balloons provides support for children, young people and their families before an expected death (pre-bereavement) and following the death (post-bereavement) of someone significant in their lives.

## **Stepping Stones**

Tel: 01392 272417  
Last Wednesday of the month, 11.30-1pm

A supportive social group which meets once a month – not specifically a bereavement group, but a chance to meet others who may find themselves in similar circumstances.

## **NHS Choices**

[www.nhs.uk/livewell/bereavement](http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/bereavement)

## **Samaritans**

Samaritans Exeter  
10 Richmond Road  
Exeter EX4 4JA  
Tel: 01392 411711 (local)  
116 123 (national free number)  
Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

## **FORCE Cancer Charity**

Corner House  
Barrack Road  
Exeter EX2 5DW  
Tel: 01392 406151  
Email: [support@forcecancercharity.co.uk](mailto:support@forcecancercharity.co.uk)

FORCE offers support, counselling, advice, information and complementary therapies in Exeter, Tiverton, Okehampton and Honiton. It also funds local cancer research, supports innovation and purchases equipment to enhance patient care at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital.





*Those whom we love and lose are no longer where  
they were before. They are now wherever we are.  
St. John Chrysostom*



## ***when cancer turns your life upside down, we're here to help***

**At FORCE Cancer Charity we believe that anyone diagnosed with cancer deserves the best possible treatment and professional support, face to face and close to home.**

Our Cancer Support and Information Centre is in the grounds of the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital. We offer support for people needing physical, emotional, psychological and practical help at a difficult time in their lives.

We run support and information sessions once a week in Okehampton, Tiverton and Honiton and fund the delivery of chemotherapy in all three towns.

We also fund local research and buy equipment to improve the care of cancer patients.

FORCE is a charity. We receive no Government or NHS funding. All our services are free, paid for by voluntary contributions from the community we serve.

**We couldn't do it without your support.**

FORCE Cancer Support and Information Centre  
Corner House, Barrack Road, Exeter EX2 5DW

**Tel: 01392 406151**

Email: [support@forcecancercharity.co.uk](mailto:support@forcecancercharity.co.uk)

**[www.forcecancercharity.co.uk](http://www.forcecancercharity.co.uk)**

***working locally to support anyone  
affected by cancer ~ face to face***

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