

## Part 1

### If you have suffered a loss

*"The only way out of grief is to go through it" – Julia Samuel*

#### Physical Symptoms

Many of us will know the usual symptoms of grief such as:

- Lack of concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Anxiety
- Sleeplessness
- Guilt
- Numbness
- Lack of appetite



**But there are other symptoms which are less talked about but still quite common:**

- Blurred vision
- Muscle weakness
- Euphoria
- Hearing or smelling the person who has died
- Dropping things and being accident prone
- Changes to the menstrual cycle (periods stop or suddenly start again)

Whilst this is far from an exhaustive list, it shows that having these symptoms is a normal, healthy response to loss. However, if any persist or are seriously interfering with you being able to get through the day, then it might be worth seeing a doctor to rule out anything that may need medical attention.

#### Confusing & Overwhelming Emotions

After a bereavement you will experience many different emotions, and this is normal at this difficult time. During the grieving process feelings can be very transient, so be prepared to deal with a whole disparate range of them, often all on the same day. We can go from OK to despair and from crying to laughter in just a short time, so be open to this wide array of emotions.

#### Having a Routine

Having a sense of routine can be comforting as it gives some structure to our day, which in turn can give us back a sense of control over our world, making us feel safer.

So, when you are ready, try and get some order and routine into your day so you can slowly re-engage with what life has to offer.



## Finding a Language For Your Feelings

Try to find a language, a vocabulary for your feelings. This will help you to better understand your feelings and therefore help you to express them. Being able to talk to someone about how we feel is so valuable and helps us in that moment to lift the cloud of sadness that can envelope us at times like this. Telling our story is a primal, instinctive need and reinforces that your loved one mattered.

### Staying Connected

All the evidence including my clinical experience shows the importance and benefit of having ongoing support from friends and family. Our health and wellbeing are determined by the people we have in our life, and it needs to be filled with those who care about us and those we care about.

Staying connected in whatever way we can will help us to eventually move forward and not become stuck in our grief. Speaking with others who are also mourning can help normalise our feelings. Sometimes we think there maybe something wrong with us because we are feeling or behaving in a way that we don't recognise or how we thought we would. Remember there is no textbook on how *you personally* should grieve. On the contrary there are only guidelines and suggestions about what you may be feeling and what may help you during this time.



### Old & New Losses

Each new loss will bring up the pain and sadness of previous losses, so buried feelings and unfinished business from the past will often re-emerge and compound the feelings you have at this time. If you have had previous losses that you may not have properly grieved or worked through, for whatever reason, then your current grief will be mixed with those old buried or forgotten emotions. This can make the grieving process even more complex and difficult than normal.

### An unfamiliar world

It can take months or years for the bereaved to feel 'normal' again. Just as every person is an individual, grief is individual to every person. There are some rituals and practices in different cultures which can give some structure and comfort, but generally these are a framework not a template, so people should feel free to take the time they need to move forward into their new life.



Death of a loved one is also frightening as it changes who we are in the world, and how we think about ourselves. Who are we now without this other person? Remember we can never lose where or who we have been, so what we can try and do is build on the security of that foundation to help us think about who we are becoming on this new journey.

Of course the unknown is scary, so anxiety will often be your fellow traveller on this new path; allow it to be there beside you, but don't let it take control and lead you.

## How we cope with death can be how we cope with life

How we respond to death can often be how we respond to life. Our natural 'coping mechanisms' will come into play when dealing with a loss. So, if in life you prefer to avoid feelings and discomfort you may very well adopt this approach when dealing with your feelings of loss. Likewise, if you reach out to people and face things head on in your day to day life you may be more like this when dealing with your grief. Knowing more about your coping style will help you understand more about your responses to your loss, and this self-awareness will enable you to see if your coping style is helping you at this time.

### Time & Space

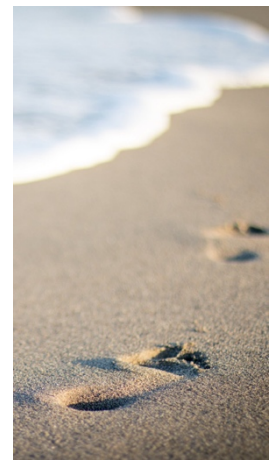


When we are faced with an upset, challenge or trauma we all need time to reflect, respond and readjust in a way we find helpful. During the period of mourning give yourself time and space to calm your mind and body/nervous system so you feel ready to face the world again. Just take baby steps for now. But remember we also need people around for support, and to be a sounding board for our thoughts and emotions. Try and find the right balance of time spent with people who care about you and time on your own. It's easy and comforting to withdraw inside but try not to bury yourself in your dark, sad feelings without regularly venturing out for some light.

### What can I do to help myself?

It's basic stuff here but it's important. Try to eat a healthy well-balanced diet, get a proper night's sleep and take some exercise. If this is all you can do in the beginning it will be good enough. Don't expect any more than this in the early stages.

When it comes to your work, inside or outside the home, break up what you need to do into small manageable tasks so they seem more achievable. A good metaphor is thinking of grief as a journey. Every journey starts with a first tentative step. You can't face the whole trek in one go but you can get to the first signpost. Your focus and concentration maybe more limited right now, so don't try and do too much or you may very quickly feel overwhelmed.



### Express Your Feelings

*"Grief must be externalised" - Julia Samuels*

It's important for your mental health to be able to express yourself. Whether it is talking to another person, or writing a letter to your loved one, or keeping a journal, try to express your feelings as much as you can. I like to use the analogy of keeping feelings inside to having a full bottle of coke. If you let your feelings out a little at a time (like unscrewing the lid of the coke bottle to let a little gas out) you can then manage to release some of what you are feeling. If you can open up a little each day the emotions won't build up to a point where they just overflow or overwhelm you.

Sometimes death comes without warning so if there are things you wished you would have said to your loved one you can still say them from your heart and also express them in your journal or letters.

### The healing power of tears

Tears are your body's way of releasing emotions. They are a primal and wonderful way for your body to release sadness and pain as well as stress, anxiety and frustration.

To cry shows strength and that you are able to heal yourself. What many people don't know is that our tears contain antibodies that fight infection. In addition, studies from Dr Frey at the Ramsey Medical Centre in Minneapolis have found that tears release stress hormones and that "crying stimulates the production of endorphins, our body's natural pain killer and "feel-good" hormones" -



Tears are healing, so allow them to flow and believe me you *will* be able stop crying when you are ready to.

### Wearing Your Badge of Grief

You have a badge right now which says:



Wear your badge as a protective coat that envelopes and respects the memory of your loved one and keeps you safe inside when you need space and quiet. And gently take it off when you need company, comfort and support.

### Nature – Life goes on

The outdoors is great for exercise and provides a sense of tranquillity and calm. The colours, smells and sounds of nature can be so comforting, and remind us when we are ready to acknowledge it, that life does go on, that each season will bring rest, growth and renewal as the cycle of nature prepares us for new beginnings as well as endings.

Let grief do its job of healing so you can gently move on with your new life. You will eventually find a place to hold your grief, and with time it will feel more comfortable and more a part of you.



### How friends and family can help:

Friends and family of the bereaved desperately want to help. The problem is they may not be sure about what to do or say. Or it could be the first time they've had to support someone grieving and they are nervous about offering help. But grief needs to be witnessed in order to be healed.

Below are some ideas to help if you are supporting someone who has experienced a loss. This is not an exhaustive list, nor is it how it *should be*. Rather it's about what feels right for you knowing the bereaved person in the way you do, and of course taking into consideration your own strengths and limitations.

And a simple thought, if you are ever unsure what to do to help, then the simplest and easiest thing is to just ask the bereaved person "what would help right now" or "what do you need from me in this moment".



#### Being Present

Julia Samuels writes the following poignant words:

*"Love from others is key in healing us to survive the love we have lost. With their support, we can endeavour to find a way of bearing the pain and going on without the person who has died – daring to go forward to trust in life again".*

At times there is often nothing more we can do than just be present with the bereaved to offer comfort and support. This can be hard for many of us, especially those who are used to 'doing' for others and fixing problems. But there is no magic wand at times like this and allowing another's feelings to be heard with sensitivity and empathy is more than enough.

*"To stay present in the silence can be a gift any friend or companion can give to the bereaved" - Penny Rawlinson*

#### Listening:

Be open and willing to speak about the loss they are feeling and also about the person that has died. It can be about the difficult times, the good times and happy memories that come up. They may also need to talk about the period leading up to the death, it's a way for them to process what has happened, a way to make sense of it, which will help them to come to terms with the reality of the situation. It may be hard for you as the listener to see someone you care about so distressed and upset, but letting them tell their story can dissipate their pain and feel like a weight has been lifted. What a gift to be able to make someone's heavy heart feel lighter.

Acknowledge, listen and simply give them time.



## Reaching Out

It can be hard for the bereaved to reach out and make the first move, so don't be afraid to make contact. You will get a sense if they are ready for connection and comfort, they will let you know in the best way they can if they are not yet able to accept what you can offer. A quick call, a short note or visit (when it is right to do so) or a friendly smile may be all they can handle at that time, but don't take it personally if they can't even accept these things yet.



Often doing something practical like dropping over some groceries or a home-made meal may be comforting and much appreciated. Remember for the grieving, even making a decision about what to have for dinner and then preparing it maybe too much for them.

## Giving them time to grieve and adjust

The grieving period gives us time to find ways to cope and adjust to our loss, our fear and pain.

This is a deeply personal time and respecting the fact that each of us grieves in our own way, and in our own time, will help you to let those who are grieving go at their own pace. As they come to terms with their loss, they will be a little more physically and emotionally available to slowly come back into the world they left behind.

However, if you feel the person is becoming depressed, or not taking care of themselves, and you want to intervene then think about sensitively and gently making suggestions such as seeing a doctor or counsellor, or trying to get them to be in touch with others who can give them comfort and support.

A lovely and heartfelt quote from Albert Camus beautifully says how we can help support and comfort our family and friends who are grieving:

*"Don't walk in front of me. I may not follow. Don't walk behind me...I may not lead. Walk beside me... just be my friend"*

## Share Space

With thanks to my fellow therapist, I leave you with this touching poem she wrote for this article:

To lose someone you love, to have them taken away  
Knowing you're not going to be able to be with them another day  
Is so very painful and so very sad  
And it's trying to remember all the precious moments that you've ever had  
No one will ever steal those memories away from you  
You will be able to hold them close and hold them true  
You will carry their memory close to your heart each and every day  
As well as their love, their smile and their words and then forever they will stay

- Donna Karpel



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\*Suggested further reading