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Bereavement and Grief

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A man who didn't want to forget his father's face

My parents separated when I was a baby and I lived with my mother, but spent every other weekend with father. I loved staying with him, even though the flat was always messy and he spent most of the weekend down the pub. But I had my mates upstairs, two brothers who became my best friends.

One weekend dad complained of terrible pains in his chest and my friends' mother called the ambulance – Dad nearly died in hospital and I was with him. I wasn't allowed to tell my mother about it because Dad was worried that I wouldn't be able to see him again. When she picked me up from hospital, Dad told her that he had had an ulcer which had burst.

Dad died not long after that – funnily enough on Father's Day. He died of alcoholism. I was eight. I find it difficult to talk about him, even to this day, because my mother and Dad were divorced and she was still angry with him. I also felt very guilty that I wasn't with him, as I am sure that I could have saved him. I get very down about that.

When my schoolfriends found out that he had died, they didn't know what to say to me and somehow I always felt different to the others. Even if your parents were separated or divorced, they still had two parents and I only had one.

I have two framed pictures of my dad in my bedroom, but I have forgotten his face and this makes me feel very guilty. Sometimes I dream about him, but he will always be the forty-six-year-old man that I loved and knew – he will never grow old.

Recently Dad's brother died and I met up with all the grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews from his side of the family. It was wonderful to speak about him openly and remember him.

What is grieving?

The loss of someone we love is one of the most painful experiences in life. Even so, most of us get through it with just the help of our family and friends. This chapter describes the normal process of grieving, some ways of coping, and why we may sometimes need extra help.

Normal Grief

Grief is the price you pay for love, and most people accept it as worth paying.

When you grieve, you pine or long for the person you love - and have lost. You have waves or 'pangs', when you can't think of anything else and search desperately for some way to get the lost person back. Having cried, you feel a little better. For a while, you can turn your mind to other things; then another pang comes and the cycle starts again.

Gradually, over time, the pain lessens. Between the pangs, you start to enjoy life again. Most people find that the first year is the worst. After that, you start to rebuild your life.

Grieving is not about forgetting the dead, it is about finding a new place for them in our hearts and minds.

Mollie, aged 75, missed her husband terribly after he died. "I could almost see him sitting in his favourite chair, it was quite disturbing. I couldn't talk to a friend or

watch television without my eyes creeping back to the chair. It was as if I was searching for him." This is quite common. Sometimes, for a brief moment, people may even see or hear a lost person in a familiar place. It was not difficult to reassure Mollie that this was normal. She then told me: "Just lately I solved the problem - I go and sit in his chair. Now I feel as if I've got him inside me".

Adjusting to other losses

There may be similar feelings of pain and sadness when adjusting to other losses – for example, the loss of a partner through divorce or separation, or loss of employment.

Traumatic loss

All bereavements are traumatic. They are particularly traumatic if the death was unexpected, and took place in horrific or frightening circumstances.

"I can't believe it's true"

It can be hard to believe that a death has really happened, especially if it happened far away, and if we were unable to see or to hold or touch the lost person. We may find it hard to give up hope that they will be found alive, or that their body will be recovered. Information about the death may be limited or unclear. It can take a long time to really work out what has happened. You may never know exactly, and may have to live with this uncertainty.

What helps?

- ❖ Spend time talking it through - don't worry that you are being a burden, that's what friends are for.
- ❖ You may find it helpful to visit the place where the disaster took place, to talk with others involved, to place a wreath in a significant place, and to attend a memorial service or other rituals of remembrance.

"I can't get it out of my head"

You may be haunted by images of the way someone died. This is most likely if you witness the event, but television or other pictures can also 'bring home' the reality of what happened. Such images may:

- ❖ pop into you mind spontaneously
- ❖ be triggered by any reminder of the loss, e.g. loud noises, cries or shouts
- ❖ return as nightmares.

You may try to avoid any reminders by shutting yourself up at home, avoiding any talk of the loss, or by being very busy. This kind of reaction is common and does improve with time, although sometimes it may become so painful and disabling that it becomes 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder'.

What helps?

- ❖ Talking about the death again and again, until you can talk about it without getting so upset. If there is no one you can talk to, it can help to make contact with a bereavement volunteer (see below).
- ❖ If this doesn't help, then you should consult your doctor. Effective treatments for PTSD have been developed in recent years. They do not necessarily involve medication.

Blaming

"I feel so guilty"

You may blame yourself for a death, or for not being there when needed, especially if it is a child who has died. You may ask "Why should I survive?" or "Why should I be happy now that he or she is dead?"

What helps?

- ❖ Even if you were not able to save someone, this does not make you guilty of their death. But if you still blame yourself, try to find a way to make up for it, to bring something good out of the situation. You could help others, or do something to commemorate the one who has died.
- ❖ Deep feelings of guilt can be a symptom of clinical depression. If you are deeply unhappy all of the time, waking early in the morning, have lost your appetite and lost weight, you should see your family doctor. You may not believe that anything could help, but most depression can be relieved with proper treatment.

"I feel so angry"

It can be tempting to blame others for what happened. It may feel that by finding a culprit and punishing them, it will help your pain. It rarely does, and may even make things worse if you pick on the wrong person.

You may:

- ❖ feel jealous of other people - why should they be happy while you suffer?
- ❖ become irritable with children or other people who have done nothing wrong
- ❖ start to drive dangerously because you don't care any more.

What helps?

This anger is natural, but you need to control it. Try not to

- ❖ lash out or, if you do, say 'Sorry'. Take extra care when driving - stop and take a break if your emotions are just too strong. If you are irritable with your children, or find it difficult to care for them, ask for help. Friends and relatives are usually happy to be of use, and you will not be letting the kids down if you admit that you are finding it hard to cope.
- ❖ Anger is a sign, not a sin – don't blame yourself. If you direct it where it can do good, you may help to prevent future suffering. Many disasters have been prevented because angry people took appropriate action.

Grieving

"I feel numb"

Numbness is the mind's way of protecting itself from mental pain that threatens to overwhelm you. This pain can be so strong that you can't think clearly, become confused, and lose your bearings.

In an emergency, this emotional numbness helps us to keep going and cope with the crisis. But if it continues after the disaster is over, it can become a problem. This may happen if you worry that you might lose control if you allow yourself to be upset. Men, in particular, often feel this way and may use alcohol or other drugs to mask their grief – which does not help.

What helps?

- ❖ Express your grief - cry, rage or talk over and over about what has happened. Try to find someone you can trust who will be a good listener. Don't worry if, for a while, you let yourself lose control of your feelings. You will find it easier in the long run to live with, and to control, your feelings. Memories of the past are sometimes painful but they are your treasure - it is best not to bury them.

"I can't stop crying"

Grief goes on much longer than most people expect, so don't expect too much of yourself too soon. This said, grieving sometimes gets stuck - perhaps because you want to punish yourself, or because you have had feelings of depression or helplessness for a long time that the death has just made worse.

What helps?

- ❖ It can feel as though it is your duty to go on grieving, but the person you have lost would not have wanted you to suffer. It will usually help to talk to family and friends but, if you still feel constantly depressed or suicidal, you should see your family doctor.

Fear

"I feel so frightened"

We all know that disasters happen, but don't believe that they will happen to us. Most of the time we go through life confident that we are safe. Then disaster strikes. In a moment the world has become a dangerous place where you can take nothing for granted. You wonder what might happen next, and feel confused and lost.

Fear causes bodily changes - tense muscles, racing heart, sweating, breathlessness, sleeplessness. These can help us to stay alive in dangerous situations. But if they continue when you are safe, they can become a problem and may even be mistaken for symptoms of illness. This can make you feel more anxious - which gives you worse symptoms, which makes you more anxious - and so on.

What helps?

- ❖ Remember that these physical symptoms and feelings of panic are natural reactions that will pass with time. They will not harm you. Relaxation exercises, meditation techniques, prayer, or whatever makes sense to you, can help you to control them.
- ❖ This said, you should not expect to go back to being the same person you were before the disaster struck. You have learned the hard way that life is never, and never was, completely safe. Disaster can, indeed, happen to you. You may be sadder, but you are also more mature and you have survived.

"Life has lost its meaning"

Your sense of purpose and direction in life arises from a hundred and one habits of thought, assumptions about the world that you take for granted. 'I know where I'm going'. Then, all of a sudden, you can take nothing for granted. Perhaps the person who died is the one you would have turned to in times of trouble - and they are no longer there. It may feel that even God has let you down. For a while you will feel crippled, as if a part of yourself is missing. It takes time and hard work to adjust, like learning to cope with the loss of a limb.

Hidden Grief

There are some circumstances when grief may be covered up, and you don't get the support and love you need.

The gay or lesbian person may not be invited to his or her partner's funeral; the macho man may cover up his emotions; or the over-protective parent may not tell a child that a much-loved grandparent is dead. Others may not understand the grief of those who have had a miscarriage or who have lost a baby soon after birth.

The homosexual survivor may not realise that everybody knows his 'secret' and that many are not bothered by it; the macho man may not know that by bottling up his feelings he may lengthen his grief; a child may imagine that 'Grandpa went away because I was a naughty boy'.

What helps?

- ❖ People fear that disclosure will make things worse. It seldom does - grief can be therapeutic. Whether you choose to cry or not, it helps to talk. If you find yourself in tears, don't be alarmed. This just means that you care.

Children

Many children will not show how they feel, or will swing between great distress and apparent indifference. You can make it clear that you are there for them whenever they want to talk about the loss.

Children regularly deal with their problems by play – don't worry if they play at funerals or draw pictures of people who have died. If you join in the play you can find out what is on their minds. A 'Memory Book' in which they can draw or stick pictures and mementoes about the lost person can be helpful. Try not to make the dead person sound so good that the child feels that they will never be good enough to compare with them.

Physical Health

In the first year or so after bereavement, it is usual to experience some changes in your health.

Normal Changes

Anxiety and sadness may leave us feeling drained and lacking energy. The loss of appetite and weight that are common in the first month seldom last. By the end of the first year, many people have put on too much weight - our appetite for food may return before our pride in our appearance. Likewise, some people find their sexual feelings decline at first, but libido returns after a few weeks or months.

Health problems

Disorders that are affected by stress, like asthma and eczema, may get worse. So may psychological problems, such as insomnia, panic disorders or depression. Aches and pains, perhaps of osteoarthritis or rheumatism, are likely to bother us more if we are alone. Heart problems or high blood pressure may get worse.

You may stop looking after yourself properly, or even use alcohol or other drugs to numb your feelings. This will only work in the short term, and carries serious risk of addiction and damage to your health.

What helps?

- ❖ eat a balanced diet
- ❖ take regular exercise
- ❖ smoke and drink moderately
- ❖ seek medical help if needed – don't ignore symptoms, or postpone visits to the doctor
- ❖ if you do start to smoke or drink too much, or use drugs, don't hesitate to ask for help.

Strange to say, the major changes, which are inevitable in all our lives when we lose someone we love, may help you to change habits that have been present for a long time. You may be able to achieve things that you would never anticipate.

Who can help?

Friends: Mainly be being there for you to talk to, but also to help with practical things.

The medical team: the family doctor and other members of their team can often help you to decide whether or not you need extra help. Many general practices have their own counsellors experienced in helping with bereavement problems. If you have unanswered questions about a person's care or why they died, do ask. If there are grounds for complaint, you have a right to know how to proceed.

Conclusion

Once a partner dies, the chances of a spouse following suit shortly afterwards goes up enormously and often heart disease is implicated, indicating that it really is possible to die of a broken heart.

The stress of bereavement is enormous. But one dilemma for mental health professionals is to plot the dividing line between normal grief and pathological bereavement in order to calculate who would benefit from services.

Death is a large unspoken taboo in our society, and it may be that cultural attitudes and rituals contribute to bereavement difficulties, such as the way we deal with the dead and our approach to funerals.

There are always other reasons for carrying on living and finding a reason to be alive, and what the bereaved need is our support in helping them discover it.

SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

Cruse Bereavement Care: local branches in most parts of the UK, except Scotland, and offers support by telephone and the internet in all areas: Cruse House, 126 Sheen Rd., Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR. Helpline 0870 167 1677; email helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk; info@crusebereavementcare.org.uk; www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

Scotland: Cruse Bereavement Care, Lower Ground Flat, 8a Atholl Crescent, Perth, PH1 5NG; tel: 01738 444 178; Web site www.crusescotland.org.uk

For bereaved children and families. Winston's Wish: Clara Burgess Centre, Bayshell Rd., Cheltenham, GL50 3DW; tel: 0845 2030 405; www.winstonswish.org.uk

For bereaved adolescents and young persons Cruse Young Person's Helpline; tel: 0808 8087 1677; www.RD4U.org.uk

Terence Higgins Trust: lesbian and gay bereavement. Helpline: 0207 403 5969; www.tht.org.uk

WEBSITES OUTSIDE THE UK

Australia:
www.grief.org.au

New Zealand:
www.skylight.org.nz

Canada:
www.bereavedfamilies.net

South Africa:
www.lifeline.org.za

Further Reading

A Grief Observed, C.S. Lewis , Faber & Faber, 1976.

Bereavement: Studies of grief in adult life, Colin Murray Parkes, Penguin Books, 1998.

Death and Bereavement across Cultures, Colin Murray Parkes, Pittu Laungani and Bill Young (eds), Routledge, 1996.