**Grief: A Father’s Story**

**By JOHN YATES**

*The death of someone we love will happen to us all at some point, and many times after. But, in my experience, as a society we do not talk openly or comfortably about grief. Mourning is, I’ve found, something that we do in private, rather than publicly.*

*The opportunity to learn from others, or to talk openly about how we are suffering seems constrained. This has turned grieving, for me, into a slower, more isolated and lonely experience than it needs to be.*

*So I hope these thoughts and my experiences will help you to feel connected at least a little to those who are grieving and be of some small use to you one day.*

**An Unimaginable Loss, Then Headlong Into a Blur**

Our daughter Eleanor died suddenly, in her sleep, on her gap year in Thailand. She was 18. We had no warning at all, just a phone call after we’d started to worry that morning that she wasn’t responding to our texts.

We had to arrange flights that day and that night, while navigating the complex administration due to COVID restrictions, for which we had assistance from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

We left the following afternoon, and spent the coming days finding our way through the diplomatic and practical processes required to avoid Eleanor being cremated in Thailand. And to arrange for the repatriation of her body; : there wasn’t any time to just sit and weep.

During our visit, we interviewed police and the friends that Eleanor had made in Thailand, trying to make sense of it all.

When we came back, we were plunged into the procedures that funeral directors know well, but that are so traumatic the first time around.

Not least, liaising with the coroner’s office over the post-mortem, viewing Eleanor’s body for the first time, and organizing the funeral service and wake.

There is, then, very little time for any real grieving during this period. Yet this is the time when most people will meet those who are beginning to grieve. Like us, those grieving are likely to be in shock, suffering perhaps from a form of PTSD.

In my case, my brain hadn’t come close to understanding or accepting what had actually, permanently happened – our daughter was gone. It was just dealing with tasks and challenges that were set before it.

In my experience, you’ll get an inaccurate impression of how a grieving family are really doing at a funeral; they are barely there at all. Real grief is likely to come later.

When I entered the pub we’d arranged for Eleanor’s wake and was met by several people I’d not yet seen that day, I had to flee to the toilet cubicle for a few minutes to quell a rising panic attack.

It’s the first time I recall ever having one but I’ve had to control a few since. I believe that panic is the brain glimpsing the horrific reality of what’s happened, all in a rush, and not being able to cope with it.

**Grief Isn’t a Process With a Straight Line or an Ending**

An important aspect of grieving I think is to understand that it’s not a process that has a start, beginning and an end.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s work on the five phases of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) is widely misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Her research identified five different emotional states associated with grief that can be distinctly identified or labelled. But these are not sequential or linear, and the different states can show up any time, many times.

This is an important thing to accept when going through your own grieving process, or when dealing with those who are.

If you’re hard on yourself – “get over it!” or “for goodness’ sake, move on!” – you might just be storing up more pain in the future.

And if you’re around someone who is grieving, don’t be surprised if they seem unnaturally OK to start with, and then fall apart in front of your eyes sometime, seemingly out-of-the-blue. That’s what happens.

Asking, “How are you doing?” – is fine but a follow-up, “No, how are you really doing?” – wouldn’t go amiss.

You’ll get the easy (and probably inaccurate) answer first time around, and the answer may be different months and years later.

**There Are the Wrong Things to Say**

After it happened, I had wonderful messages of support from all over the Mind Tools family, and empathetic tears from those closest to me. They will remain in my thoughts until my last days.

I also had some messages from friends outside work that I didn’t find so helpful. “Be strong, John – it’s what she would have wanted,” being a typical example. Or “You’ll get through this.” What the hell did they know?

Please do remember there’s no getting through or over grief. It will always be there because the person we’ve lost won’t be.

I’m a person who’s used to, over time, being able to fix things. Phrases like “It’ll be all right” take on a very different perspective when they can’t be, and you have to reconcile yourself to that, and to the most profound of things never being OK.

**No More Answers to Find**

The last of the formal processes (required in our case, and more often than you’d think), was the inquest. Ours for Eleanor happened well over a year after she died in 2022.

Inevitably, it stirred up many of the thoughts and feelings that we had in the very early days of our grief. Details were pored over anew, ones that we’d put aside out of self-preservation or fear.

It’s tough talking out loud about it all, to a stranger in an official capacity. And it was the first time we‘d had the chance to since we got back from Thailand.

Then we had a brief period of dealing with the Press fallout, including a knock on our door from a journalist. After so long in private, it’s bewildering, all at once dealing with the opposite of people being afraid to bring it up.

But we were treated fairly by the journalist, : others I know aren’t so fortunate. The days since the inquest have been another stage again, as we don’t have that event to “look forward to;” no more answers to find, no more uncertainty.

So we move into another phase of our grieving, again in the privacy of our family.

**Hierarchies and Communities of the Grieving**

It’s not possible to predict or quantify the likely breadth and depth of the impact of loss on someone’s wellbeing.

Every one of us experiences pain differently. So it’s only partially true therefore, as far as I’m concerned, to say that there are commonalities of experience that separate the grieving into communities defined by this experience.

Your loss, though, does mean you have joined the island of the grief-stricken. This sets you entirely apart from those on the mainland, those without any direct experience of grief.

Next, you may find yourself gravitating to those with a loss most similar to your own. Those who are grieving a very different type of relationship, or loss, whether or not they inhabit your island, feel too distant from your own experience to provide the kind of empathy, insight or support you seek.

There is, though, comfort in sharing experiences with those who are further advanced in their own personal experiences of a grief that is very similar to your own. In knowing that they are still here, that they have survived, you begin to know that you might too.

**Grieving Parents Have Been Our Signposts, Our Comfort**

I’ve found you can only go so far in connecting with people who haven’t experienced the same kind of grief that you have, let alone bonding with those who haven’t really experienced it at all.

It’s nice to be asked how you really are, and to be given the time to open up a bit about how difficult things are or have been.

But I’m only willing to keep this conversation relatively short and shallow. It doesn’t feel fair to expect someone else to know the next most appropriate question or observation.

They don’t have the route map, and I don’t want them to be dragged into a pain they can’t really understand, and that I hope they will never experience.

In my case, we’ve now come across a number of people who have lost a child of a similar age to Eleanor. The cemetery is one place to expect this and I now know two men whose children have died through suicide, hit by a train.

Although Eleanor didn’t commit suicide, I have found the words of these two men helpful. One is just three or so years into life since his daughter died, while the other has been visiting his son in the same cemetery that Eleanor is buried for almost 10 years. He can tell us a little about what is likely to come.

He still visits his son many times a week (grieving parents appear the most regular visitors), but sometimes I see him when he’s en route to his five-a-side soccer game, and he has grandchildren now. Life goes on; it has to.

He laughs and jokes, but I’ve also seen him touch his son’s gravestone with love and sadness. This is my tribe now.

We find comfort among these folk, and are drawn toward stories of grieving parents in the news.

**Your Old Self Will Never Be Back**

For the past year, my wife Catherine has been wandering the discussion forums of an online site specifically for bereaved parents – The Compassionate Friends.

She intends to contribute her own experiences soon, as well as ask questions of others who have lost their children overseas.

Especially of those who have experienced a paucity of support from local police or the local coroner’s office – as has been our experience.

More questions than answers, always wondering what happened and why – and underneath knowing that it’s unlikely we’ll ever know.

You aren’t just grieving the loss of your loved one, you’re also grieving the loss of who you once were. You are no longer that person, and can never be again.

**Finding the Right Thing to Say**

“I don’t know what to say, and I feel uncomfortable. I worry I’ll upset them by bringing it up,” is a common sentiment when it comes to talking to someone about their grief, their loss. But it didn’t help me when I needed it most.

When it comes to how should we interact with those who are grieving and what should we say, I think it’s an easy one – provided you don’t overthink it, and provided that you say something, anything.

There’s no “right thing” to say, and the only thing you may not be forgiven for in my experience, is saying nothing at all.

Believe us when we say that it’s noticed. You might have some moments of discomfort, but briefly.

Compare those feelings with the ongoing pain that your colleague or friend is going through, and be brave.

You can walk away afterward, they never can. As for worrying about “making it worse”, reminding them, or upsetting them, you can’t do any of that with a few words. Their pain is permanent, just maybe not visible.

They will almost certainly be thinking about their loss in the moments before or after you chat anyway. While your words may bring this to the surface – you may see tears – the feelings were there beneath all of the time, and always will be.

**Why Talking, Asking Helps**

Whatever you say will provide some relief from bottling it up, and some companionship on the island. It’s refreshing to have a visitor pop over now and again.

Does this mean that there’s no real hope for the bereaved, they can never be whole again? Perhaps.

Dr Tonkin’s “Growing Around Grief” model challenges the notion that time heals all wounds. But it does offer hope that we can build our lives around the hole that is left at its center.

Grief doesn’t shrink, it doesn’t go away and there are times – anniversaries, birthdays, big festivals like Diwali, Christmas or Ramadan – where the hole fills the whole of our existence, just as it did the day our loved one died.

But our life does get bigger. We build it around our grief, meaning that we can enjoy things fully and realize joy from the things that we have in our lives.

**Joy is Our Greatest Comfort**

It’s still early days for me, and for us all as a family. We had our children so close together that our surviving twin boys are currently waiting to see if their university applications have been successful, while Eleanor was due to be in her first year.

So, on an almost daily basis, we have to live with this dichotomy of joy and hope for our boys, when their very hope and aspirations for their future are a reminder of what Eleanor will never have.

But we are, as Dr Tonkin observed, building around that loss. It doesn’t shrink the loss but creates some insulation from it, a feeling that positives can happen in spite of that pain at the center.

We are mindful of it, acutely most of the time, but still able to experience as a family our shared hope for the future, and feel happy at times.

We are starting to learn that making intentional, positive efforts, putting energy into building a new, different life around our grief is a way to make something of our loss, and not allow it to cause ever more damage.

**Further Reading**

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

There is some great writing out there about grief that we’d recommend you read if you find yourself having to come to terms with loss.

In the same way that seeking a community of shared experience helps with the loneliness of grief, the words of others can make a profound and lasting difference in understanding your situation.

These are some of the best books that we’ve read about grief and grieving. It is a relatively short list in comparison with books on other human emotional experiences – love, or relationship break-ups, for example.

Which perhaps reflects our reluctance as a society to discuss the experience of grief openly and honestly.

• The Year of Magical Thinking, Joan Didion

• A Grief Observed, CS Lewis

• Grief Works, Julia Samuel

• It’s OK that you’re not OK, Megan Devine

• A Heart that Works, Rob Delaney