

## 5 things I have learned about grief

Over the past 18 months I have experienced my first major bereavements and been thrown into the world of grief, it's quite an experience! And, I believe, no two experiences will be quite the same. Relationships differ, ways of death and any 'preparation' for it differ, where you are in your own life when you experience it differs.

My story is this: my dad died very suddenly 16 months ago – an ostensibly fit, healthy 64 year old he died out running with his (now our) dog, Jack. My mum had just been diagnosed with breast cancer two months earlier and she declined rapidly to die in February this year. I was in the midst of other big life changes as this was happening – becoming a parent and moving from a London flat to a smallholding down a rural Scottish track, ironically to be closer to my parents and other family, with big changes in our work lives too.

So these are just a few things I have learned through my own particular journey so far. I think it will be a lifelong journey...

**1. Grief is isolating** – I am not an isolated person: I have family, friends and support around me. I also have people around me grieving the same people too. But I wouldn't say it's something you can really share. It is so personal and something I almost feel protective around. Relationships are unique and your experience of letting go of that person must therefore be unique. This can be extremely painful and make you feel very lonely. Feeling sad can make you want to withdraw, especially when you feel like people just want you to be ok again and you're just not. It can also be hard for people close to you to understand, it can be hard to support someone with a bubble round them, but I think that bubble is necessary protection for our grief for a bit at least, which means it simply *is* isolating.

**2. Grief is visceral** – I heard a psychotherapist say "grief feels like fear" and I totally agree with that. It comes with heightened anxiety and can take over your body, tense your jaw and churn your gut in particular. It is therefore really an embodied feeling, which can mean back pain, stiffness, upset stomach as well as anger and bubbling frustration. Another bereavement specialist told me "you can't deal with anxiety cognitively" and this was so helpful a reminder that our bodies are our minds and vice versa. The routes out of anxiety for me are the same that are helpful for managing symptoms of grief - Yoga, massage, acupuncture, running, hugging (see [Erika's blog on oxytocin](#) for reasons this helps so much), meditating, talking, sleeping, playing hide and seek with a toddler...

**3. Grief is unavoidable** – Grief comes with death so is unavoidable for that reason. But I also say this in that grief is something you actually do have to go through when you experience death. Early on a friend told me "No one escapes the full grief experience " and this has chimed with a lot of anecdotal evidence from, for example, interviewees on [Griefcast](#) who tried to avoid the experience and it comes back to haunt them later on. But it's not something you go through then finish! It's something that you have to create space for in your life, to examine and process and ultimately to learn to live with. Grief changes you and you have to adapt to absorb those changes.

**4 Grief is not all bad** – if you said this to me on some days I would feel like punching you! I sometimes feel like that is untrue, but in my more rational frame of mind I see it like any injury - if you attend to it, if you go into it and explore it you can learn a lot about yourself and life. If you just numb the pain then it will just hide there and give you greater trouble down the line. Grief is a sign that you have really loved and that is what makes life worthwhile, so if you can bear to let the process happen it can help ground you in your priorities and focus on what really matters.

**5. Grief is Really F\*&£\$ing hard!!** – Because it's isolating, because it's visceral, because it's unavoidable and even because it's not all bad (really you'd rather have them back!) – all these things and the adapting to the change the loss brings make grief hard. It is a complex beast, it's absorbing and intense at times. It is like childbirth and chronic pain, these are things that everyone acknowledges are tough and painful, but until you experience them yourself you won't *really* 'get it'.

I wanted to share these experiences as I have found it helpful to hear other experiences, particularly through listening to [Griefcast](#) and also through [Griefworks](#). While it is such an individual journey, there are so many common aspects, emotions, tensions and challenges. I have found solidarity, understanding and support through these channels and they've helped me make sense of some of the reactions I've had, which is invaluable on this confusing, anxious sad and important journey.