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## COPING WITH GRIEF

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*'If you are going through hell, keep going' - Winston Churchill*

I wish it weren't so, but I am duly qualified to write this article by the deaths of many precious loved ones - my brother, stepbrother, cousin, friends, grandparents, aunts and uncles - accidents, cancer, subarachnoid haemorrhage, suicide, old age. And of course, in this line of work, there is also the rare patient whose death deeply touches me.

My main message is this: I have dark days and have felt convinced I could not survive or flourish or feel joy again, but I have, and you will too. So, while grieving never gets easier, even over the years, I have developed a coping armamentarium. This article shares some of the tools that have helped me and that may help you too - little rays of light and hope, which will slowly get bigger. And if you don't have any hope right now, borrow some of mine.

I am a South African Intensivist who did the bulk of my Emergency and ICU training in Australia. As a junior consultant I scored a fabulous job in the Wellington ICU where I am now living with my young family. I nipped away from brother's deathbed, having been awake for 36 hours, so I could have my interview for this job. I returned in time to be with him when he died a few hours later.

### ***How you are grieving is the right way for you***

Grieving is a universal human experience. It is so intense that it can feel like what you are going through is not normal, but it is. It can make you feel like there's something wrong with you, but there isn't.

For the first few days, the agony, shock and disbelief is engulfing. But somehow, you get through. *You are stronger than you know.* And your loved ones get you through – their love, kindness, prayers, hugs, good thoughts and little things they do for you. Simple pleasures help the bad moments become bearable - a cup of tea, a piece of cake, a long hot bath, a walk, hearing stories about your loved one. Large patches of time may lapse without you realising you need to eat or you may feel too sick to eat. But do try to eat, even just a little. And don't worry if you can't stop eating! If people ask you how they can help, ask them to make you a meal or do something on your 'to-do' list. Don't be embarrassed to ask for help. People want to help you (and directing them can make it easier). It will make them feel better too.

If you are floundering, ask yourself, 'What do I need in this moment?'. Look within and notice and name what you are feeling. Come back to your breath. Take some deep breaths. Feel the air coming into and out of your body. Exhale for longer than you inhale. Pause between the in and out, and then between the out and in. This activates your diaphragm and your vagus, which in turn activates your parasympathetic nervous system. This will help you feel more in control again. Reach out to someone. Let people know how you feel. Often, there will be times that the only person you can think of who could soothe you, is the very person your heart is aching for. Give someone else a chance at supporting you anyway. I have written a list of friends who can all fulfill some of my brother's functions. When I am overwhelmed, I mentally run through the list and pick someone. If the list wasn't there, I might not be able to think of someone when swept up in emotion.

After the initial shock, the world seems to continue as usual, but you don't know why you do not want to get out of bed. This is normal. Don't judge your grief. Don't worry about wanting to hide in bed or being forgetful. Grief is the most exhausting emotion. If you just want to get back to work and normal life and can't stand slowing down, this is normal too. No two people will mourn the same way. However how *you* are grieving is just perfect – this is not a time of comparison. Give yourself a break and give yourself permission to grieve however you are. And how the people around you are grieving is also just as valid, so give them a break too. We all cope in different ways. Grief only becomes something to worry about if you are wanting to hurt someone or if it is still significantly disabling and not showing signs of diminishing after a substantial period of time– three years or so. Then, please, seek and trust professional help.

### ***You are still allowed to enjoy your life***

The Kubler-Ross process of grieving – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance have not applied to me, and may not apply to you. It's a year and half since my brother died and I still have days of complete disbelief that he is gone. I haven't really felt angry. I definitely bargained in the weeks before he died. I have not felt depressed. Instead, I have felt equally sad and anxious. Anxious that I don't have my wise sibling here to accompany me through life, and anxious that my other loved ones will die too.

The sadness has at times been so heavy and pressing I wondered if I was depressed. Luckily, a wise friend, who lost her two best friends, told me the difference between depression and grieving. Depression is there all the time. When grieving, you can still have enjoyable moments. A beautiful sunset can lift your spirits, your children laughing may make you giggle, a funny story about your loved one might bring comfort. Those beams of happiness must be savoured and not quashed with guilt or held up as a sign that you didn't love the one who has died enough. You are allowed to feel joy and pleasure, *it is not a betrayal* of your loved one. They would want you to feel that joy and brief respite from mourning.

Contemporary research<sup>1</sup> on grief suggests it is not a stepwise process but more an individually constructed compromise between a degree of pain that never fully resolves and the need to compartmentalise that pain to move on with one's life - slowly the grief symptoms subside.

### ***Your usual coping strategies work during grief too***

How you have coped in the past will help you now too. What are your good habits? What usually inspires, energises or lights you up?

Try to get outside. A little sunshine and blue skies or time near the water can be enough to sustain you through the tough times. If you are too tired to exercise, push yourself out the door anyway and walk around the block. Rate your energy before you leave, walk for a couple minutes and 'check in'. If your energy is the same or better, push on - if it is worse, go home and have a cup of tea.

If you de-stress by exercising intensely or if cleaning and organising make you feel more calm and in control, do that. The day my stepbrother was diagnosed with stage four glioblastoma, I called him – he was fixing the plumbing. Then I called my stepdad, he was mowing the lawn. I was coping by calling all of the family, offering love, support and an ear. They were coping by being busy and useful.

Connect with people in any way you can. Talking things through may help and sharing stories and pictures can be a comfort. Actively find ways to be supported. Tend to your grief. Stay

close to your loved ones. It doesn't matter what anyone else says, and trust me, people will say unhelpful things, like '*Surely you are over it by now?*'. It is just hard for them to understand if it is not something they have been through.

When you are in the depths of sorrow or despair, try to remember that the intensity of the sadness is a measure of how much you loved them. Then you might be able to turn your attention to gratitude. Gratitude of the precious time you had together, for what they taught you, for what they shared with you. Gratitude for your loved ones that are still here with you.

It's ok if you want to talk to your loved one. I talk to all my departed loved ones. Who am I to say they can or can't hear me? So, in the face of no concrete evidence, I might as well believe the thing that is a comfort to me. When I hear a joke that my brother would love or see a sunset that he'd drink in, I pause a second and, in my mind, ask him if he is enjoying it too. I know others who speak to their loved ones in the stars or when they see certain signs in nature – rainbows, birds or magnificent skies. Who's to say it isn't your loved one visiting or making a spectacular show or sign, just for you.

### ***Anniversaries and flashbacks: 'The only way out, is through' - Robert Frost***

Whether it is your loved one's birthday, death-anniversary or some other special date, don't under-estimate how tough these can be, even years down the line. Don't be surprised, if in the weeks leading up to the anniversary you feel heavy and miserable. Give yourself space and time to mark them and feel what you feel. Cherish photos, stories and mementos.

It is 12 years since my closest cousin died. We grew up together. I looked after her when she was young and we lived together when we were older. It was a huge wrench for us all when she died, only 24 years old. This weekend we toasted her, enjoyed her photos and contacted family. I read the eulogy my late brother said for her. I sobbed. Last year I was fine and thought to myself that I was 'over it'. You never know when grief is going to sneak up on you and dissolve you into tears again, even years down the line. Often it is a song that gets me. Sometimes when I am at work or somewhere else equally as public I am taken right back into the devastation by a similar patient, family or situation. All I can advise is this: don't be afraid or ashamed of how you feel. Let it out and pave the way for others to show their feelings. Often if you acknowledge a feeling, it dissipates. Feel it fully for a moment and it will usually move through you.

### ***Grieving with children***

When my brother died my children were 1 and 4. With kids, moving countries and a busy career – there didn't seem to be time to grieve. So I wrote a list of ways to honour my loss. I gave myself grieving tasks that could muscle their way into my schedule. I got a beautiful picture of my brother for the wall – one where he seems to be looking deep into my eyes, so the grief didn't get buried in my busy life. I listened to his favourite book. I got grief counselling through the EAP. I danced to his favourite songs with my kids. I listened to the playlist I played him every night he was in ICU. I created a 'peer support group' of other people who have lost siblings to go for walks with and chat about how we are feeling. You may have to 'schedule in' times to go deeper into your grief too. And find your own ways to honour your loss - they may look very different from mine.

I never hid my emotions from my children – but I didn't allow myself to go into the depths of my feelings. The sadness felt like a bottomless pit and I didn't know where it would lead. As part of my grieving plan, I put time aside to go deep. When the kids were in bed I asked my husband to come and sit with me. I assured him he didn't need to say anything or fix me, he

just had to be with me – sitting with his hand on my knee or his arm around my shoulder, no matter how long it took for me to cry - as long as it took to express everything that was bottled up. And I cried and cried in the comfort of the loving and supportive space he provided. When grief is expressed, it allows the richness of life to be felt again.

Talk about your loved one with your children. Answer their questions honestly. I talk to my children about my brother. I tell them stories of when we were little. We celebrate his birthday with a picnic or a cake. They both bring me heart-shaped rocks, which remind us of him. I talk to my children about all of my loved ones who have died; they are alive and well in our house.

Check in with your children regularly. Children are at the centre of their universes and they often mistakenly think they caused what's happening around them. Check they understand that you are sad or dull, not because of anything to do with them, but because you are missing your loved one - because you are grieving. If I am ever upset, I try to remember to tell my children that they haven't done anything wrong and that I am just missing my brother. If they try to comfort me (a snotty hug, a slobbery kiss, a mangled flower), I try with all my heart to open to their love and effort – to let it help me, so they feel they can help, so they feel heard and in control.

### ***Grieving during COVID and dealing with regrets and guilt***

There has been much to grieve during COVID - not just deaths but loss of personal freedom, travel, income, identity, health and a sense of safety. There is also anticipatory grief, because the future is uncertain. It has been a tough time. Many of us have been cut off from our usual supports. Find people you can talk and share your concerns (however little) with. Name and express all you are feeling – it will feel better afterwards.

Post-traumatic growth is a studied concept that profound struggle often transforms into growth and positive change, in as many of 90% of people. You may emerge from your trauma at a higher level of happiness. Whatever you have lost during COVID, when you are ready, you can look for ways to fill the void. As Aristotle said, 'Nature abhors a vacuum'. Fill the gap with something exciting - something just for you. Start with something small that you can look forward to. A fresh start. It is not a good idea though to make any major decisions while grieving.

'By learning how to attend to, befriend, and surrender to the energies of grief, despair, and fear, we create the conditions for something new to arise in ourselves and in the world. We discover an unexpected gateway to healing and transformation.' ~ from Healing Through the Dark Emotions, By Miriam Greenspan, First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand has five ways to wellbeing (connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give) which are easy, daily habits that can help you heal. Have a daily gratitude practice to bring you into the present moment and build hope. Think of three things you are grateful for in this moment. It can be as simple as being grateful for your dear heart, which just beat around 4800 times in the last hour, just for you.

My gran and aunt both died in Australia during this time of restricted travel. I was very distressed by not being able to be at their death beds, holding their hands and comforting family. My gran didn't have any visitors her last three days. Initially I struggled with this, but as I have said to numerous patients' families who weren't there as their loved ones passed, you have to trust that things have worked out exactly as they are meant to be. My gran would hate for me to feel guilty for one second. It would only sully her memory. I realise guilt doesn't change anything, and it doesn't have any purpose. It only holds me back from feeling love for myself and others.

When a loved one dies, we often have regrets, guilt or anger. Perhaps you didn't see them as often as you would like, your last interaction was not kind, you were planning something awesome together that you didn't get to do, or you are angry at them for leaving. The more you can acknowledge how you feel, the more likely you are to be able to accept and forgive. Trust that you (or they) were doing the best you (or they) could at the time. Be kind to yourself. Another way to unhook from these thoughts or feelings, once they have been acknowledged, is to imagine someone who loves you dearly (it could even be your pet) and what they would say to you. What would your dog say to you if you told him that you stormed out of your friend's place the last time you saw them? Something like, 'You silly bugger, you had better beat yourself up about that for a long time!' Or, something more like, 'I still love you, they know you loved them, we all say and do silly things when we are tired or upset. Can we go for a walk now?' Treat yourself with the tender, loving care that you extend to others.

Lastly, I was dreading the online funeral, but it actually worked out fine. I got to watch it all from a distance and sob as loudly as I wanted, wrapped in a blanket, and no small talk. At the actual time of my gran's funeral (I couldn't watch hers live), my mum and I told stories and acknowledged all my gran's wonderful attributes on FaceTime. We also had simple rituals with the children to honour them – photos, candles and some lovely stories. Sometime in the future, I will go to Australia and take flowers to their graves and celebrate their lives with my family, champers and a lovely meal. It might help you to think of ways, that feel right to you to honour your loved ones, even if you cannot be there while they die or at the funerals. These rituals might help you adapt to the loss, which can be even harder to believe if you are in lockdown.

### ***How to support people who are grieving***

It is unlikely you will have the right words, so just show up. Be there and provide simple cares. Accept whatever space they are in or whatever emotion they are experiencing. See them from the perspective that they are doing the best they can. Share a memory or photo of their loved one if you can - it will be cherished. If you are really brave, ask them if they want to talk about the traumatic aspects of what has happened. Then, just be there, listen, acknowledge and pat or hug them, if it feels right.

### ***'The wound is where the light enters you' - Rumi***

There is no cure for grief. Your grief has changed you. Things won't be the same again, but with some healthy habits, support and the tincture of time, you will feel more normal and joyous again. And whatever you are going through, it is totally OK.

### ***Grieving Resources - in no particular order:***

#### 1. Websites:

- a. <https://www.leva.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/LeVa-GriefFactsheet.pdf>
- b. <https://www.wildvictoriousheart.com/>
- c. <https://www.opentohope.com/>

#### 2. Podcasts:

- a. <https://www.opentohope.com/radio/>
- b. <https://podcasts.apple.com/za/podcast/the-mindfulness-grief-podcast/id1387930317>

3. Books and articles:
  - a. Orford N. Grief After Suicide. *JAMA*. 2018;320(18):1861–1862. doi:10.1001/jama.2018.15664
  - b. The Little Book of Loss and Grief: You Can Read While You Cry, Liz Crowe
  - c. Coping with grief, Mal and Diane McKissock.
  - d. The many faces of grief, Nola Shaw.
  - e. Death and Life, Dr Baruch Banai
  - f. The Body Keeps Score, Bessel Van der Kolk
  - g. <https://www.thehivery.com/blog-posts/2019/5/30/on-love-loss-and-being-a-cello>
  - h. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/style/modern-love-you-may-want-to-marry-my-husband.html>
  - i. The Year of Magical Thinking; Blue Nights, Joan Didion
4. Movies/TED talks:
  - a. I See Dead People: Dreams and Visions of the Dying | Dr. Christopher Kerr | TEDxBuffalo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbnBe-vXGQM&feature=youtu.be>
  - b. Nora McInerney: We don't move on from grief we move forward with it: [https://www.ted.com/talks/nora\\_mcinerney\\_we\\_don\\_t\\_move\\_on\\_from\\_grief\\_we\\_move\\_forward\\_with\\_it?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/nora_mcinerney_we_don_t_move_on_from_grief_we_move_forward_with_it?language=en)
  - c. [https://www.ted.com/talks/jason\\_b\\_rosenthal\\_the\\_journey\\_through\\_loss\\_and\\_grief#/t-831501](https://www.ted.com/talks/jason_b_rosenthal_the_journey_through_loss_and_grief#/t-831501)
  - d. The near-death experience of Jeff Olsen: <https://youtu.be/1FD5lReqe64>
  - e. [https://www.ted.com/talks/lucy\\_kalanithi\\_what\\_makes\\_life\\_worth\\_living\\_in\\_the\\_face\\_of\\_death](https://www.ted.com/talks/lucy_kalanithi_what_makes_life_worth_living_in_the_face_of_death)
5. Songs
  - a. Maroon 5: Memories <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIPhMPnQ58k>
  - b. Chris Young: Drowning <https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=share&v=v2F0h19plCQ&app=desktop>
  - c. Eric Clapton: Tears in Heaven <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxPj3GAYYZ0>
  - d. Puff Daddy: Ill be missing you <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKMtZm2YuBE>
  - e. Hot water: Cruel, crazy, beautiful world <https://www.facebook.com/DonovanCopleySA/videos/cruel-crazy-beautiful-world-hot-water-versionpianoballad-covid19-song-emotionals/2643126549305832/>
6. COVID grieving
  - a. <https://www.johnsonhagglund.com/coronavirus-and-the-six-needs-of-mourning>
  - b. <https://www.fdanz.co.nz/assets/Covid-19/COVID-19-When-no-funerals-tangl-or-gatherings-can-be-held.pdf>
  - c. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/home/ways-to-wellbeing/>
  - d. <https://urbanbalance.com/a-pandemic-of-grief/>
  - e. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/13/magazine/jack-kornfield-mindfulness.html>

### Reference

1. Wakefield JC. Should prolonged grief be reclassified as a mental disorder in DSM-5?: reconsidering the empirical and conceptual arguments for complicated grief disorder. *J Nerv Ment Dis*. 2012;200(6):499-511. doi:10.1097/NMD.0b013e3182482155

*“Your absence has gone through me like thread through a needle. Everything I do is stitched with its colour” – W S Merwin*

**We would like to remind our CICM Fellows and Trainees that if you are struggling with grief or your mental health, the College has [Converge](#) the Member Assistance Program available to you, as well as Welfare related articles on our [Member Health and Wellbeing website](#).**