

Change, loss, grief... and hope





If you are taking time to read this booklet, you are probably experiencing changes in your life as the once ‘familiar’ and ‘safe’ gives way to ‘uncertainty’ and ‘fear’ for what may lie ahead.

I hope the words contained here will offer you a gentle reassurance that the conflicting feelings, which arise when we are grieving, are a natural response to the endless cycle of change and loss we experience throughout our lives. We start school, leave home, change jobs, move house, relationships end, a trust is betrayed, we mourn the loss of our youth, our health declines and our hopes and dreams remain unfulfilled; for all these and more – we grieve.

Grief is a normal human experience but when it has us in its hold, we feel anything but normal. When all certainty has gone and we’re shaken to our core, we try to cope as best we can, but we know nothing will ever be the same again.

Contradictory feelings arise; numbness, despair, desperation, anger, guilt, indifference and even relief are common. We may feel isolated and alone, that all joy has gone, and previously enjoyed activities fail to offer respite.

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Loss is the absence of something we were once attached to. Grief is the rope burn left behind, when that which is held is pulled beyond our grasp.

Nothing is more natural than grief, no emotion more common to our daily experience. It’s an innate response to loss in a world where everything is impermanent.

Stephen Levine

Unattended Sorrow, Rodale Books, 2005



It's like a giant wave has knocked me off my feet and has swept me out to sea and so far down that I feel I am drowning.

Bereavement Volunteer

So, it's understandable, when we gaze from our window, to ask: 'how can the sun go on shining, and the world go on turning, when my world has shattered and changed beyond belief?' We feel so raw and 'undone' that we are, quite literally – lost for words. We may seek the words of others, a song, a poem or a book, to make sense of how we feel.

We are at the mercy of our grief, a relentless rollercoaster of emotions leaves us distressed and exhausted, appetite, memory and concentration are all affected. We are tired beyond measure, but sleep evades us as thoughts 'think themselves'. If sleep does come, the split second of normality we feel on waking evaporates, as we are plunged into our loss all over again. The more we strive to make sense of what is happening to us, the more we may feel we are going 'mad'.

Each of us responds to grief in our own unique way so our 'grief travelling' is also unique. We may find we need to talk about how we feel, to tell our story over and over so that the reality of our situation begins to sink in. We may need to channel our grief into practical tasks and physical activities because this how we cope best. Or, because this loss reawakens a lifetime of losses, we may find we just can't absorb another drop of sorrow and so, to protect ourselves, we seek ways to avoid or deny our grief. We may do any and all of these things but, we 'travel'. We know that grieving is a profound and often excruciatingly painful experience which has its own rhythm. Grief cannot be 'picked up' and 'put down' to order.



As the months pass and the initial support of family and friends feels less available, it's natural to feel 'worse' a sense of two steps forward, one step back, because the reality of our loss begins to dawn. However, if these feelings continue or if we begin to sense that our grief isn't straightforward, we may consider talking to someone outside of our immediate circle of family and friends. The Family Support Team at Dorothy House has a team of specialist staff and trained volunteers available to offer bereavement support.

In those moments when our grief feels overwhelming, it's normal to ask ourselves '...what's the point of carrying on?' But if such thoughts become persistent, or extreme to the point where we are seriously planning to harm ourselves, then it's crucial to seek help and guidance through our GP or The Samaritans, who offer a 24hr helpline – 116 123.

Wherever we are in our ‘grief travelling’ being gentle with ourselves, allowing time and space to sit quietly with thoughts and feelings as they arise, is an important part of our journey. Taking ‘time out’ from our grief, to laugh, to smile, or to simply take pleasure in something we once enjoyed doesn’t mean we are forgetting or being disrespectful but, rather, it’s often a sign that we are healing.

Grief is like being forced to swim underwater; every so often we have to come up for air but in the early days, those moments of breath are few and far between. As we move through the water, and we are always moving through, we find our moments of breath become longer and we begin to spend more time above than below.

For most of us, the love and support of those willing to walk beside us, without trying to fix us, in all grief’s messiness, is all we need to begin to heal. Even when we see no way out of the vortex of grief and can’t ever imagine being free of it, there will come a time when it won’t be the first thing we remember on waking. The rawness will ease and very slowly our life will grow and expand as we begin to adjust and accommodate our grief.

In the meantime, we offer ourselves love, compassion and mercy, reassured that we do the best we can. Stephen Levine speaks of the ‘braille method’ – feeling our way moment by moment as we begin adjusting to life different from the one we had planned.

Linda Owens
Bereavement Lead



For Grief John O'Donohue

When you lose someone you love,
Your life becomes strange,
The ground beneath you gets fragile,
Your thoughts make your eyes unsure;
And some dead echo drags your voice down
Where words have no confidence
Your heart has grown heavy with loss;
And though this loss has wounded others too,
No one knows what has been taken from you
When the silence of absence deepens.

Flickers of guilt kindle regret
For all that was left unsaid or undone.

There are days when you wake up happy;
Again inside the fullness of life,
Until the moment breaks
And you are thrown back
Onto the black tide of loss.

Days when you have your heart back,
You are able to function well
Until in the middle of work or encounter,
Suddenly with no warning,
You are ambushed by grief.

It becomes hard to trust yourself.
All you can depend on now is that
Sorrow will remain faithful to itself.
More than you, it knows its way
And will find the right time
To pull and pull the rope of grief
Until that coiled hill of tears
Has reduced to its last drop.

Gradually, you will learn acquaintance
With the invisible form of your departed;
And, when the work of grief is done,
The wound of loss will heal
And you will have learned
To wean your eyes
From that gap in the air
And be able to enter the hearth
In your soul where your loved one
Has awaited your return
All the time.

Contact Dorothy House for more information
about how the Family Support Team can
support you by ringing 0345 0130 555

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