

Counselling Matters

Bereavement – Your Stories

Text Only Version

A welcome from the NCPS

The National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society (NCPS) is a membership body for counsellors and psychotherapists. We are pleased to share with you this special edition of our magazine which is normally released exclusively to members.

This edition came about after receiving an overwhelming amount of articles from our members for our bereavement magazine last month, so we decided to create a special edition to share publicly – ‘Bereavement–Your Stories’

As bereavement will affect everyone in their lifetime, we hope that sharing this magazine with anyone and everyone brings comfort, understanding and perspective but most of all we hope that sharing our stories lets others know it is ok to ask for help if, and when, they need it.

If you or someone you know is dealing with any of the issues in this edition you can use the NCPS find a counsellor tool to search for a qualified therapist in your area [here](#).

CONTENT NOTE

This is a collection of personal experiences around bereavement and while we hope you find the magazine engaging, moving and thought-provoking, this is a gentle reminder to take care of yourself while reading a topic that can be emotive.

HELPLINES

If you are affected by anything in this magazine, here are some of the organisations that can help.

Samaritans

www.samaritans.org

Jo@samaritans.org

Always Open

116 123

Cruse Bereavement Support

www.cruse.org.uk

Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday: 9.30am – 5pm

Tuesday: 1pm – 8pm

0808 808 1677

Suicide & Co

www.suicideandco.org

Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm

0800 054 8400

Winstons Wish

winstonswish.org

Monday – Friday 8am – 8pm

08088 020 021

Papyrus

www.papyrus-uk.org

Always Open

Text – 88247

pat@papyrus-uk.org

0800 068 4141

Child Bereavement UK

www.childbereavementuk.org

helpline@childbereavementuk.org

Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm

0800 02 888 40

The Afterwards

Thank you to Clare Elliot for this poem.

Where were you? I couldn't find you

I looked and you weren't there

I went out into the night to search for you

The darkness wrapped around me

I shouted up into the sorrowful space above

Your name slipping further from me

Misplaced by the tormenting wind

I called for you, over and over

Something wild and terrified

Shook me to the cold, perished earth

Such a noise was harrowing

An untamed beast howling incredulous

Clambering up like a resolute volcano

Incandescent red desolation bottle necked

It hung there, and then it cracked

Just a whisper, "Where are you now?"

Longing tears fell from the well of my heart

The purge kept me warm

It swaddled me like a baby

Stilled my flailing limbs

Restricted my panicked despair

All was silent

The wild animal, it had been me

Here, there was no longer anything to fear

I tentatively opened my eyes

Like a newborn, now in this world without you.

I looked up at the sky

The scale, the depth, the vastness

It crashed towards me and yet before the fear could settle on me, again...

I saw the stars, for as far and as wide as I could see

I couldn't find you; I didn't know where you had gone

Yet, a light, in the darkness

Reflecting the vivacity in your eyes

All the little stars of you, together, gave me warmth

It happens all the time

Thank you to Katalin Thomann for this article.

It happens all the time.

That's what the mother-in-law of my friend told me after she let me in the door. I came to see my good friend who had just lost her baby. She was 9 weeks pregnant – just like me. For both of us it was our second pregnancy and we muddled through the first 2 years of motherhood together, going to classes, taking the babies to the park and often just sat together in silence and exhaustion over a cup of coffee whilst our children played together.

As most first-time mothers, I too feared that I might lose my unborn baby in those crucial first few weeks of conception. I watched carefully what I ate, cut out caffeine and of course alcohol, exercised and rested in between – I did what society taught and expected me to do as a pregnant woman.

I consider myself fortunate to having been able to conceive, grow and birth both my children healthily. But if we look at the statistics, this is actually not the norm.

According to the NHS, about 3 in every 4 miscarriages happen during the first trimester (NHS 2024). And that is only the statistics of women having been able to get pregnant. The journey for conceiving starts long before that though and with that the hidden loss and grief of those wishing to become parents.

Current figures show that around 17.5% of the adult population – roughly 1 in 6 worldwide – experience infertility according to the WHO (WHO 2024).

As an antenatal and perinatal therapist, I have been working closely with female clients over the last few years and have come to understand the struggle and difficulty of the journey of wishing nothing more than holding a healthy baby in their arms. From the waiting lists for infertility treatment to the strict health regime a woman is put under and the lack of human compassion and care in our health care system, the loss and grief is

always present. The holding out hope each month for a much anticipated positive pregnancy test – and with the absence of that positive line on the test, it can feel like a loss every month.

As therapists, we are all familiar with the power of acknowledging and validating a clients' feelings.

However, it is often when a client is in the space with me that their loss and bereavement is seen and truly acknowledged for the first time. I am often privy to listen to a client's story in which they almost casually mention that they experienced a pregnancy baby loss and continue on with their story.

When I bring them back to that event, it is often very powerful when they are being offered a genuine acknowledgement of these simple words: "I am very sorry for your loss". Because it always IS a loss. It just is not treated as the same loss as a person having lived earth-side whom we have lost.

Grieving for what wasn't, for what could have been. The baby that never made it earth side, the cuddles that would never happen, the first school day that would never happen. The sending off to university that would never happen, seeing them grow into an adult whom they can be proud of and call family.

We need to do better as a society to support women and parents in this journey and acknowledge the loss of a baby or foetus rather than dismissing it as a commodity that a woman and parent should just have to put aside without further thought.

A loss is a loss. And any loss deserves the space and respect to be acknowledged and for the person experiencing the loss to be allowed to grieve.

Katalin Thomann is a therapist who specialises in working with pregnant women and new mums.

She offers sessions online and in person in Edinburgh.

<https://www.mamasworth.co.uk/>

<https://ncps.com/counsellors/ncs20-01743>

Too Long

Thank you to Monique Oxenham for this poem.

Too long to see your beautiful, kind, caring face

Too long to feel the warmth of your nurturing, comforting embrace.

Too long it's been to see your gorgeous smile

Too long it's been, my tears run for mile after mile.

Too long the nights I've laid awake and cried,

Too long this grief, the pain, the emptiness inside.

Too long when life seems to be getting shorter,

Too long the time you haven't met your beautiful granddaughter

Too long everything seems

Too long just beautiful dreams.

In memory of a wonderful, warm, caring mother.

Catch You

Thank you to Julie Pose for this article.

It can be the little things. The little thoughts that catch you. The tiny wee ones that creep up and in on a chain, attached to a train from what feels like nowhere. I'm writing my next lecture for uni. It's about the

configurations of self; how the parts of ourselves add up to more than the whole. We are complex, we are multiple, we are our present selves and our past selves. We're waiting to meet our future self. A complex gestalt, as my presentation says, taken straight from the source textbook. Not an original thought.

My next thought though was about adding a picture of me and my mum into the presentation. She had a complex gestalt, just like we all do. I noticed a part of hers once and I shared with her what it was that I saw. She was surprised and she agreed. I didn't call them configurations of the self then, or complex, or a gestalt. I called it a bit of my mum. Her very young woman who seemed stuck at the age where she lost her dad, who meant the world to her. A young woman not quite emotionally able to take it all in. Her loss. His death. So she never quite did. It always, always, always hurt and that bit of her stayed stuck there. In the hurt. At the age of 21.

So that was the 'bit' or the 'configuration' that I noticed. It made sense to me and it made sense to her. It also had the surprising effect of me being able to love her more. I felt that I was able to understand her, to see how she was from the outside and that made who and how she was as my mum.....a little easier to take. Because her emotional stuckness after her tsunami meant that she really couldn't handle or help with my own emotional tsunamis when they arrived and that was hard. I internalised it. She couldn't be there for me because of me. It was my fault. Now, this little objective noticing gave me a space in which to see that this maybe wasn't the case. Maybe she couldn't be there for me because of her, and that felt really, - for her. I felt a melting of understanding in me. A little hardness melted, and a little love took its place. It wasn't about me.

It was about her.

Putting a picture of me and my mum into my lecture feels like it could put a face to all of that complexity, all of that difficulty, all of that love. It's all more than a phrase, a definition, a theory and words. It's the look in our eyes. It's the arm around the shoulder and the heads tilted in. It's the same smile. It's the same eyes. The same blood from the same life. It's all that and more.

And then the thought came in on its train. I realised, I thought, I noticed that I'm looking older already. It's 18 months since she stopped being here and I definitely look older already. Lots more grey hair, lots more fine lines, a heart that has deeply, deeply hurt. And I just realised that there won't be another picture of me and her, me looking older, her looking older. A picture of the now. A picture of the future. Our skin won't be close again, we won't tilt our heads and say 'cheese', we won't feel that little second of awkwardness quickly replaced by 'c'mere' and then love. I won't be older with her. We'll stay stuck in the moments that have passed, caught in a camera and all that remains. We'll have our own stuckness and it's hard, hard, hard. This won't melt but it will be replaced by time.

And softened by love.

Preparing to say goodbye

Thank you to Kuldeep Kuner for this article.

As I sit here beside you, I feel so much pain, knowing you won't be here tomorrow. I try so hard to recall the joy I experienced with you over the last 13 years, but right now, they are clouded by the focus my thoughts give me of the future without you. They say cherish the good times and remember what you had; know that you're doing the right thing by him. I know this to be true; after all, it's the rational side of my thinking. However, emotions continue to seep through as they are part of what I have with you, part of my everyday life, the one who would feel any distress I may be holding before I am aware myself!

You were like my child, my brother, and my father during your years; nurtured as a puppy, became a sibling as you grew, and then became the wisest one in our family, the only one who played every role within one life. This life that seems so short but understandably, as one who can offer so much in a short time, has the right to move on; for you, it must have seemed so much longer than 13 years.

I now sit beside you and wonder if you're moving on to become our guardian angel who will look over us as a family, to continue to protect us in another form. To let go is the hardest experience we as a family have had to consider over the last several months. We have closely monitored our own emotions and your quality of life to better understand what the right thing is for you. Today as I sit beside you, I'm still unsure, but I know this is more about me than maybe you, so today I will need to accept that a decision like this may never feel right and that I can choose to have you in my life in another way.

I will learn to live with you in a new way, knowing you are always here with us in some form. As I continue to reflect without really knowing what's next for you and how it will be for us without you, I become more aware that we need to let go so you can be at peace.

I hereby say 'thank you, Che, for giving us unconditional love over the years, for carrying so many of our emotions and offering so much support without having words to express your love. It showed that words are not required, just your silent presence that provided so much more. You were and always will be part of our family, and though we will miss you every day, we picture you back up on your paws, running around and enjoying all the things you always had. I love what we had and will learn to love you in a new way!'

Dad you were...

Thank you to Fiona De Vries for this poem.

Dad, you were so many things to all three of us.

A dark green waxy anorak you wore for fell walks

With XL pockets.

Binoculars and a well folded map.

Bonfires in our back garden and bacon and egg for breakfast.

Bringing in coal for the fire.

And switching off lights as you went about the house.

Attention to detail and never-ending patience.

Meticulous packing of the car before our yearly camping trips.

Your Sunday best with polished shoes

And your bright red handkerchief

Your once-in-a-while stew (with a tin of baked beans in)

Your fondness for cheese and chutney, red onion, After eights, and a morning ginger biscuit.

Checked tweed cap.

Your stubbornness and fatherly advice.

Your love of nature and wildlife.

Carefully pruned apple trees and a well-fed lawn

Greenhouse with lovingly tended tomatoes

Dear dad, thank you for everything you gave us, in so many different ways.

May God's peace be with your soul, now, and always.

This hand of mine

Thank you to Melanie Lee for this piece.

This hand of mine is both mine and that of three generations of powerful, intuitive, witchy women. When I look at my hand now, I see floating acetate layers, perhaps a ghostly photo, multiple exposures in one. I wonder: does it sound scary? It's comforting, these different realities, different timelines overlaid, my hand as a portal.

There's a real strength as well as the echo of a primal wail, coming from the depths of my grief, a bottomless well, located stone hard against my organs, held tight between my heart and my stomach.

Objectively I see wine-hued nails, recently painted by my beautiful teenage daughter. Extra sparkle on my ring finger. The skin on the back of my hand loose and freckly. A question: what is a freckle and what is an age spot at this point? This hand of mine, once Scottish white-with-a-hint-of-blue (as Dulux might have sold in the eighties), morphing into my mum's much coveted olive complexion.

This hand of mine has held my children's, kept them safe, reassured them. This year, when my daughter gently holds my hands to paint my nails, there's a bittersweet, heart-splitting moment of tenderness, of being held again and a flashback of my holding my mum's hands in her final hours, maintaining vigil through her last night, letting her know she wasn't alone, pure love flowing between us.

Another flashback overlay of my daughter shaping my mum's nails on her last full day. Mum lying in a hospital bed in surprisingly good spirits, before she slipped into a sleep from which she never fully woke up.

This hand of mine has ink-stained pads, I have been writing today. It feels good. Tentative shoots of burgeoning new life and hope. I will write through my loss, connecting to our mutual love of prose, promising to go on living my one *'wild and precious life'*.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve

Thank you to Alicia Dawson for this article.

Bereavement affects us in our own individual way. Although most of us will experience bereavement at some point, it is surprisingly not always spoken about openly. At times, some people do not know what to say, usually to spare themselves the discomfort of the other person crying. Support networks can shrink suddenly, at a time when feeling lonely, this can feel particularly difficult.

From my experience both personally and professionally when we lose someone significant to us how we respond to it, how it feels and looks will be different for each person bringing up different feelings and emotions at different times. There are some common themes such as the disbelief (even when we knew the person was likely to die), the questions about why and guilt about not doing enough, the unfairness of the situation, the 'what ifs' about the future without that person being around and the intense sadness, even pain of not seeing that person again and how to build a life without that person in it. If having been a carer for the person who died, the lack of routine, identity and caring role can also be lost adding to the overall feeling of loss and purpose.

The unpredictability of and the fluctuation of feelings is not always expected so may be a shock. For example, crying when out shopping or tears being brought on when someone says something kind even though a few minutes ago things were feeling lighter and less sad. Some hours and days feel manageable while others feel overwhelming and it can feel hard to make sense of these different feelings.

Feelings of isolation can increase when after a certain time others do not want to hear about how hard it feels with a comment dropped into conversation such as "are you still feeling sad?, they died some time ago". Feelings of embarrassment and self-judgement to name a few, can surface, both of which can complicate the grieving process. Hobbies and

interests may go by the wayside as things feel more difficult to do and to avoid questions being asked.

The significance of the person, the pet, the relationship, the friendship and the suddenness of the death, can all impact on the bereaved person when these connections physically end. All areas of our lives can be affected, such as friendships, work, hobbies, how we feel overall including about the future and ourselves as confidence and resilience can be knocked. Eating, sleeping and physical self care can also be affected with loss of appetite or overeating as a way of offering comfort. Sleep can be disrupted, finding it hard to go to sleep, getting up in the night and maybe sleeping too much. Not taking the usual care that we would of ourselves including washing, getting dressed and not getting or delaying medical treatment when needed. When a parent dies particularly suddenly and there was a strained relationship between the parent and child, any hope of a resolution or repair is lost. This can leave lots of unanswered questions, confusion, loss of what might have been said and guilt about how the relationship was and feeling torn between grieving and not.

Offering ourselves patience, care and understanding even when going through the different emotions including anger can make the process of grieving less painful. Looking after ourselves physically by trying to eat (well), drink enough, sleep enough, rest when we need to, exercise even a little if feeling exhausted. Emotionally by reaching out to trusted people for connection and just to be, if talking is hard. Allowing and sitting with the different emotions that surface, not expecting to feel better by now or by a certain date. Not comparing grief to another person's grief or masking emotions as people may be less likely to reach out as it seems support is not needed. Understanding while some are more expressive of their feelings, some may be less so but this does not mean that they are not grieving. Some may take comfort in returning to spots that were special to that person as an example, while others may never want to return as that person is not there to share it.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve as each person is individual with different needs, likes and an understanding of what works for them. There are some circumstances when professional support may be needed, if there is sustained and intense bouts of sadness, lethargy with not being

able to get out of bed or undertake basic tasks, loss of job impacting on income, feelings of hopelessness and suicidal thoughts. Reaching out to get support can be hard, it takes courage to do this. It can support in validating and normalising feelings, expressing and making sense of feelings so things do not feel so overwhelming and confusing. Self-care is important with even just small things built in regularly to offer some comfort and re-grounding as grief can be all consuming at times. The more we talk about bereavement the less reluctant we may be to share our feelings and vulnerability around this when we experience it!

My grief

Thank you to Janice Baughan for this poem.

Sadness that envelopes
Eats into the soul
Bites hard
Weighs heavily

The embrace, the rawness, the bitterness, the anger
The emptiness, the hole,
the gaping wound

Others
Blythe comments,
platitudes
Oblivious
A knife that twists
A heart unread
A grief unheard
A silent scream
A lonely journey
Pale and watery
Limp and wilting
Needing air

Beneath the water
Slowly drowning

Sliding down
Deeper darker
Black depths

No end in sight
No going back to the light
No happy ending

Kicking Thistles

Widowed at 34 years old when her husband 'J' died by suicide, this practitioner was left to raise their 5-year-old twins, 'S' & 'D'.

Here are a selection of diary entries that she recorded through the first 2 years of their grief, followed by a 'coda', written shortly after the family's time at a specialist grief retreat, organised by the charity Winston's Wish.

Her diary depicts the awful reality of 2 young children, struggling in very different ways to understand the death of their father, a father that took his own life.

* This account may be distressing for some, with content including suicide, self-harm and childhood trauma.*

1.6.05

I feel like I'm mentally and emotionally squinting. Walking a tightrope, I feel brittle, edgy and out of control. No energy, no motivation. I try and turn it round and force myself to play football with the children in the garden.

22.8.05

S has been very sick again. There seems no rhyme or reason to it, no pattern. I am convinced it is psychological. Literature arrived from Winston's Wish today, so now it's just a case of finding the right time to tell the children the truth. I am so scared, but convinced that it is the right thing to do. I look at the booklet they have sent me. Pictures children have drawn

of people they loved. I cry yet again, for all their lives have become.

5.10.05

I must have slept at least a little because I woke with a feeling of panic and immense sadness that stayed with me all day. Felt very on edge, or aware of how on edge I am, like I'm going to break. I'm too good at acting/putting on a brave face. I have an automated outer shell, but inside I am so frail, so broken, so hurt, so...dead.

No Date

Told the children the truth today. D went quiet, pale, distant. At bedtime, I asked how she was. She spoke like a 30 year old, tears in her eyes and said 'Please don't talk about Daddy. Don't say anything now'. Later, she came downstairs and said, 'We should forgive him'. I have to remind myself, she has just turned 6 years old.

19.10.05

The lonely evenings are becoming increasingly unbearable. My fantasising that J will return continues unabated – it both tortures and comforts me. I could cry all day. Today I even called the Samaritans. **'I AM SO TIRED'**.

25.10.05

Children both up every night asking questions and needing to talk about J. I am frustrated, fractious, utterly, utterly exhausted.

4.11.05

D wakes in the middle of the night to talk. Her eyes are full of tears. She wants to talk about what a 'strange Christmas' it will be. She seems especially worried about me being lonely.

8.11.05

I am vacant, empty, soulless, brittle, fragile, like an empty egg shell – hollow inside.

14.11.05

Cried solid for 3 hours last night. Then S woke with a bad dream at 2.10am. He dreamed we were by the sea and a man was blowing a whistle

signalling us to throw pebbles into the water. But S's was the heaviest and it pulled him in with it, causing him to drown.

21.11.05

Terrible, tortuous days, filled with a dangerous mix of indifference or complete devastation. S sick now for 5 days. When he calls me tonight, he is at last able to explain so articulately and carefully his thoughts/feelings. He blames himself for J's death, for not tidying his room. He says when he feels sick he feels sad about J and then when he feels sad he feels 'sicker and sicker'.

27.11.05

Children are hell, with me, with each other. I can't stand anymore. Don't know if it's because of our circumstances or them just being 6. I'm confused and feel out of control. Lost all patience and feel so guilty.

2.12.05

D has been very low again. She keeps thinking of the moment of J's death. A child shouldn't know of such things, think of such things, feel such things.

4.12.05

D keeps having visions of her Dad stood in the road waiting to die. She is confused what to do when we go to the grave. She is lonely if she stays in the car but doesn't want to go to the grave. Sometimes she hates her Dad, sometimes she loves and misses him. She is sad when she isn't with me but is scared of telling her teachers. She feels sad and cross when she hears the word 'love'. How much turmoil and confusion do my children have to bear.

8.12.05

T, my CRUSE counsellor, was a source of immense help and comfort today. I have come to realise that she is the only person I can really talk to without censoring anything I want to say. I don't know what I would do without her.

12.12.05

D asked if it hurt when J died. I encouraged her to write some stuff to help. She wrote; she thinks her heart will break or stop because she is so sad. She thinks she will die because she is so sad, she thinks J's music will burst out

of her, she thinks she has no words to explain how she feels and she thinks 'it did hurt, even if mummy says it didn't'.

Had to get up to both of them again tonight. S still waits for his Dad to come home from work, especially when he wants help with something. D said she thinks her Dad was too sad to think properly. S says his heart hurts when he thinks of him. He is scared of having to open Christmas crackers. D says she is sad all of the time. She said she feels no love at school.

18.12.05

We decorated the Christmas tree – I had to switch off again in order to cope. We put special homemade biscuits and baubles on for J. Tried to put his hat on top instead of a star, but it was too heavy.

Had to get up for both of the children again. ***How long can I possibly keep this up?*** I am aware that tonight I just switched off while they talked. I feel dreadful.

21.12.05

D seems depressed and broken, I am fearful for her. She keeps breaking down. She is 6 years and 2 months old.

22.12.05

My 'off' switch is weakening as Christmas draws nearer. D is barely able to keep her head above water, she speaks only of sadness. S is scared that Daddy is sad in heaven – D expressed the same fear a few days ago. S seems confused and is trying to comprehend what made J do it. We discussed what other action he could have taken.

1.1.06

Last night was hell. In between my own tears, S had me up 3 times. He is very restless and unable to sleep well. I am trying so hard to imagine things from the children's point of view.

3.1.06

Up every night for one or both of the children. I am sick of it and then feel guilty for thinking like that. D cries without realising in her sleep nearly every night. She says she thinks about him constantly. She is scared because she

forgets what his hugs feel like. At school she wants quiet time but is unable to get it. Words cannot describe how impotent I feel. S is getting more difficult to handle by the day. He says he wants to cry but can't and as a result he is getting angry and frustrated. He says he 'really, really hurts'. I cried in front of the children last night and this morning, I'm finding it harder to keep it together in front of them anymore.

7.5.06

S wanted to go to the grave. While D waited, I watched him scatter flower petals and seeds from dandelion clocks – it looked like fairy lights or stars all over. S asked me, 'Why don't we all die, go to Daddy and then be happy together. Why wait till we're old?'

I feel lost, lonely, hopeless, helpless, exhausted, empty and it's all endless, endless, endless...

8.5.06

Planted sunflowers with S after school. Out of the blue he says 'I hope I don't be like Daddy. I hope I don't feel so sad and think I'm a bad Daddy and make myself die'. I tell him he is too loved, happier and more confident than his Dad was as a child. I tell him Daddy is Daddy, S is S. But he just switches off.

5.6.06

S behaved oddly all day. He has been getting into trouble at school more often and his behaviour is generally unpredictable and erratic. He told me tonight that he is 'muddled, confused and tired'. He can't sleep and feels 'icky' all the time. He asked me, 'when does it all end?'

26.6.06

Only the children keep me here. ***Just.***

12.7.06

1 year on. I can't accept the person I have become, the pain I have, the different views and outlook I now have. I feel not only the loss of him, but the loss of all that I was. S hates J, the world, the universe. He says he wants to hurt himself to know what it felt like for his Dad. D sobs endlessly. She is very troubled at school, realising she has difficult feelings but that her friends aren't the right people to talk to. She is down, thoughtful, troubled.

To add to it all she worries about me and that I have no one to talk to. It feels as though we are in a bubble, living in a parallel universe compared to the rest of the world. Like a Picasso painting – all the components are there, but distorted, unreal/surreal. Sometimes interesting, sometimes ugly.

26.7.06

S now having unprovoked tantrums, getting into trouble at school, hyperactive and hits himself in the head. I am so scared for him. Called Winston's Wish for help. They gave me some ideas on how to deal with it and booked us on their 'suicide' camp. I wish you could hug someone on the phone. I felt calmer and more able to cope afterwards.

4.8.06

S says he 'can't wait to see Daddy again'. He says he feels scared a lot. He shouted and shouted and shouted tonight. He said, 'I'm just a scared 6-year-old who hasn't got a Daddy'.

8.8.06

S's anger/frustration spilling out every day. I called Winston's Wish yet again. A fabulous woman gave me the courage to ask him some difficult questions which I've been avoiding. He says he is confused because he loves and hates J. He says, 'There is nothing in my heart but worry. I feel one inch small and my worries are ten feet tall'.

24.9.06

S is cross with God for wanting to take J back. His legacy weighs so heavily on me.

It is a Thursday.

We are sitting in the middle of what seems to be one of the freshest, greenest, cleanest fields in England. Two magnificent horse chestnut trees tower above us, decorated to perfection with tapering tall candle blossoms. We sit near to but not under the trees; with the exception of a strong cool breeze the weather is exactly the same as it had been on That Day nearly two years past. The sun is high and primrose yellow, its portrait framed by the infinite Grecian blue sky. The grass is so long; thick as shagpile; that walking through it is like wading through water. The children

think we are close to running water and each time I have to remind them that it is the rush of the wind through the grass and the shaking of the leaves in the trees. A cuckoo is insistent all day in his song – monotonous and mundane yet curiously comforting. They both collect pheasant feathers and amass an ample supply of medicinal dock leaves in case of nettle stings. And as always, S has insisted we try to kick thistles like Daddy did. Odd what small things they both remember, but S, often mentioned his Dad's thistle kicking. Finding the biggest, thorniest specimens available, he would take a run up, put the boot in and cleanly send the poor unsuspecting plant flying across the field with impressive height and speed. None of us can do it.

And that is how it must stay.

Every time we kicked thistles S didn't want or expect us to succeed, he was praying we would continue to fail so that nobody would achieve the dizzy heights of Dad's thistle kicking.

No one kicks thistles like Dad.

Now there's a metaphor for you.

Our picnic eaten, we lay back luxuriously on the magnificent grass mattress.

"I believe Daddy will come back", S announces.

I am astounded. After all that has been said and done and worked through, this is the last thing I expect him to say. I find myself saying, "No, he's not love. Daddy's never coming back".

I half choke on the words, realising as I say them that I have never dared say it, like that, before. I haven't dared think it myself. I haven't dared believe it. Only a few weeks ago, I had been driving across to my parents when the thought fell into my head that when J came back, he wouldn't know we had moved house and subsequently he wouldn't know where we were, where to find us. I had panicked. As I turned the corner into my parents' road, relief washed over me; I concluded that as they still lived in

the same house he would be able to trace us through them. If I still had bizarre moments like this, was it any wonder the children did too? Children who still believed in myths and fairytales; Father Christmas, dragons, fairies.....

"Well I believe he will" S replied defiantly.

"No" I persevere gently, "Daddy is dead. Daddy as we knew him, how he looked, how he felt, how he smelled, how he sounded, is never coming back".

There, I said it.

But S persisted, "Well I believe he can. Jesus did".

There is such a long, long way for us all to go. We have taken a long and complex passage across an emotional jungle, and yet still it is clear that we have to continue kicking and fighting to get anywhere; fighting off demons and storms together, in a collective battle of improvisation, guts and sheer bloody mindedness.

We are learning, together, how to kick thistles.

Sunrise

Thank you to Nicola Hare for this poem.

The first birds make their morning call
The first rays of sunlight touch down upon all
Slowly the waters reach out to dry sand
The lapping tide caresses new land
I close my eyes to imagine you here
Sharing this moment, feeling you near

A rainbow of emotion fills me inside
Trapped in this prism the colours collide
Eyes still shut tightly I go back in time

When I had you there, with your hand in mine

Unbearably, my heart aches for you

Then I open my eyes. The sky has turned blue.

The sun warms my body like the love I used to know

And I breathe out deeply, letting you go

But not our love, our love so deep

Our memories, our laughter, those I keep

You would want me to find peace, that much I know

So I'll use our treasure to learn how to grow

You are part of me now, etched into my being

A rainbow appears, and I smile, I can feel you agreeing.

Loss is the price we pay for love. A therapist's personal journey

Thank you to Victoria Warwick-Jones for this article.

Over the past 2 and a half years, my partner and I have lost a parent each and 2 dogs. The pain we have experienced is like nothing we have seen before.

As we are both therapists, we thought that we should be able to handle these deaths but to be honest, we have struggled. Working with bereavement was off our agendas for a while as we couldn't ethically help others.

It all started with me saying goodbye to my little Shih-Tzu, Franklyn. Franklyn was a little diva, he had to be involved in everything and have things his own way. He would be on the sofa, on the bed, sat on the chair behind me whilst I worked with clients online. He wanted his presence known at all times. At 12-years-old, I knew I was lucky to still have him running up and down the stairs and sharing my toast with me at breakfast time. He was a feisty, little dog who wasn't shy around big dogs, in fact the bigger the more he wanted to be mates.

He had a heart murmur which was gradually getting worse but he was

full of life. Until the day he wasn't ok.

To cut a long, sad story short, following a trip to an emergency vet, Franklyn was taken back to our own veterinary surgery where my daughter and I said our final goodbyes. I had never felt pain like it. My little ball of fluff was not going to be there anymore.

One month later, my partner and I watched as his mother slipped away from us. Stage 4 cancer was the cause this time. Watching this strong vibrant lady disappear became the hardest thing I ever had to cope with. Val was beautiful, funny, sophisticated and warm. She was always fun to be around and was probably the most sociable person I had ever met. Losing her felt wrong.

My job now was to support my partner through his loss and funeral planning. There were so many things to do and neither of us had ever gone through this before. It was hard. Mark took time away from work to look after himself and to sort out his mother's affairs. This was a hard, lonely job for him but I was at his side the whole way.

If things couldn't get any worse, my father had also been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer and although we hoped for a few more years with him, he became very ill very quickly and was gone a week after going into hospital.

Now I really understood pain, what I had felt before was like a practice run for the real thing. I was upset losing Val and seeing Mark struggle but this was a whole new ball game.

The physical pain of losing my dad was unbearable. I was angry, sad, disbelieving, lost and felt like a small child who was desperately trying to find their father. I wanted my dad back; I wanted him to tell me everything was going to be ok. I wanted it all to be a dreadful nightmare.

But it was real. It was so real that I had to switch off for a while. I stopped work completely for 2 months. I spoke to people about grief, I read books but all I wanted was the chance at another conversation with my dad.

I supported my mother; they had been married almost 50 years. I shut off my feelings and tried to carry on in the form of some kind of unemotional robot in public but in private I was broken. I would lie in bed for hours in the hope that I would fall asleep and it would all have been a dream.

But crisis hit when I realised I was hiding my feelings from Mark. I had been through this with him and I didn't want him to feel as though he needed to look after me as he was grieving for his mum. It could have broken us as a couple but our dog, Coco kept us going.

Coco was a rescue Border Collie who was in all but title, a therapy dog. He was loving and knew exactly what people needed from him. He sat with me for hours on end and he helped me to open up to Mark about how I was feeling. Coco became my sidekick who would give me all the love I needed. I felt closer to Coco than I had felt to anyone for a long time and he enabled me to feel closer to Mark again, for us to talk about our parents and what we had been through.

We took Coco on holiday to Weymouth, he had a fabulous time in the sea, he was living his best life. We were able to laugh at him, throw balls for him and walk for miles. We cleared our heads, talked, cried and found each other again.

Life was starting to become manageable again, our new normal was not what we wanted but we were learning to navigate through the sadness. Coco allowed us to see that life did have some positives in it. He had been adopted by Mark in 2015 and after having been in and out of Dog's Trust, he had his forever home.

Coco was now 11 years old, still full of beans and running around like a bit of a nutter. Nobody believed his age, he looked and behaved like a puppy. He would ask for a walk at 6:30pm every evening. He would continuously bring you a ball to throw for him and he would explore the bottom of the garden each night where frogs jumped about, he loved life.

In December 2023, Coco started to struggle to walk properly and was diagnosed with arthritis, we had to cut his walks a little shorter and not let him run around as much. It felt wrong, he was such an active dog. But he was still happy, sitting with us in the evening, covering us with his

ever-shedding fur and longingly watching us eat sausages and bacon at weekends.

He was the best.

In March 2024, Coco went to the vets and didn't come home. He too had cancer, we were devastated. The vet couldn't guarantee treatment would work and as he was 11 years old we didn't want to watch him suffer as we had watched our parents. We said goodbye to him and came home to a very quiet house.

Coco had become the focus of our lives and our emotions from our losses, and now he too was gone. It all seemed so unfair. How can one couple go through so much loss in such a small space of time?

Then I remembered something I once heard, "the price we pay for love is loss".

We were feeling so much pain because we had loved so much. We had seen pain in our parents' eyes but when it came to Coco we were able to take that suffering away from him. We put him first, as he had done for us. His love was unconditional and so we made the sacrifice to let him go and be free from cancer.

Nothing ever prepares you for losing a loved one, no amount of training or client work can shield you from true devastation. In all of this I have learnt that loving and losing, whether they are people or pets, is always going to be painful. Those emotions are what makes us human and I never want to stop loving and feeling.

HOW BEREAVEMENT UNIQUELY MANIFESTS

An anonymous article.

I had always thought of death and dealing with all bereavements as being of an equal process we experience. By that I mean we lose someone through death, we grieve and we process at various stages, such as the

five stages suggested by Kübler-Ross & Kessler, and where we work towards acceptance. To some degree, that feels so.

However, having experienced so many personal losses throughout the years and working with many clients experiencing their own loss, I often challenge my own concept of bereavement and question what it really means to deal with death.

My first experience of loss was the sudden death of my father when I was aged nearly 10-years old and at the time it was deemed unsuitable for me to attend his funeral. The lack of not being part of something and unable to experience my own closure is something I still struggle with. I can remember feeling so invisible, just seeing adults talking about their feelings and me having to be aware of how they felt whilst unfairly feeling like a bystander of their grief.

This experience of not being included in processing a bereavement brought about a huge level of empathy when previously working as a Teaching Assistant.

Here began the start of a degree in Childhood Studies and further training to, amongst many areas, gain a better understanding of the bereavement process for children. The latter also came by way of a training programme called Drawing and Talking Therapy, a structured approach to exploratory drawing to encourage emotional expression. I ended up introducing this therapy of support into every school I worked in. I also trained as an Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) which covered many support approaches in working with the emotional needs of children.

Further deaths of my elderly family relatives which seemed acceptable to me were followed by another sudden death, my sister who suffered a fatal stroke, resulted in us as a family only having the shortest of time to travel and say goodbye to her. Here, I am reminded of our times of being in the midst of Covid where many people never got to say goodbye to those dying because of rules and restrictions.

With the death of my sister, I can honestly say it broke my heart to watch her die and it felt like it was the first time of dealing with deep grief, an

emotion I hadn't felt before. It was many years before I could talk about her without crying.

In 2018 I would be dealing with another family bereavement, a loss to suicide. At the time I had been working several years as a qualified Counsellor working with adults and had not long started an employed post, after years of being in voluntary work. Although this person we'd lost wasn't a client, I felt huge levels of guilt and shame that I had failed to spot their suicidal ideation and any planning because of what I did as my job.

With me being trained as a counsellor and having experience of working with mental health, how did I not see what was happening?

The truth of the situation was, we didn't know whether this person had even planned to take their life, there was no indication, no goodbye notes and the last call they made which was to me, offered 27 seconds to work out what was happening to them before they took their life. This loss presented another new experience to me and my family and I was diagnosed with complex grief. It was a death which became public, highlighted by a newspaper, on media and the police being involved in taking statements which brought further shame. All of this ended with a public inquest to determine it was entirely the actions of someone taking their own life. The ripple of shock and sadness went out over so many people, the grief felt black and intense.

I would like to add here, without the support of my fellow work counsellors and a very dedicated Clinical Supervisor, I think I would have considered ending my counselling career at this point because of not feeling good enough.

What became evident is the unique differences of how I felt with bereavement through suicide and my other losses. As a result, it made me re-evaluate my therapy work, particularly with survivors of loss to suicide and/or more complex grief.

The differences of bereavement are something I observe often with clients, questioning themselves in their own expectation levels or allowance of grief. Experience and therapy work also tells me there can be a pecking

order in bereavement, as to who is entitled to the most grief and how they were related to those who have died. I have seen the process of dealing with bereavement blocked or stuck for some because of this. Some clients can feel their right to express emotion is taken away and they can only hold theirs in, so others may grieve more.

My therapy work encourages clients to look at their own unique connections with their loss, exploring what bereavement means to them, bringing the person who has died into the room, through ways such as pictures, drawings, photos, written words, or previous messages/videos on phones.

As a result I have found clients feel better supported to understand and process so many emotions including laughter as well as sadness, as I learn about the characters of those who have died.

I could go on to write of the many different bereavements our clients and us may have dealt or will deal with, that of bereavement of loss in pregnancy, loss where you have no rights to the person who has died. Here my thoughts go to a recent programme hosted by Tom Allen - 'Big Gay Wedding' with Sandi Toksvig speaking of a male friend who had lost a partner and was denied any rights in their grief. Other experiences include bereavement after being a carer, bereavement through murder, processing the death of an abuser, already bereaving for those with a terminal illness, death of pets and so many more to say.

Challenging my thinking for the therapy work I do in how I approach bereavement, has seen outcomes being much more productive for clients in discovering their own way of processing grief and loss. For each client that walks through the door into the therapy room, it's exploring how bereavement uniquely manifests.

References:

Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2014) 'On Grief and Grieving'

Drawing and Talking Therapy, (2024)

ELSA Network About ELSA

BBC one (2024) 'Big Gay Wedding with Tom Allen'

Sailing a shipwreck

Thank you to Denise Brent for this poem.

The sky was blue, in vibrant sheer,

as we sailed with joy towards the end of that year.

Then suddenly, with treacherous disregard,

an unforeseen tidal wave struck us so hard.

The shoreline ahead disappeared from our view,

the wonderous blue sky had no way to break through.

No time to brace, or to seek a reprieve, just F R O Z E N

... until eventually remembering to breathe.

Bruised and battered, stumbling through ruins and harsh terrain,

would we ever encounter something safe and solid again?

The pain so raw, like the rough, choppy seas.

No lifeboat to save us from having to grieve.

The waves are still crashing whilst reality seeps through;

the impact; brutally unforgiving. And much that we knew

is now forever changed.

Our lives have been fractured, some parts are displaced,
the pieces are broken, hopes for the future gone, without trace.

'This pain will ease, I promise', she said,

but how can that be? This isn't just a shipwreck, he's dead!

Through each tiny moment, with tears falling like rain,
we are accompanied by nature's hand, in the evolution of pain.

In moments, then days, in months, and now years,
the waters slowly settle with the drying of our tears.

Blue skies are emerging in our new life's preview.

The healing begins,

but we will always miss you.

In dreams I hear

Thank you to Lee Buttitta for this poem.

A poem I wrote about a recurring dream I had for years as a boy after the death of my grandad. I hadn't worked out that it was actually about his death until many years later whilst in training to be a psychotherapist.

War's scars etched deep, a soul adrift.
Nightmare's grip, a falling star's descent.
Darkness swallows, fear's icy touch,

Then fur and warmth, a steady heartbeat.

A bear's embrace, a comforting presence,
Years dreamt this dream, a silent yearning.
Relationship's intimacy pierces the storm's hold,
Grandad's eye, his voice, recognition burns.

Love's constant echo, battles finally won,
The soldier's fear, at last undone.
But fear, a shapeshifter, twists its form.
No longer absence, a gnawing unknown.
The weight of fatherhood an unending storm.

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