

Learning to Live in a World Without a Loved One



How can we cope with loss and navigate the grieving process?

BY **LUCY HONE** | JUNE 2, 2021

Coping with the loss of a loved one is hard at the best of times. At the worst of times, as COVID-19 continues to ravage the planet, it can be even harder to bear. Not only has the virus caused the unexpected, sudden deaths of so many, but the circumstances accompanying those deaths—and the limitations the pandemic placed on mourners—have made the grieving process that much harder to navigate.



In my capacity as co-director of the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing & Resilience, I've been working with companies around the world to support the resilience of their teams throughout the pandemic. The multitude of grief stories has been harrowing. Only this week I spoke to a client whose work colleague had lost four members of his family to the virus. I've also spent time supporting a family whose husband/father was dying in a care home, after COVID restrictions had prevented them from seeing and touching him for over a year. Every training webinar we run, every breakout room I sit in, tales of sadness, isolation, and loss dominate.

This is loss on such an unprecedented scale, something few of us have experienced in our lifetimes, that it's easy to feel helpless, as though there's nothing we can do to support ourselves or those we care about who are grieving. But research suggests there are ways to better navigate the multifaceted and very personal journey of grief. Based on

my own grief experience and our institute's work supporting the bereaved, here are some simple strategies freely available to us all that can be powerful antidotes to grief.^[1]_[SEP]

Understand what you're going through

The first step is to update your understanding of grief, and bust some long-held and unhelpful myths. For instance, there's little evidence suggesting we always go through the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance—made famous by the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler. Despite how well-known this framework is, bereavement researchers agree that the five stages model needs to be retired. They argue that it's too simplistic and does more harm than good, by making grieving people think these stages are common and then judge their own experience if it doesn't fit.

Grief is as individual as your fingerprint; it looks different for different people. Just as every life is unique, so is every death and every person's journey to assimilate that loss into a world where their loved one is no longer present.

It's also useful to know that when someone dies suddenly, and the death was traumatic, those left behind are left to cope with two separate challenges: the pain of grief, and the symptoms of trauma. When I lost my own 12-year-old daughter in tragic circumstances, I found it really helpful to understand grief and trauma as two separate things that should be approached differently.

“Treatment that focuses on only one of these elements is unlikely to be effective,” explain Laurie Anne Pearlman and her colleagues in their fantastic book, *Treating Traumatic Bereavement: A Practitioner's Guide*. While I didn't require clinical treatment, understanding that I was coping with the after-effects of trauma as well as grief helped explain my intrusive thoughts, my problems concentrating, my acute sense of vulnerability, the way I started at loud, unexpected noises, and the feeling of constantly being on high alert. While these all eased over time, they were very different from the longing and emotional upheaval that came with the grief.

If you or someone you care about have experienced traumatic bereavement and you're not coping six months to a year after the death, that's a sign you may benefit from some professional support from a therapist who treats these two issues separately.

Talk about it

The next step is to talk about what happened: If you feel like it, and only when you're ready, tell your story. When you are free to talk and feel safe in the company of trusted people, without judgment or interruption, the process of integrating the loss into your own ongoing life story is able to begin. Step by step, each time the story is retold, the story becomes a little less familiar and raw.

This is because “a central process in grieving is the attempt to reaffirm or reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss,” explains Bob Neimeyer, the leading researcher on the role of meaning-making in bereavement. Neimeyer's work has demonstrated the importance of meaning-making through talking for adapting to the loss of a loved one over time. Talking through what has happened, going over the “event story” and the “backstory”—sharing details of the event and how much this person meant to you with a trusted friend—is an instrumental part of meaning-making.



Active Listening

Connect with a partner through empathy and understanding

If someone in your life is grieving, it may feel daunting to begin the conversation. But the bereaved are usually desperate to talk. While it's often tempting to join in, share your own personal experiences, or try to soothe their grief, it's actually more useful to just listen and allow them to talk. Don't make them talk if they're not ready, but keep

the offer there knowing that active, non-judgmental listening is one of the greatest gifts you can give to the bereaved. Best of all, it can be done over the phone or on a virtual call, making it possible whatever COVID restrictions you are living under.

Build a legacy

Not long after my daughter died, a colleague sent me a copy of Joseph Kasper's capstone project. A master's student in positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, Kasper introduced me to the potential of legacy building as a way of coping with grief. The experience of losing his own son, Ryan, had given Joe the idea that he could keep Ryan present by exploring and perpetuating his son's legacy.

This is something that we can all do when we lose someone we love. Take some time to intentionally reflect upon their legacy by asking yourself these questions:

- What did your loved one teach you?
- How has knowing them changed you?
- How has your thinking or acting changed for the better for knowing them?
- What impact have they had on your life?
- How do you behave differently now because of their life and also because of their death?
- How can you commemorate that? What can you do to keep that legacy alive?

Legacy building is another way to help us make sense of our loss, aligning with a large body of research demonstrating how meaning-making is a central mechanism at the heart of the grief process. For me, so much of the life I live today would never have happened if my daughter Abi had lived. The way I prioritize family and friends over work, the way I sometimes pause at social occasions and deliberately soak up all those faces I love that are still moving and very much alive, the way I value the little things, even the change in the direction of my work (writing *Resilient Grieving*, creating courses on coping with loss, and my TED talk)—these all help me to feel that our daughter's short life counted for something, that even in death little Abi Hone is still having an impact on the world.

Create regular rituals

Another way to keep those we have lost present in our lives is by engaging in rituals. In fact, research shows that people who create rituals tend to feel a greater sense of control and experience less grief after loss.

While most people can name the public rituals commonly associated with death—a wake or funeral, notices in the paper, a period of sitting shiva—there's also much comfort and relief to be had from honoring the dead in less formal ways that are individually personal to us. This is true at any time, but particularly important and powerful when COVID has robbed us of all those traditional forms of mourning.

For example, when my mother died quickly from liver cancer back in 2000, I drew comfort from playing her favorite songs, baking her favorite almond cake, wearing her rings, making an effort to put a skirt on for some event when I knew she'd expect it, and walking tracks we'd trodden together many times before. Doing these things brought her presence into my daily life, not in overly reflective ways that made me sad but in active ways that kept her memory alive.

In the workshops we run at the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing & Resilience, I've come across just about every kind of ritual to commemorate the dead that I could imagine...and quite a few that I couldn't! I've heard people arrange flowers in inherited vases, wear special socks on birthdays or coats in the cold, go carol singing, attend concerts, learn to play an instrument, cook all kinds of recipes, use certain tablecloths and crockery, gift favorite books, get haircuts at the barber they used to go to, wear jewelry, snuggle in armchairs and blankets, or wear their hair a certain way.

There are so many opportunities to maintain connections with those we have lost in everyday, simple ways that are deeply personal to us. People have told me that what they love most about rituals is that they can be secret practices that are only obvious and meaningful to them, thereby providing some form of inner protection and comfort that we don't have to outwardly share.

Perhaps that's what is common to all of these actions: their accessibility and personal nature. Whether it's talking about those we lost to trusted friends, contemplating their legacy, or practicing informal rituals, these things are universally accessible. No matter where we live, what mourning or social distancing restrictions are placed upon us, we are all still free to establish ongoing connections with those we have loved so much, even when they are no longer here.

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