

How to deal with grief

In our column and podcast series, Professor Sarah Niblock, CEO of the UKCP, explores real-life challenges that affect us all and how psychotherapy can help. This month, she looks at how to process loss



There's a great opening scene in Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver*, in which we see row upon row of women in aprons and headscarves furiously polishing the headstones on their dead husbands' graves. Even after death, work and life go on, it seems to tell us.

All of us will experience loss at some point in our lives. Grief is a perfectly natural reaction to any form of loss, whether bereavement itself or some other kind of ending: relationship breakdown, empty-nest syndrome or redundancy. Often, we don't recognise that these changes invoke a psychological response akin to grief.

Bereavement and grief prompt a range of feelings, from deep sadness to anger, while the process of adapting to a significant loss will vary dramatically from one person to the next, depending on our backgrounds, cultures and our relationship to what we have lost.

Grieving is unique to an individual

Our emotions in the wake of loss can shock and confuse us. We may experience guilt in some circumstances, such as feeling relief that a lost loved one is no longer suffering. Or we might find ourselves feeling ashamed of our utter despair at the death of a pet.

Various models of the stages of grief predominate, but psychotherapists at UKCP say that measuring ourselves against them can make us feel worse and that something is wrong with us. It is perfectly normal to have good days and bad days. No one way of grieving is better than any other. Some people are more emotional and launch

headlong into pouring out their feelings. Others may seem very composed, preferring to distract themselves from dwelling on an unchangeable fact of living. Every individual has unique needs when coping with loss, but we must check in with ourselves to make sure we aren't delaying healing or doing ourselves more harm. If we already had any predisposing issues, such as depression or anxiety, grief can make those feelings more profound.

Grief expert Julia Samuel, author of *Grief Works* (Penguin, £9.99) and a UKCP psychotherapist, says it is important that we try not to let grief dominate our every waking thought as it can stifle us and delay the healing process. Ideally, we should acknowledge our sense of loss, accept that our minds are on a trajectory of recovery and try to compartmentalise our negative feelings. That is much easier said than done, though, especially if the pain is overwhelming in the wake of sudden loss.

It may help to allot certain times to really focusing on and processing these emotions. Making a regular appointment with a highly qualified psychotherapist can be an effective way to 'schedule' our grief processing which, says Samuel, can expedite our healing.

A psychotherapist can help us confront all aspects of our loss and its implications for us, currently and in the future. That way, it is more likely that we can embark on the journey of adjustment and reorientation. Samuel

also advocates making some time every day for gentle physical activity. Grief can feel physical in its intensity, and the natural reaction is to close down our bodies and retreat under the duvet. That can make us physically ill and slows down our emotional recovery. Samuel advocates daily exercise, especially out in nature, such as a stroll in the park.

Avoiding the 'what ifs'

Thinking back to that film, it reminds me of my own family background with distant Spanish ancestry. My relatives even made plans for their own deaths while relatively young, to the extent of buying burial plots for themselves in their 30s! I even remember my mother taking me to visit the cemetery where she wanted to be laid to rest while I was a small child. It may sound terribly morbid and weird, but Samuel says preparing for our inevitable demise while we're healthy is actually a pragmatic move which can be comforting. You certainly don't have to go to the extremes my family did, but a little forethought can prevent some of the 'what ifs' and regrets we feel so acutely in the wake of loss.

PHOTOGRAPH: PAL HANSEN. HAIR AND MAKEUP: CARL STANLEY

ASK THE EXPERT...

Bestselling author and UKCP-registered psychotherapist, Julia Samuel, speaks about coping with loss and how we can support and nurture those close to us who are grieving



Q How do we know we are experiencing grief, if perhaps it is an atypical situation, such as redundancy or a break-up?

Grief is often heralded by a physical and a psychological feeling of discomfort: we feel discombobulated or cannot settle or concentrate. We often ruminate about what has happened; question it; look to see what we or someone else could have done differently. It is often a resistance to accept the reality of the new situation.

journalling or creating a memory book are also beneficial. We heal by remembering the person, not forgetting them. Taking physical exercise will help us manage the pain in our bodies.

Q What's the most important way we can support ourselves when we are grieving?

The love and connection of others when we are grieving the loss of a person we love helps us bear the pain. Expressing our grief by

Q How can we best support someone who is grieving?

It is key to recognise and acknowledge their loss. Listen, don't try to fix them and let them tell you what they need. Being a friend means showing up. Be there for the long haul, encourage them to express their pain, but also suggest ways they can have a break, like going for a walk or doing something they enjoy. Let them go at their own pace; we often want to hasten someone's grieving process, but it has a natural pace of its own.

griefworks.co.uk



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How to deal with grief

Listen to Sarah Niblock talk to Julia Samuel about how to deal with grief at psychologies.co.uk/how-can-i-move-grief-podcast-ukcp

About the UKCP and how to find a therapist

• **The UKCP** Alongside professional support for our members, we are the leading research, innovation, educational and regulatory body working to advance psychotherapies for the benefit of all. Our membership includes more than 8,000 therapists and 70 training and accrediting organisations. Members work privately, in public health or third-sector organisations, offering a range of approaches for couples, individuals, families and groups.

• **To find the right therapist**, log on to psychologies.co.uk/find-a-therapist and look at our Life Labs Channel of experts who may be able to help, or visit psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist to locate a therapist near you.

