

Easing grief

by Amber Lloyd



C.P.J. Field.

More than a funeral director since 1690.



A number of years ago I was given a copy of this excellent guide to coping with grief, written by Amber Lloyd. Since then, I have taken great comfort from the advice contained within and have often shared a copy with friends and family as they come to terms with bereavement.

I hope that you may find comfort in the words that follow, and that like me, you will be able to come to terms with your loss.

Colin Field
Chairman

Grief is caused by an overwhelming loss

**This can be of a spouse, child, parent, friend, pet, animal,
piece of one's own body, marriage, home or job.**

Although all grief seems as though it must be the worst whilst it is occurring, probably the death of a dearly loved, longstanding husband or wife, or of one's own child, is the most devastating.

Leaflets written in the first person are usually irritating to read, but I see no way to write this except by relating it directly to myself. Every person is different, and their reactions and needs differ, but I say what helped me at the worst moment in my life, it will make a starting point for thinking about how to help oneself and how to help others.

My darling husband died suddenly and unexpectedly, beside me in bed. He was 58. In the seven months since then I have discovered many things, including how unfeeling and lacking in understanding I had previously been.

One cannot imagine it unless one has experienced it.

The bereaved person has truly lost a part of themselves – “my better half” – and one feels a half person, almost as though one had been cut down the middle. This lasts for a long time, only very gradually easing as the days and weeks pass.

My first reaction was to die too, until I started telephoning our children, when their grief made me realise I could not deliberately inflict it on them in a double portion, but for months I woke every morning hoping it was my turn. I envy people who have the religious conviction of a future life together; I have not but, with his Will, he left a note saying: “We'll meet again somewhere sometime,” so I cling to the hope that we might eventually be joined in some sort of togetherness.

From the minute of his death I realised that how I behaved reflected directly upon him and trying to make an effort seemed to bring a little strength.

I had not known, but sudden death can theoretically be murder so I was not allowed to be alone with his body. The ambulance men waited with me for the police, who waited for the undertakers. The police had to take a statement and have a formal identification. It was a bitterly cold February night and they were all so kind and gentle.

I made tea and we sat in the kitchen and talked. They offered to ring my family but I felt it was something I wanted to do myself, because he was mine and everything connected with him was mine. (I had monitored his non-existent pulse while the ambulance men tried to revive him and I had closed his eyes; those were my privileges.)

As our heartbroken children and grandchildren arrived, I became aware that I was now the head of the family. They comforted me and supported me, I, in turn, had to comfort and support them. Whereas Desmond had always been the source of advice and wise counsel, it now had to be me.

We had discussed funerals and both wanted the cheapest possible, with no money wasted which the living might need. We wanted only the very close family and a simple short service (so as not to upset anyone who had religious beliefs). In the event, the crematorium was packed to overflowing with his friends, who came through the snow knowing they were not coming back to any reception afterwards. This massive, warm, entirely spontaneous gesture was immensely moving and comforting. Because he was a happy person we wanted to keep all his memories happy, so we wore no mourning clothes and tried to make a few jokes to ease the tension.

Everyone must do as he or she can at this shattering time; I knew I had to drive the family car there and back myself and not be driven. Possibly I appeared hard-hearted or uncaring but you can only do as you must – the strain is so great. Throughout it all, our family did him proud and he would have been very pleased if he could have seen it. They did it with dignity, and dignity is what makes the utterly unbearable just bearable, for those closely and less closely concerned. The Vicar asked if I wished him to say anything in particular; I told him the only comfort I had found were the words: “He shall not grow old as we that are left grow old. Age shall not weary him nor the years condemn,” and he brought them into his short address.

For the lunch afterwards we fetched all our grandchildren. Those old enough to understand, knew where we had been and they knew this was Grandfather's party.

We made (and still do) a point of talking about him a lot and referring to things as his – his side of the bed, his chair, his greenhouse – so everything is in the open and neither taboo subjects nor hidden fears are encouraged. Death is a fact of life, for little children as well as adults, and they need to be helped to face it as it arises.

One of the most shattering moments for me was the arrival of his ashes. They are often sent by post but the undertaker offered to deliver them when passing. The door bell rang and I was handed a parcel, wrapped in second-hand brown paper and string. Inside was a plastic container, rather like an economy size detergent, with Desmond's name on the side.

This was my husband! Somehow, it seemed so ghastly that I could not tell anyone. He wanted his ashes scattered under a tree in the garden and, in a snow storm, I slipped out and did it alone. It seemed too heartbreaking an ordeal to inflict on even grown-up children.

Other things had to be done, like registering his death. I went to the registrar myself because I wanted to, because I felt I was doing a last thing for him, but another member of the family could have done it. It is here that one really comes hard up against those ugly words – widow and deceased. Desmond ceased being my husband and became 'the Deceased'; I stopped being his wife and became 'the Widow'. This seems cruel and harsh so early but I suppose it is unavoidable.

Desmond had appointed me his sole executrix; I resented the thought of the work involved at first but he knew me better than I did and the challenge and effort pulled me back into the world.

All insurances, credit cards and AA membership had to be altered. Desmond had a business means of joining BUPA, which I had not, so that had to be completely re-negotiated. All his club subscriptions had to be cancelled, as had a holiday we had booked. The telephone I have kept in his name to discourage anonymous callers.

As we had no flowers at the funeral, friends asked if they could contribute to a memorial, so we suggested either The Relaxation for Living Trust (which was founded when he had his first heart attack) or a rebuilding project at his beloved cricket club. Both have benefited and his memory will live on.

I am gratefully aware that I am very lucky: Desmond did not suffer and we had over 36 wonderful years together. Furthermore, I have a large close family who have been unstinting in their love and support, I have no immediate financial need to leave my home of 32 years and I have my work for Relaxation for Living. People remark that I have come through it well but these are the reasons why, I can understand how frighteningly easy it would be, at this time, to go completely to pieces. Our family gave me a reason for going on; immersing myself in work made it possible. Whilst concentrating on teaching, the agonising emotions were temporarily anaesthetised, a short respite from the strain of grief was possible and the slow healing began.

The main physical effect on me has been amnesia; I suffered, and still do, great gaps in my memory, I lost half a stone in weight.

I had tried to help so many people with depression in my classes that I was terrified lest I succumbed; luckily I did not. The very first night alone in our bed I had a moment of sheer panic, when I thought, "I cannot manage everything myself," so I practised what I had preached for years, told myself firmly that tomorrow was the time for solving that problem, not now, and that of course sleep would come, never doubt it for a moment. Then I relaxed completely and sleep came. Subsequently I worked so hard that I was exhausted and fell asleep as soon as I touched the pillow. The greatest single cause of insomnia is the fear that it might occur; refuse to admit that the possibility exists and the chances are that it will not get a foothold.

In the depth of grief I comforted myself with one thought: "The worst thing in the world has happened; nothing can ever hurt me again." Five months later I was proved wrong, when a grandson was born prematurely and died. My heart broke all over afresh, showing me that in so short a time, and without being aware of it, the capacity to feel strong emotion had returned.

I felt I needed to go quickly to three places of special sentimental meaning to us, because the sooner I faced the pain involved the better or I might never pluck up the courage. It was torture and yet strangely soothing. Now I feel I will be able to go again and they will only be full of happy memories. In a few days I am venturing off to a place we always planned to visit together. I intend to be especially observant because I am seeing it for him as well as myself.

I think it is sometimes not understood, either by a widow or the people around her, why she feels such intense shock and disorientation as well as grief. It is probably worth thinking about the following points.

Death of a spouse brings a loss of identity to the survivor. Without realising it, you constantly measure yourself against your partner; you see yourself as part of a whole. Afterwards you have no framework in which to set yourself. In addition there is the loss of role. From playing full-time, glamorous, starring parts of wife, lover, companion and friend, you can suddenly find yourself demoted to a part-time, drab, supporting role of granny. It takes some time to rebuild your self-image and see yourself in a new and worthwhile role.

On the top of that, you may have been proud to be addressed in the correct way as Mrs Your Husband's name, which is what you still are; yet many people suddenly give you an additional knock by starting to write to you as Mrs Your Own Name, as though you had been divorced. They do not mean to hurt, but they do. It is a sad fact but widows have advantage taken of them. Husband's business contacts tend to think debts can be ignored; neighbours, who have appeared content for years, suddenly complain of bonfires and boundary trees.

It is sometimes said that a widow or widower allows her or himself to go to pieces when the other dies; I think it is understandable.

Not only have we lost the dearest person in the world, our whole shared, planned future has gone too.

A marriage is a partnership; both partners have their own regular jobs, even if it is only something as trivial as he winds one clock, she another; the entire lifestyle is geared to two people; suddenly there is only one person to do everything. Financially, if there had been two incomes, there is now only one; if his had been the sole income, there is just a Widow's Pension. In every case there is a drop in money coming in, a lowering of the standard of living. This is unpleasant at any time; coupled with grief it can be shattering.

How does relaxation fit into this? Well, had I not put into practice every trick I knew, I feel things would have been an awful lot harder. From that first shocking moment I have consciously and deliberately released tension every time it has become apparent. By so doing I have lowered my level of 'arousal' and stopped the build up of anxiety. By being more relaxed I have become less exhausted than I might otherwise have done; I have saved energy. I have remained calm, maintained my regular sleep pattern and avoided the dreaded depression. Whenever I have felt I needed it, I have practised Deep Relaxation to restore my body and calm my mind.

Above all, I had previously learnt to ACCEPT and not to try to fight the inevitable – one of life's greatest lessons. Without this knowledge and these skills I dread to think of the state I might have been in.



Dos and don'ts to ease your grief

Do face up to and accept reality. This is the hardest piece of advice to receive but it is being cruel to be kind. It has happened; no wishful thinking can alter the fact. Your darling, dear, half-of-yourself has DIED. Try to make yourself use the word; at least it is dignified. "I've lost my husband" sounds as insulting and unimportant as if he were a key you had dropped out of your purse.

Do what you want, what you need. You are the important person at this moment. Do not let anyone, however well-intended, bully you. Only you can tell how strong or how weak you are. If you are very weak it does not matter; you have a right to be so.

Do talk about him. This makes it much easier for other people to talk to you. There is nothing wrong with a joke about him and it stops others feeling stiff and inhibited in your company.

Do not pay one penny more for the funeral than you need unless you want to. It does not show any lack of love or respect on your part. Some people believe that deep mourning and extravagant flowers are necessary to honour the one who has died. If you agree with this, then it is right for you to request them. If you do not, do not allow anyone to tell you that you must spend money on them. Expensive wreaths quickly wilt, are swept up and burnt; bunches of flowers are more worthwhile as they can be taken home with you.

If it is a small child who has died, the coffin can be carried in the family car and professional pall-bearers dispensed with. This seems more tender and loving. If a baby is still-born some denominations will not hold a funeral service; if the parents want one they will need to ask the help of a different denomination. I think and hope that this will soon be changed. (Please, give the baby a name and take a photograph of him. You will be glad of this in time to come.)

Don't allow the funeral to be rushed, unless you wish it. To me there is something terrible in, "Less than a week ago we were so happy and already he is buried." Take all the time you want.

Do continue living in your own home, if you possibly can and you want to, for at least a year. It may take even longer than that for you to know what you want to do or where you want to go. Don't be hurried; try to coast along and let things happen and sort themselves. Time softens and heals; things work out; you grow stronger.

Do make changes around the house, when you want to. This is no disrespect to his memory.

Don't blame yourself if you find yourself dwelling on his bad points. You are not being disloyal; it is a self-defence mechanism of your broken heart. Equally you may find yourself feeling angry that you have been deserted. You are not evil to think this; it is another very common emotional defence reaction.

Do throw yourself straight into work, if you feel able, preferably helping other people. This rests your mind.

Do remember that beauty (music, art, flowers, sun landscape, etc) can heal, even if it brings a stab when you realise he is not able to share it. Be brave and try it.

Do take your time over sorting his belongings. Attempt it when you feel strong enough, in a few months, but don't go on putting it off forever in case they turn into 'holy relics'.

Do remember there is a time to cry and a time to stop crying. My daughter asked our five year old grand-daughter if she would like her to read Desmond's obituary. "Not if it going to make you cry again, Mummy," was the answer. Other people have a right to be happy even when our hearts are breaking.

Do remember that your strength, your bravery, reflect the beauty and strength of your love and your life together.



Dos and don'ts to ease the grief of others

Don't hold back; be spontaneous. A sign that you care is an enormous comfort. Even if you fumble and stumble for words, the effort shows through.

Do go straight to the home of the bereaved person if you can. You may or may not be asked in but your gesture will be greatly appreciated. Do not be shy about doing this.

Do take a few flowers if possible; leaves or grasses from the garden or hedgerow will do. Their beauty helps to heal.

Do be brave enough to face tears. The bereaved person is suffering agonies of irreparable loss. The least you can do is suffer a few tears. Don't be ashamed if you cry too; it will only show your sympathy.

Do if you can, touch the bereaved person. This is a very basic, primitive gesture of sympathy and it helps. It can be anything from a warm hug to a hand clasp or a brief squeeze of the elbow. Do what is seemly and what is natural to you. A friend of mine telephoned the day after Desmond died; when I told her what had happened she said, "Oh ducky! Imagine my arms are round you." I found it extraordinarily comforting.

Do say something but do not try to make fancy speeches; they don't help at all. It is far better to say, "There is nothing I can say," or, "Words are so useless," and really mean it.

Do telephone if you are unable to visit. This gives the bereaved the chance to talk if she wants to – and she often does. In fact, lending an ear is one of the greatest kindnesses you can offer; be willing to listen patiently.

Do write if you cannot telephone but say that you will not expect an answer. Don't be long-winded and pretentious; a bereaved person feels exhausted and has not the energy to wade through long screeds. Short and spontaneous is what is appreciated.

Don't belittle anyone's grief. Give it the compliment of acknowledging its enormity. One colleague wrote to me several weeks after Desmond's death – a long business letter tucked right in the middle were two sentences: "I'm sorry to hear about your loss. It will make a difference to your life." It was like a slap in the face.

Don't make promises you do not intend to keep. One neighbour expansively said, "If there is anything at all my wife or I would do, you only have to ask." I nervously replied that the garden badly needed some weeding and was scathingly told, "I didn't mean that!"

Do realise that suddenly having to cater for only one person, and at a time when she is shocked, is very difficult. One of the greatest kindnesses you can offer is to invite her in to share your meal with you. Let her realise it is to be quite private and informal and she slip away as soon as she wishes.

Do offer to bring in anything needed when you are doing your own shopping. Someone newly bereaved feels tired out and drained and quite unable to face up to standing in queues.

Don't neglect her later on. Many people wrote to me and said "Do come round for coffee"; "We must renew our old friendship"; "We will phone and invite you for a drink." They have not done so. It is not easy to force oneself back into social life and one badly needs help. I realise that I am now that awkward party creature 'the uneven number' and, I am told, some wives see widows as a threat.

Do be tactful. I was asked if I had "tried that smart new restaurant yet": bereaved people do not take themselves out, certainly not lone women. Try not to boast about your own clever, generous husband, or the exciting holiday you are taking.

Don't be frightened of coming face to face with a newly bereaved person and, if you do so unexpectedly, make eye contact. One of the most hurtful experiences I had was meeting three acquaintances as I was entering a door through which they were leaving. The panic in their faces and their avoiding eyes as they pretended not to see me and tried to escape, cut me to the quick.

Don't leave the bereaved person in the awkward position of wondering whether you have heard the news or not. Some people seem so frightened of the subject that they will talk, non-stop, of trivialities, till she finally realises they must know because otherwise they would have asked how he was before this. This leaves her feeling she cannot mention him either and a barrier comes between you. Much better a mumbled, "We were so sorry to hear..."

Don't be trite. I dragged myself to a conference ten days after Desmond's death and kept bumping into a doctor I knew. Each time we met he said: "Are you all right?" I felt like shouting, "No I'm not! I can never be all right again because I've lost something irreplaceable." Even worse was another friend, who kept saying to me: "Never mind!" Much, much more supportive was a friend who made a point of keeping an eye on me, casually placing herself between me and people I was not up to talking to. From time to time she would catch my eye and whisper, "You're doing fine."

Do above all, remember that someone who has been bereaved is still a human being, with all the needs of friendship, company, outside interests and cheerful amusement that any other human has. She (or he) needs your help in building a new life, even if all you can give is a telephone call every few weeks to enquire how she is getting on. Your thoughtfulness will be appreciated and remembered with gratitude.

Do realise that someone newly bereaved is acutely hyper-sensitive. Slight differences in words make great differences in sense; for instance, never say, "You are lucky to have a large, close family." At that moment, she is the most unlucky person in the world and it is very hurtful to imply otherwise. Instead, say, "I am glad you have a large, close family." This conveys you are concerned about her and it comforts her.

Dos and don'ts to help those who will one day grieve for you

Do remember that the odds are against couples, however lucky and however devoted, dying together. Statistically, wives are likely to become widows, as they survive their husbands by a ratio of four to one. These facts will not go away however hard we try to ignore them.

Do talk about dying. It is not more, nor less, likely to happen if you do so. Find out what your spouse would like to be done, what would help him, in his grief if you died. Sound out your family. There is nothing disrespectful in making macabre jokes about this and DIY funerals are now possible.

Don't be an excessive hoarder. We all collect things as we go through life but try not to stock-pile inessentials. It can take years to sort everything and extract the items of possible family historical significance.

Do make a Will and keep it up-to-date. Disagreements can break up a family so make your wishes crystal clear; they may say, "Silly old Mum" but at least they cannot accuse or blame each other. Give instructions for your funeral or else name who is to decide the arrangements. You do not have to have a religious service but it often seems to fill a need of those left behind, a chance to show respect and to say goodbye. If you wish your ashes scattered somewhere special, specify over a very wide area. They are surprisingly large and obvious.

Do try to share knowledge and information with each other. I first realised my ignorance when I went to the cupboard to get a bottle of wine for the funeral party; I had no idea which was for drinking now and which was laid down for future use. I have had to learn, amongst many other things, to work the motor mower and to cope with income tax; if Desmond had survived me, he would have had to learn to use the washing machine and how to manage the temperamental complications of the boiler and heating systems. When one is at one's lowest ebb it is very difficult to grasp new technicalities. One need not be an expert at each other's specialities but a rough working knowledge is a great help.

Do make certain that the partner who survives you will have access to funds. This seems obvious but is easy to overlook. Day-to-day living expenses continue.

Do be sure both of you know where the medical cards, national insurance cards, birth and marriage certificates, pass books and all life insurance and pension policies. These have to be produced soon after a death.

Do take photos of each other. When you live together you often do not think of it. I have no recent photograph of Desmond clear enough to enlarge and I bitterly regret it.

Do live your life fully. If you want to do things and you can, then do them. Don't postpone them or you may never have the chance. Happy memories live on and bring comfort to those you leave behind. Please, enjoy your life with those you love, for their sake.

This is a ragged and unbalanced leaflet but this is because I still am too! Perhaps, in a year or so, I will re-write it. At present my emotions are raw and my concentration is not all it should be. Please, accept that it is written from a sincere desire to help other people and ease – just a little – their pain.



Sixteen months have passed, to my amazement I have survived

Contrary to the terrors of that first night, nothing has been wholly insurmountable. I still miss him deeply but the physical pain has gone. I realise I have changed; I am more decisive and independent.

Recently I had a thought, as clear as though Desmond spoke it: "Your earthly senses are of no more use to me and it's a sin against nature not to use them." It made me begin to see how it could be possible to love again, as when having a second baby one loves the first no less and 'belongs' to both. Love, realise, is limitless and forever welling up inside us.

Four and a half years have elapsed.

Desmond is alive in my heart.

Life is good and well worth living.

"Dedicated to the memory of Desmond, without whom there would be no Relaxation for Living Trust, and baby David, who taught his grandmother so much in such a short time."

Mrs Amber Lloyd



The background of the entire page is a light teal color with a repeating pattern of stylized, swirling floral and leaf motifs. The pattern is dense and covers the entire surface.

Because every life is unique

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