Since March 2020, life has been different for all of us due to Coronavirus restrictions. Now we’re feeling, “I want to go back to normal.”

This longing for life to return to normal will be recognised by every bereaved person, at any time, whatever caused the death of their loved one: “I wish I could return to life before they died.” Of course, that’s not possible. Bereavement transposes a person’s living into a different key, a new normal which is neither sought or welcomed. The widow, painfully enduring the Euro matches without her football-daft husband, “He would’ve loved it all but he’s not here.” The mother-to-be, longing to return to the days of expectancy, plans and hope, all crushed by the still-birth. A teenager grieving a grandparent lost to COVID-19, handling death for the first time, wishing the clock could be turned back.

Care must be exercised when suggesting people embrace change for most people can handle only a certain amount at a time. Every day in Scotland around 600 people will face the grief which follows the death of someone close. In every congregation there are people grieving, sometimes because of COVID-19, and ‘normal’ patterns of grieving have been messed up due to restrictions on life.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Since November I’ve been assisting a Health Board’s Spiritual Care Team with their bereavement support service. I’ve said to many bereaved people, “Grief is learning to live life differently.” It’s not a problem to be solved, and it’s not an illness. Grief’s hard work, which is why Worden[[2]](#endnote-2) talks of ‘tasks’ – things that need to be done to grieve well. Yet, how hard it is for some people to accept and express their painful emotions. ‘Being strong’ doesn’t mean not crying or avoiding the pain of the loss. Michael Rosen says, “Being sad is not the same as being horrible.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Children especially can find bereavement confusing and <http://smartgriefguide.co.uk> is a useful starter (for adults too probably!)

My recent bereavement work has underlined much that I knew was important:

* Empathy: hurting people respond to a sense of the listener stepping into their experience and trying to understand it.
* Grief is painful and natural – but the emotions and thoughts a person’s experiencing are often new and bewildering: they need assurance that it’s normal.
* Basic listening skills are powerful: for example, reflecting back what’s been said or asking ‘Can you say more about that?’
* The stories I hear about loss resonate with my own experiences of bereavement. These can inform how I listen, respond and care - but I never talk of them.
* Grief theories are helpful and support practice: the five stages (or six in Kessler’s Finding Meaning[[4]](#endnote-4)), Worden, the Dual-Process Model.
* Being a helper to bereaved people affects ourselves, so I have a Pastoral Supervisor who helps me reflect.

Finally, I’ve noticed that bereaved people could benefit from simple neighbourliness: a call to ask how they’re doing, a shared cup of tea in the garden, company to break the loneliness.[[5]](#endnote-5) We must never underestimate an act of kindness which helps a bereaved person know that they matter and life can still be good.

1. M Stroebe and Henk Schut, Bereavement in Times of COVID-19, Omega – Journal of Death and Dying, 2021, Vol. 82(3). I’m grateful to John Birrell for sending me this review article. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William Worden, Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy, 4th Edition, Routledge 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake, Michael Rosen’s Sad Book, Walker Books, 2004 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. David Kessler, Finding Meaning – The Sixth Stage of Grief, Rider, 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See [https://theconversation.com/what-weve-learned-about-bereavement-during-the-pandemic-153729 Accessed 2 August 2021](https://theconversation.com/what-weve-learned-about-bereavement-during-the-pandemic-153729%20Accessed%202%20August%202021).

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