



WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT DEATH

How we react to grief can make a huge difference to the well-being of ourselves and others

Many of us deal with death so badly that it can have a long-term negative impact on the quality of our lives and on those around us. 'It can lead to individuals turning to alcohol and drugs to try to numb the pain and other reactions can include depression and other mental health issues,' says Claire Henry of Dying Matters, a charity raising awareness of dying, death and bereavement (its awareness week runs from 8-14 May this year – visit dyingmatters.org). But it's something that we all

have to cope with throughout our lives. So we've asked some experts to offer their advice on how to support yourself and others in times of grief.

The big taboo

Why do we find it so hard to deal with death? 'If we don't think about it, then we feel it won't happen to us or people we're close to,' says Julia Samuel, psychotherapist and author of the new book *Grief Works* (Penguin Life, £14.99). 'We tend to block out things that scare us. But the flip side is that if we

can think and talk about death, we will be able to deal with grief better when it happens to us.' A helpful way to stop being so scared about death is to write down your funeral wishes. This may sound morbid, but it is a very practical thing to do. 'Write down exactly what you'd like, such as the music and flower choices,' says Claire. 'You can do this at any age. You may also wish to plan the finances to pay for the funeral so everything is taken care of. Then tell someone you've drawn up a plan and let them know where you've put it.'

How to support your friends

The biggest thing you can do for anyone at a time of bereavement is to show support and not ignore them. 'Often, because we don't know what to say or because we're fearful of death, we might think it easier to avoid the bereaved,' says Jane Harris, psychotherapist, bereaved parent and co-founder of the Good Grief Project. 'But ignoring them will make them feel worse. It's absolutely okay to tell people: "I don't know

what to say and I can't begin to imagine what you're going through." Showing that you're there for them and that you care will mean so much.'

Julia recommends that you acknowledge their loss, then be respectful and follow their lead as to whether they want to talk about their grief – don't confuse your need to speak with your friend's needs. If they want to talk, be a good listener – every time they speak, it can help lighten their burden of pain.

Julia also advises that you give practical help – like taking around food – as this is often what really makes a difference.

Don't let the funeral be the end

Your life might go back to normal once you've been to a funeral, but for the people who are grieving, it will never go back to the way it was before – and they will need and appreciate ongoing support. 'Have the courage to ask people regularly if they need help,' says Claire. 'Appreciate that they might not say yes immediately, particularly if they're dealing with a sudden death, the death of a child or a suicide, where the shock may be immense. Don't give up, stay in touch – even if it's just sending a text to ask how they are.'

It's also important to remember the anniversaries of those who have died. 'Remembering someone's birthday or speaking about them at a special event will mean so much to their family and friends,' Jane says.

Explaining it to children

Many people don't like to talk to children about the death of someone because they don't want



to upset them, or if they do tell them, they often use terminology that can be unintentionally frightening. 'People often tell children that someone who has died has gone to sleep or they talk about them as being lost. Both these phrases can be very scary for children,' says Claire.

She recommends you talk to children gently about death, so they can grow up with a healthy attitude. 'Talk to them about the importance of celebrating the life of the person who's died. Don't forget that most children see death on television and films from a young age – in Disney films, for example – so it's not a

subject that's foreign to them. If you want help on what to say, look for a book on the subject – one I recommend for young children is *Water Bugs And Dragonflies* by Doris Stickney.'

Look for help if you need it

If you're the one struggling with grief, then look for help, as not dealing with it properly can be harmful to yourself and your loved ones.

Julia says: 'If you're using up your emotional and physical energy trying to block the pain of grief, then it will affect your ability to deal with life. Blocking pain will block your ability to have joy. It will lessen your "bandwidth" of emotional capacity.'

It's also important to remember that grief can open up cracks that already exist within a family. It really is a time for healing, not fighting or accusations.

And take on board that we can all grieve in different ways. 'Men and women can deal with grief

very differently and it's crucial that this is recognised,' says Julia.

Three things she recommends you should do are: acknowledge your loss and need to grieve, allow yourself to be surrounded with non-judgemental people who love you (the love of others is most important when you've lost someone you love), and get outdoors to exercise (the beauty of nature can be very healing).

For more information about Julia's 'pillars of strength', visit griefworks.co.uk.

Talk to people who understand

Sometimes the best people to give you help are those who have gone through, or are going through, what you are. There are many fantastic support groups to help with bereavement – just take a look online – as well as helpful books and films.

A thought-provoking feature documentary worth watching is *A Love That Never Dies*, in which Jimmy Edmonds and Jane Harris, whose son Josh died in 2011, travel across the US in search of others who have also experienced the death of a child. For screening information go to thegoodgriefproject.co.uk. ■

Words: Julia Smurthwaite. Photos: Getty, Shutterstock. Posed by models