

LIFE

AFTER

The bereavement counsellor *Julia Samuel* distills 25 years of experience, sharing stories of love and loss

I am reminded of how strange my job is, whenever I meet someone new, and they ask me what I do. When I say I'm a therapist, I see unease in their eyes; but this turns into actual fear when I explain that I specialise in bereavement.

Yet their second impulse is always to tell me their own experience of death. It could be the loss of their mother or father, friend or lover; or the devastation of a child dying, a death 'out of time' and the death of the future they expected – everyone has something to confide. Stories are how we make sense of the major events of our lives; and death is as much a part of our life as birth, though it is often hidden away in the cellars of our minds, as if in the hope that if we don't think about it, or talk about it, it won't happen to us or to those we love.

I never tire of hearing these stories, and I have heard hundreds over the past 25 years working for the NHS. From them, I have learnt the central lesson: that loss cannot be fixed or forgotten. We need to find ways of supporting ourselves through the pain of it.

I had occasionally wondered about writing a book about grief, but lack of confidence stymied any progress. It took the voices of two strong women, a literary agent and a freelance editor, to help me believe that I had something to say, but

when I started my intense relationship with my book, it felt like an obsessive affair with a recalcitrant, elusive lover who occasionally delivered the goods.

In *Grief Works*, I retell 15 clients' tales of great love and great loss, and how they survived. One, Max, found peace after re-establishing a connection to his mother, who had been murdered when he was

five years old; Caitlin dared to love again after the death of her husband. And the death of Princess Diana 20 years ago was a watershed moment too, when for the first time as a country, we voiced our grief loudly, and passionately. Perhaps

that event awakened the unexpressed grief of a nation: in mourning her, we gave ourselves permission to cry for our own losses – and it was the beginning of a shift in our attitude to death.

Paradoxically, as a friend of Diana's, in those first months, I hid my sadness. For I am the child of the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' generation of parents and learnt how to grieve by observing them. They had fought in World War II and were brought up by the survivors of World War I; they didn't have the luxury to mourn, for their imperative was to survive. Yet by their mid-twenties, both my parents had suffered multiple losses. I can clearly see the black and white photograph of my Uncle Tony, killed in the war; my other Uncle Ivan and Aunt Aline both died suddenly; and three grandparents – all dead, and I knew absolutely nothing about them.

These unanswered questions led me into this work; I wanted to know what was really going on, what was beneath my parents' silence, what they were feeling, how to broaden my understanding and connect with them. That has never left me.

In writing *Grief Works*, I have finally given myself some answers. The book has forced me to analyse what grief is, how it works in us, and what we need to do to heal.

In telling other people's stories, I have understood my own. And having read my book, my mother, now aged 90, has begun to tell me her memories, too. My hope is that others will follow – and that at last, grief and death can come out of the shadows. □

'Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving' (£14.99, Penguin) is published on 2 March. For more information, visit www.griefworks.co.uk.

