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**STRONG MIND**

# Good grief

It's the emotion no one ever wants to feel – or talk about. And yet amid self-care tips and body-pose posts, grief is muscling into the mental health conversation. *WH* explores the communities trying to find a positive in the negative

WORDS MINI SMITH

**R**emember, you're not alone.' So echoes Cariad Lloyd's customary closing remark on each episode of *Griefcast*, a comedy podcast, the popularity of which has seen it earn close to five million downloads. The premise? Death. The series, in which Lloyd quizzes a different celebrity each episode on their personal experience of grief, is just one example of how heartbreaking loss is gaining ground as a conversation piece.

From panel talks to supper clubs, podcasts to social media communities, grief is cropping up more and more, and for a topic so painful and often uncomfortable, it's found a captive and welcoming audience. On Instagram, you'll find *Life.Death*. Whatever. (@lifedeathwhat) – a virtual community dedicated to expressing the reality of its followers' experiences of death.

The Leeds-based supper club *Grief Eats* (@griefeats) offers a seat at the table for locals navigating loss in their twenties and thirties. The similarly premised *Death Cafe* movement ([deathcafe.com](http://deathcafe.com)) has brought people together over 10,000 times in 69 countries since launching in 2011. Its USP? Tea, cake and talking about dying. This is about more than shattering stigmas; research confirms that consciously and openly engaging with the topic could make the difference between a healthy response to feelings of grief and a mental health condition.

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**Coping strategy**  
For an emotion that's pretty much guaranteed to affect every single person at some point in their life, grief has long been uncharted emotional territory, at least in British culture. In a recent survey commissioned by palliative and bereavement support charity Sue Ryder, 32% of bereaved respondents said they felt unable to open up about their grief to anyone, despite listing 'being able to talk freely' as the action most likely to help in particularly dark times. But it wasn't always this way, says Dr Kavita Deepak-Knights, chartered clinical psychologist at Cardinal Clinic in Berkshire. She explains that people in the Victorian era mourned openly, shrouding themselves in black for months on end, but the First World War and associated death toll forced those left behind to move on quickly and quietly for the sake of upholding morale. Dr Deepak-Knights also points to advances in medicine and the transition of death from something that used to happen in the home to something that happens in third-party hospitals and hospices, which has reduced its visibility. The result is a society built on learned behaviour – older generations more likely to stifle grief, which means that those who succeed them are left with no blueprint for dealing with bereavement of their own.

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### Talking therapy

One woman determined to change this is illustrator Poppy Chancellor. She was 26 when her dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer and given just three months to live by doctors. 'He actually lived for another two years after that diagnosis, so we had a lot of time to come to terms with the news,' she tells *WH*. 'He eventually went into hospital and we spent that last night with him, which was a wonderful experience as he was still very much in his own mind and my sister and I were able to play him all his favourite songs. Because the process ended up being so gradual, I thought I would be fine – Dad was gone, I'd said I love you, now to get on with my life.' The reality was very different. For three years, Poppy didn't engage with what had happened – a coping strategy that appeared to work, until it didn't. 'My mental health completely fell apart,' she adds. 'I began to doubt my work, my relationship, everything. There was this really dark cloud around me. I'd been in denial, subconsciously not processing what was too devastating to process.'

Aware that she couldn't continue on that same path, Poppy tried to be proactive about dealing with her grief. Opening up to others seemed like a good place to start. She invited friends who had lost loved ones to her flat one evening to talk about grief, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. 'I bought flowers, lit candles, put out snacks and we took it in turns to speak. Everyone cried, some from the moment they walked through the door, as if just coming together was a welcome release. At the end of the evening,

one friend suggested, "Same time next month?" The Griefcase, as the monthly meet-ups are now known, take place in a bar on London's Brick Lane. Newcomers and regulars come to share their stories, with attendees encouraged to bring a piece of art or writing that helps express how they feel. 'Creativity allows you to express the stuff that's difficult to say,' explains Poppy, who shares her own paper-cut illustrations around modern life and death on Instagram (@poppypapercuts). The first time I shared a Dead Dad Club illustration, I was shaking before I pressed post,' she says. 'But the comments made me realise that people could relate to an image of grief just as strongly as they could to words.'

### Reality check

There's a reason why communicating experiences of grief is so helpful, explains psychotherapist and author [Julia Samuel](#), who explains that these emerging grief

networks tick off two essential elements of the grief response: acknowledging death, and social connection. 'The purpose of mourning is to face the reality of a death, to engage with the psychological pain is an agent of change that forces you to accept the reality,' she explains. 'Do that and, over time, you'll come to terms with the loss before learning to live with it.' Being a part of a network, even just listening to someone's experiences via a podcast, brings additional benefits. As Samuel explains, 'One of the worst feelings is the thought that you're somehow "grieving wrong". You might give yourself labels like "anxious" or "depressed" when what you're feeling is grief, and networks help normalise that. It can bring hope for the future.'

Rachel Wilson has been on the receiving end of the feelings that silence perpetuates. She founded The Grief Network – 'maybe the shittiest network in the world' – in 2018, out of desperation to find others who could relate following the death of her mum. 'I felt incredibly isolated. I was surrounded by older people who'd tell me that time would heal and all that, and I remember thinking: "But you didn't lose your mum when you were 25." An email to a podcast searching for fellow griever on the day of her mum's funeral received over 200 responses from listeners; Rachel began to meet them one-on-one, before branching out into group meetings. TGN (as her network is better known) launched last October, via a panel talk entitled #StillGrieving, and holds monthly drop-in drinks at a London pub – tickets for the December 'Shitmas' party sold out in two days. You only have to look at TGN's minimal branding and sardonic voice to see it's been designed with grieving millennials in mind. Typical bereavement counselling websites can feel quite generic and patronising – it can feel like: "Oh God, is this what my life looks like now?" laughs Rachel. 'I didn't want TGN to be a huge leap from what you're used seeing on your Instagram feed. Hopefully, it also helps those who haven't been bereaved to feel less afraid of it happening to them: because it's not presented as a horrible, traumatic thing that exists in some weird isolated room – it's just part of life.'

### Support crew

As invaluable as such networks can be, Samuel points out that they're not a replacement for more structural support; signs you might need this include a change in the intensity of your grief in a way that

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ILLUSTRATION: GETTY IMAGES



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impacts your behaviour – an inability to get out of bed, for example. If this is you, or someone you know, Samuel suggests grief counselling, either through the NHS (find your nearest psychological therapies service via [nhs.uk](http://nhs.uk) or your GP) or the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy network ([bacp.co.uk](http://bacp.co.uk)). Tools Samuel shares with her own clients include exercise; a 2007 study by Duke University found it to be just as effective as antidepressant medication in treating depression. She also suggests grabbing a pen and paper and journaling your thoughts, a habit that also comes with a whole host of evidence behind it. As for supporting someone else? 'Say something,' stresses Samuel. 'The person grieving often transmits feelings of fear and distress, which can be picked up by those around them. This means people can feel frightened of saying the wrong thing, but saying nothing is worse.' As well as acknowledging the loss, in person or over the phone, she suggests offering practical support, like delivering food or looking after children. 'And be there for the long haul. People are often there for the first six weeks to three months, and then they go back to their lives – grief takes much longer to work through than that.' It's advice echoed by Poppy: 'Do we ever heal fully? No, but we can at least not feel alone – and that's a good place to start.' 



## 'People feel frightened of saying the wrong thing, but saying nothing is worse'

**FINDING THE GOOD**  
*The grief networks to know about*

**Life, Death, Whatever?**

**THE COMMUNITY**  
*Life, Death, Whatever.*  
 @lifedeathwhat  
 Hit follow for the 'Five Things' series, where griever of all kinds share stories of what they've learned from love and loss.

**The Grief Gang**

**THE PODCAST**  
*The Grief Gang*  
 @thegriefgang  
 Download for a smorgasbord of heart-fitting interviews, advice for grief supporters and host Amber Jeffrey's hard-earned experiences.

**THE DINNER PARTY**

**THE SUPPER CLUB**  
*The Dinner Party*  
 @thedinnerparty  
 Sign up to be matched with a table near you and join a like-minded group expressing how they feel about death, over dinner.

**Let's Talk About Loss**

**THE MEET-UP**  
*Let's Talk About Loss*  
 @talkaboutloss  
 With 20 active groups across the country, Let's Talk About Loss hosts monthly get-togethers for bereaved 18 to 30-year-olds – from pub trips to ten-pin bowling.

**Cruse Bereavement Care**

**THE HELPLINE**  
*Cruse Bereavement Care*  
 0800 808 1677,  
[helpline@cruse.org.uk](http://helpline@cruse.org.uk)  
 Cruse's free national helpline is staffed by trained bereavement volunteers, who are available to offer emotional support five days a week.

**Grief Works**

**THE BOOK**  
*Grief Works: Stories Of Life, Death And Surviving* by Julia Samuel (£9.99, Penguin Life)  
 Featuring a range of real-life stories, Grief Works provides comfort and clear advice for those facing loss and those helping them through it. 





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# BOOST YOUR & bounce-back

As our health and mental wellbeing is being tested like never before, we all want to strengthen our bodies and minds. Writer Tessa Hilton finds out what works – and what doesn't...

**T**aking care of ourselves to make our immune response as robust as possible is not about popping a concoction of different supplements, drinking water every 15 minutes, or any of the other wilder 'alternative' remedies that have been spreading on social media faster than the coronavirus itself.

In fact, scientific research shows that it is certain lifestyle habits that can make the greatest difference to our ability to fight infections. Even more encouragingly, our immune response may not always decline with age. A ground-breaking trial that studied a group of long-distance cyclists aged 55 to 80 found that even those at the top end of the age range had an immune system more like that of a 20- to 30-year-old.

Of course, not many of us are likely to suddenly start cycling hundreds of miles, but the discovery has widespread implications, says Professor Janet Lord, director of the Institute of Inflammation and Ageing at the University of Birmingham, who co-led the trial.

'Being physically active to any degree helps the immune system work better,' says Professor Lord. 'It doesn't need to be a marathon. Simply walking quickly upstairs, which is aerobic, and slowly downstairs, which provides resistance, 10 times makes a difference.'

## INFLAMMATION: FRIEND OR FOE?

Our complex immune defence system consists of tissues, cells and organs, and at the forefront are T-cells, a type of infection-fighting white blood cell produced by the thymus, a gland in the chest. Once we reach adulthood, however, the thymus usually shrinks and becomes inactive, meaning our T-cells age with us. 'A Dad's Army of T-cells' is how Professor Arne Akbar, of University College London and president of the British Society for Immunology, describes these diminishing crack forces.

Added to this is an increasing level of inflammation as we age. While, in the form of fever, swelling, pain or redness, it is part of the immune system's defence against harmful bugs, unhealthy lifestyle habits and age can trigger low-level inflammation; a driver of most age-related diseases. 'A lack of new T-cells, the dysfunction of the T-cells you already have, plus a high baseline of inflammation create a perfect storm, making people less able to combat disease, especially new viruses like Covid-19, in later life,' explains Professor Akbar.

Inflammation may also diminish the effect of vaccines in older people. Professor Akbar is investigating whether certain drugs that temporarily reduce inflammation may allow vaccines to work better.

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Good health

# WELLNESS

## power

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“  
Being physically active to any degree helps the immune system work better. You don't need to run a marathon  
”

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## Good health

Also linked to inflammation are a host of problems that can affect us at a much younger age, such as heart disease, depression and autoimmune conditions.

### BE MORE ACTIVE

The good news is that there are changes we can all make to help our immune function. We know that exercising regularly has been proven to boost our mental and physical health, but it also plays a big part in our immune function. In the case of those long-distance cyclists, it's thought that anti-inflammatory hormones produced by working muscles (all that pedalling!) protected the thymus, so it continued to produce new T-cells, explains Professor Lord.

'Muscles do more than enable us to move around,' she says. 'It's only relatively recently that we've understood that muscle is essentially a big endocrine organ. As well as anti-inflammatory hormones during exercise, muscles also produce compounds that make more brown fat than white fat. Brown fat is very good and metabolically active. White fat is the one with lots of downsides: it doesn't just stop you from doing your jeans up; white fat cells produce inflammation.'

It might be hard to think about shedding pounds at a time when we're all seeking comfort, but maintaining a good body weight is a priority for the health of our immune system, insists Professor Lord. It also reduces the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers.

### BOOST YOUR SLEEP

Another priority is one we all yearn for: a good night's sleep. This is because immunity is strongly linked to our circadian rhythm, or body clock. 'If you disrupt your sleep, your immune system will suffer,' says Professor Lord. 'There are genes in every cell in the body called clock genes. One controls how inflammatory an immune cell is and, if you mess with that clock gene, the cells become more inflammatory.'

Poor sleeper? The single most effective step you can take is to go to bed and get up at the same time each day. Getting 30 minutes of bright light, ideally sunlight, first thing in the morning and, at the end of the day, dimming lights and avoiding screens before bedtime prime the body for

wakefulness and sleep, respectively. Eating at regular times also helps to set the body clock. And it's important to exercise during the day and wind down gradually in the evening, avoiding caffeine and alcohol.

### EAT TO BEAT DISEASE

We know the microbiome - the 'friendly bacteria' that inhabit our gut - is an important part of our immune system: the more diverse our array of microbes, the better it is for our health.

'Aim to eat 30 different plant-based foods a week,' advises Dr Jenna

Macciocchi, author of *Immunity: The Science Of Staying Well* (HarperCollins). 'There's no such thing as an "immune diet", but foods rich in phytonutrients are known to have extra immune-nourishing benefits. There are many different groups of phytonutrients - chemical compounds found in plants that have unique antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial properties,' she explains. Green tea, for example, contains 16 times more of a polyphenol with natural anti-inflammatory properties than black tea does.

And following a Mediterranean diet with plenty of fresh fruit, olive oil, fish



CONSULT YOUR GP ABOUT ANY SPECIFIC CONCERNS AND BEFORE FOLLOWING MEDICAL ADVICE ON THESE PAGES

Reset your  
body clock by  
getting some  
sunlight first  
thing in the  
morning



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PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY ALAMY

and vegetables will naturally include a good range of phytonutrients. Probiotic supplements may also help certain conditions, such as diarrhoea after a course of antibiotics, but a 'food first' approach is better.

'Eating plenty of fibre is the best way to nurture diverse microbiota,' advises Dr Macciocchi. 'It's a common misconception to think that fibre mainly means cereal. Pulses, including peas and beans, are also a rich source.' The recommended daily fibre intake for adults is 30g, but most of us only eat 18g.

A Mediterranean diet should provide all the vitamins we need, except vitamin D. As it's made by sunlight acting on the skin, a daily supplement of 10mcg is advised in winter. 'Vitamin D carries out a range of activities geared towards regulating the immune system.'

says Dr Macciocchi. 'For example, T-cells don't move around the body properly unless they get enough vitamin D.' As vitamin D lives in fat stores for up to two months, stockpiling safe sun in late summer and early autumn will help top up reserves, she suggests.

The other supplement many people would benefit from, unless they eat plenty of fatty fish or nuts and seeds, is omega 3, which has anti-inflammatory and regenerating properties. 'There is no established upper limit, but follow pack instructions,' says Dr Macciocchi.

There's evidence that zinc can prevent certain respiratory viruses getting into our cells, but Dr Macciocchi advises not taking supplements unless you're deficient. Natural sources include meat, shellfish, wholegrains and legumes.

She also warns against fasting diets while the coronavirus is still active. 'Fasting is fashionable and has been shown to have transformative effects in experiments in animals,' she says. 'However, fasting creates a stress response, with higher levels of cortisol, which impairs our immune response, so I would advise against it at present.'

## Mind over matter

Increasingly, evidence shows that how we think and feel affects our physical health. Stress triggers the release of cortisol, our 'fight or flight' response hormone, while anxiety and loneliness impair our immune response - and for all of us, the coronavirus crisis is prompting difficult emotions.

Good things can still happen in terrible times, though, as acts of kindness and community spirit are proving. 'We have more endurance and capacity than we know,' says leading psychotherapist and grief counsellor Julia Samuel, author of *This Too Shall Pass* (Penguin), about coping with change.

'Anxiety feels like fear and sends spikes of cortisol through the body, making it hard to think rationally,' explains Julia. 'We need to use ways to bring us back to the present and remind ourselves that feelings are not facts.' Losing work, income and social contact are living losses, she adds, and many will also be grieving the deaths of family or friends. In these circumstances, women are more likely than men to feel guilty, wondering if outcomes would have changed if they had done something differently. It's important to find a way of living with the things you can never find answers for, because the anger of blame and uncertainty is so destructive,' says Julia. If you want to talk to a therapist, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy ([bacp.co.uk](http://bacp.co.uk)) and the charity Cruse Bereavement Care ([cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)) can help.

## Home health

Stay balanced in uncertain times with these tips from Julia Samuel.

- Creating a new structure helps to take away a sense of helplessness, so set times for exercise, work or projects.
- **Breathing in for a count of seven and out for 11 moves your body from the sympathetic back to the parasympathetic nervous system, which regulates blood pressure and is linked to your immune system.**

- Add breathing exercises, such as the one above, to your regular habits: perhaps when you turn on the kettle or after you've washed your hands.
- **Exercising for just 10 minutes to get your heart rate up tells your body you've 'fought or flown' and calms anxiety. Use a combination of exercise and breathing techniques.**

- **Regular exercise is also a natural antidepressant.**
- Tapping techniques can distract from scary thoughts. When they enter your head, try tapping each forearm with the opposite hand. The more you do it, the more the effect builds.
- **Visualising a favourite or safe place can also ease anxiety. Looking at real images can help calm you, too.**

- Getting outside is proven to lift mood, and growing flowers or veg in pots rewards and gives purpose.
- **Connecting online to choirs, museums, book clubs, yoga and exercise classes has proved a lifesaver for reducing isolation, as has playing online games like Scrabble, draughts or bridge.**

- Planning small projects in the house and garden helps to create a sense of achievement and satisfaction. □

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