

‘Even though death is part of life it’s still taboo’

Princess Diana was her friend and the Duke of Cambridge is patron of her charity but, as Julia Samuel talks to Anna Moore about her book on grief, it’s clear her desire to help the bereaved has taken her far from the privileged elite

JULIA, 57, was born into the aristocratic Guinness family but began working at St Mary’s Hospital, Paddington, counselling mothers whose babies had died. Together with Jenni Thomas, a former midwife running a similar service in Buckinghamshire, Julia created Child Bereavement UK in 1994. She was supported by her friend Princess Diana, who was godmother to Julia’s youngest son. Today, Julia is godmother to Prince George. As a psychotherapist, Julia splits her week between private sessions with grieving parents and an NHS post at St Mary’s Hospital, Paddington, where for more than 20 years she has been maternity and paediatric counsellor – a role she pioneered. Her first book, *Grief Works*, discusses how to heal again after bereavement. Julia is married to Michael Samuel and the couple have four adult children.

Bereavement, psychotherapy, talking about your feelings certainly wasn’t a world I knew anything about. My parents were from the generation who’d fought in the Second World War and been brought up by survivors of the First. The way of surviving was to “get on and be strong”.



Princess Diana and Julia were close friends, (pictured at Wimbledon in 1994). Julia says: “She was incredibly warm and we had fun doing all the normal things you do with a great mate.”

My mother had lost both parents, her brother and sister by the age of 25. My father had also lost his father and brother young. None of this was discussed. Unconsciously, I think my career path must have been influenced by that.

I’d started fundraising for a pregnancy research charity called Birthright, which has since changed its name to Wellbeing and is the fundraising arm of the Royal

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Royal Patron

JULIA SAYS: “Having HRH Duke of Cambridge as Patron of Child Bereavement UK is transformational for us, both because he helps raise awareness of the importance of the work we do, and also because he has such a natural empathy when he meets bereaved families. A mother he spoke to recently – one of our bereaved mums, Marie, with her daughter Aoife and son Keelan – said that talking to the Duke was ‘Just like talking to someone from Child Bereavement UK’. She also said to the children: ‘If there’s just one thing you have to remember from what he said, it’s that we have to keep talking; we must always remember that, keep talking.’

“I thought it was such an amazing testament to the Duke’s sensitivity and warmth.”



William and Kate at the headquarters of Child Bereavement UK in 2013

College on Obstetrics and Gynaecology. It gave me an insight into all the things that can go wrong. From there, I began voluntary work for the mental health charity MIND, and Westminster Bereavement Service. After ten training sessions, I was sent off to a block of high-rise flats to counsel Annie, a woman whose daughter had died in a car crash on Christmas Eve. It was 28 years ago but I’ll never forget it. I’d discovered the job I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

It was where I felt – and feel – most alive. I loved the connection, the bridge of understanding between two people. There’s something about the enormity of bereavement. Helping someone rebuild their life feels very important.

Even though death is part of life – and everyone will lose someone they love – it’s still “taboo”. People don’t know how to respond when others are bereaved and they don’t know if the way they feel is “normal” when it happens to them.

People talk about the public mourning for Princess Diana – it was certainly the greatest outpouring >>

Godmother to Prince George

JULIA SAYS: "I was deeply honoured, and of course touched, to be asked to be Prince George's godmother. I love hanging out with him, he is so much fun and I want to be as good a godmother to him as Diana, Princess of Wales was to my son."



we'd ever seen. I think it's because she was authentic and always very much herself. People felt they knew her so her death felt very real.

For me, Diana was just a lovely friend. She was incredibly warm and loving and we had a lot of fun doing all the normal things you do with a great mate – shopping together, she'd collect my children from school, empty the dishwasher at my house. When she was officially "out in the world", she was very much the Princess, but when she was just Diana, she liked to be ordinary. It took me a long time to believe she'd died.

There's no hierarchy in death and you can never say, "This is the worst" but the death of your child is, in my view, as bad as it gets. You grieve the future. I find mothers are much more likely to

blame themselves for longer than fathers. There may be something a man will wish he'd done differently – "I wish I'd picked her up from the party" – but women can become consumed with guilt.

As a psychotherapist, there's nothing I can do except listen and let them unpick it. Sometimes, while their heart may tell them it's all their fault, they know in their heads that even if they'd got to the hospital three hours earlier, that child was on a trajectory to die. It's about trying to allow all the different voices to be heard – the heart and the head – to give a fuller picture.

When it's about the loss of a partner, it's true that "men replace, women grieve". You often see men finding new partners quite soon – I think it's because men move towards wanting to make things better. They also may be terrified

of being alone. Women are better at getting social support but can get very preoccupied with their grief.

I never assume that I know how to "fix" clients. I just hope to facilitate this person finding ways to live with what they don't want to live with.

There are practical things that you can do to help yourself (see right) and I do all of them myself too. I run, cycle, meditate. Weekly kickboxing is my counterbalance – punching my trainer's lights out and feeling physically strong helps you feel mentally strong.

Two crucial factors predict the outcome

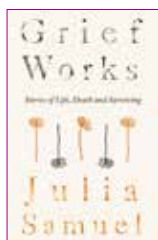
when someone is devastated by grief. One is the ability to adapt in the face of catastrophe – finding a way of not gripping on to wanting it to be as it was. The other is finding ways to

manage the pain. Pain is the thing that makes you know that this person has died. There are no shortcuts and the ways people try to avoid it – through drink, sex, drugs – keeps you stuck in it.

There are no "happy endings" – no one is going to say "I'm over it." But you can find a way of living with it and loving and feeling alive again. It can change your perceptions about life too. Until bereavement, you can be on a wheel – "I've got to be successful", "I've got to have this." A bereavement

shows you what matters most – and that's the people you love.

Julia's book Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving (Penguin Life) is out now.



WHAT CAN HELP?

IF YOU ARE BEREAVED...

✦ **Exercise.** Run or go for a brisk walk every day for 20 minutes minimum. We hold grief in our bodies and it often feels like fear – we're tight and alert, which puts us into "fight or flight" mode. Physically exerting ourselves tells our bodies that we've "flown" and releases the soothing hormones that help wind down the system.

✦ **Meditate.** When you're grieving, your head can be full of chaotic, multiple thoughts. If you meditate regularly, you can gradually create a space that quiets your brain.

✦ **Connect.** Finding ways to express your continuing relationship with the person who has died reduces negative emotions and increases positive ones. Create a memory box, cook their favourite recipe, wear their watch, or write to them in a letter.

✦ **Express your grief.** It could be talking to family or friends, seeing a therapist, painting or making music. It's important to connect to your feelings.

WHEN SOMEONE ELSE IS BEREAVED...

✦ **Acknowledge** the loss without overstating it. Keep it simple. "I know you really loved your dad. I'm so sorry."

✦ **Avoid clichés** and don't say anything that tries to "fix" it, like: "He's at peace now" or "You must take comfort in your three other children..."

✦ **Follow the person's lead.** Allow them to talk about their sadness or not to talk about it. If they want to change the subject, don't bring them back to the bereavement or patronise with a sad face and voice.

✦ **Offer your own memories** of the person that's died, and if you have them, your own photos or films can be like gold for a bereaved person.

✦ **Give practical support** – dinners, school runs are important but the big thing, if you're a really good friend, is being there for the long haul.

✦ **Don't assume** after three months or one year that the subject is closed. Make it clear you'll always want to listen.

For more help visit griefworks.co.uk