

Health & Living

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Ask the therapist

'I worry constantly that I will say the wrong thing in social situations. Help!' Psychologist Allison Keating answers your questions
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Elle Gordon whose father Trevor passed away in 2020 during the Covid pandemic restrictions.
PHOTO STEVE HUMPHREYS



Grief in the time of Covid:
'I remember every detail of the day Dad died. The sound of his last breath gently whooshing away with him'

Watching my dad leave this world is a moment I will never forget. It couldn't be happening and yet it was. I remember every detail of that day. The sound of his breath. We knew, but at the same time, we didn't know. We didn't know, at this, the most painful of moments, that the pain could possibly be about to increase. That even though he was dying, he was still there. Still with us. Still a tangible presence in our lives. We could touch his hands. We could smell his distinctly Dad smell [a mix of freshly cut grass and soap]. We could chatter away to him even if unsure what he could hear. And then he was leaving. The sound of that last breath gently

Grief is the strangest thing, writes **Elle Gordon**, whose father passed away two years ago. She describes the support that is helping her through the overwhelming pain and loss

whooshing away with him. A world in which my dad no longer existed. An unrecognisably, cold, and suddenly scarier place to be. My wonderful dad Trevor passed away two years ago on April 1, 2020. He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, out of the blue, just 11 months before in May 2019. I remember the day he was diagnosed vividly. I remember how we banded together, fierce warriors, determined to defend such an adored member of our precious little family from the ravages of this disease. But, while he weathered treatment with a kind of grace and composure that I could only ever wish to emulate, nothing went his way.

TERMINAL

On February 7, 2020, he was told he was terminal and six weeks later, the four of us, my mum, my brother, my sister, and I watched through sheets of tears and gasps of "we love you" as he had to leave us, our favourite person. Grief is the strangest thing. The hardest thing perhaps. Love turned to pain, but a pain that forever has love at its core. Grief in the pandemic, for so many people, has been even stranger still. With Dad we never had that beautiful ritual of departure where loved ones gather, stories flow and you find out things you never knew about the person, as through a mix of laughter and tears, those closest to them

gather to say goodbye. Instead, after what I can only describe as a burial rather than a funeral, we found ourselves back at our house on the farm he loved so much. Four, where there had been five. Shellshocked, we ate a quiet dinner, the empty hospital bed in the room beside our kitchen a stark reminder of what couldn't possibly be true. Although I am very aware of how precious it was that we were able to be with him in those final days. And while we didn't have the throngs of people surrounding us that you would have expected in a traditional send-off pre-pandemic, a gesture from our

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neighbours — who stood in silence lining either side of the road, as Dad departed the farm for the final time and the hearse drove past — is a poignant tribute that the four of us will never forget. Dad would have been blown away by their thoughtfulness.

FIRST YEAR

In my first year of grief, I often say that I woke up in Christmas 2020. What I mean by this is that while I was working away and interviewing people in my job for a magazine all through that first year, I remember little of the months that followed his death. A blur from which I can only recall vague snippets: such as, in July 2020 finding myself walking around Cork where I was on a girls' trip in-between restrictions, with tears streaming down my face and no energy or even care to wipe them away. Then I'd gather up my emotions and put them in a box, manage through an evening of laughs and normality before the sea of tears would be sure to return. I remember the days of uncontrollable sobs. The kinds of sobs that seemed to convulse through you, with no want for anything, nothing to soothe, no words, no hugs, no nothing. All I wanted was my Dad back.

That first Christmas we spent in a beautiful Airbnb in Donegal. It was there on those beaches, watching our gleeful dogs running towards crashing waves, as we drank in the beauty and wild landscape, that I think tiny little cracks in our monumental grief chasm started to heal. But, as is always the case with grief, it undulates unpredictably, ready to strike when you least expect it.

For me, my grief bubbled up in the form of changes. I suddenly need to change everything. I had my hair dyed red (a disaster that I have only just completely rectified two years on). I moved house. I changed jobs, and I needed everything in my life to be different because everything was different.

Then a diagnosis for my mum — which she is now thankfully recovered from — rocked us once again.

Through all this, I suppose what I have come to realise is just how much grieving in the pandemic has pulled apart people's mental health.

Those usual outlets of gathering with friends and loved ones have only been intermittently available over the last two years so a lot of our grieving, and that of so many others, has been a very lonely place to be. It was a very kind person (who I suspect would prefer to go unnamed) who suggested I try grief counselling at the six-month mark and he linked me in with the amazing Michaela Brady from Aspire Counselling and Psychotherapy.

PAIN

It was here, on Zoom or by phone, that the pain began to pour out of me and into her expert hands. I believe we did about 10 sessions in total before I decided that I needed to continue on my own, using the tools that she had taught me. I had no idea at the end of that year one, just how much year two was going to fling at me, and that I would find myself in grief counselling more than once, but thankfully I am in a much stronger place today, a place I didn't think was possible for me to get to. I spoke to Michaela to



Eile Gordon pictured with her beloved late father Trevor

'People say I should be over it but grief is a process we have to go through, there is no quick fix'



ask her to share a little of what I found so helpful in the hope that it might help others as well.

If you are in the throes of those hazy days of bereavement and feeling completely overwhelmed and lost, Michaela advises that just talking is a first step: "You remember in our sessions we talked about Elizabeth Kubler Ross' five stages of grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. We talked a lot about denial in particular in those early days. Denial is a protective mechanism that kicks in because it is so overwhelming and there are so many different levels.

"Often you will hear people say, 'I just can't believe it' — and it is actually because they genuinely cannot. It is just too much. So as a therapist I suppose in my initial phases with people I just let them talk and tell their story which is what we would have done. There really isn't a solution or a fix and for so many people they're just not able for anything except to breathe." And when it comes to trudging through the messiness of grief, where can we even begin? I know myself, all too well, that feeling of being flung into the sea of grief and realising I have no idea how to swim.

How can we ensure that we don't get lost in the pain of it? Michaela says: "There's a framework that I use that I developed myself and it's called 'The CARE Framework'. And that stands for Cause of Stress, Awareness of Effects, Review Responses, Establish Resilient Responses, and this can be helpful just to put some sort of structure on your grief.

"So I break it down with my clients and we look at the causes, having awareness around the impact, discuss things like how bereavement can change relationships in families, how it can change roles and responsibilities, and then it's about being able to track our responses. The 'E' is about establishing

self-care and support responses as we go through the therapy work."

And for anyone who feels that their pain is just too great to be helped?

"I think it's most helpful for people to be reminded that when we're going through that grieving process we don't go through it in a linear fashion, I find it's helpful for them to be able to name where they're at, and meet them where they're at.

"We go backward and forwards in grief. People will often say, 'What is wrong with me? It's six months later and now I can't stop crying.' It's about normalising this. People grieve in different ways of course but it's about reminding people that what they are experiencing is a normal response to this horrendous thing that's happened and it's OK to feel these emotions."

I remember when we were doing our sessions that Michaela had a lovely analogy for grief, about how on the flipside of it there is so much love. Michaela says, "Yes. The pain and the grief and the extremity of what you experience is a sign of how much you loved, how much you loved the person, and how much they meant to you and that everything you are feeling in that moment is OK."

What would she advise people who are navigating the years following the initial aftermath?

Michaela says, "Journaling is really good because it gets whatever you are feeling and experiencing out onto paper. And puts down those memories on paper. As time goes on grief can hit. I had that with a friend of mine recently who lost her mum a couple of months ago, and I just said to her one day, 'How are you?' and she burst into tears because it was Mother's Day.

STRUGGLE

"A nice analogy that I would use is that if you're swimming in rough seas and you come up against rough waves they

say 'don't struggle because you're going to sink'. Instead, go with it and you will have more chances of staying afloat. And people do that to themselves in grief saying, 'Oh, I should be over it by now' and it's a reminder that it is a process we have to go through, there is no quick fix."

LEARNING PROCESS

When it comes to grief what I have learned is that there really is only one way to navigate it and that is to go through it. I think for me it is the support I have received from people like Michaela, and the kindness of my friends and my immediate family, that has kept me going the last two years so I would encourage anyone who is struggling to reach out, whether it's one text or one coffee, it is about having people in your corner and letting those people be in your corner.

Just this week I have decided that I want to start a grief support group where I live (in Ranelagh, Dublin) to connect with others going through the waves of grief. I am, of course, not an expert so it will simply be a space where we can laugh, cry and share our stories and memories of the loved ones that we have lost.

I would never want anyone to feel that aloneness that my family and I would have felt in the heart of lockdown. Now that it's possible to do this kind of thing, I want to do it and I just know Dad would be thrilled... I had said that if I got five people I would do it, but I suspect there'll be a little more than that.

It is called 'Grief and Margaritas' and if you would like to add your name you can find me on Instagram @ellegordon2. I hope that I as move through this next year without Dad I can do my best to honour his memory, making him proud, treating people with kindness as he always did, and most of all I am hoping that in sharing my story of grief I might help even just one person.

Check out aspirecounselling.com

'We go backwards and forwards in grief... It's about reminding people that what they are experiencing is a normal response, and it is OK to feel these emotions'