

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

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STRONG MIND

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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.



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) 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.

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.

Remember, you're not alone.' So echoes Ciarad 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.



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 shittest 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

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 or your GP) or the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy network (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.' **WH**

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FINDING THE GOOD

The grief networks to know about



THE COMMUNITY
Life, Death, Whatever.
[@lifedeathwhat](https://www.instagram.com/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 PODCAST
The Grief Gang
[@thegriefgang](https://www.instagram.com/thegriefgang)
Download for a smorgasbord of heart-hitting interviews, advice for grief supporters and host Amber Jeffrey's hard-relate experiences.



THE SUPPER CLUB
The Dinner Party
[@thedinnerparty](https://www.instagram.com/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.



THE MEET-UP
Let's Talk About Loss
[@talkaboutloss](https://www.instagram.com/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.



THE HELPLINE
Cruse Bereavement Care
0808 808 1677,
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.



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. **WH**