

Good

Section Four

grief



How the Hindu way of grieving helped me overcome two losses

Amita Joshi

After the loss of two family members in 2017, the editor and journalist found comfort in the rituals of Hinduism's 13-day mourning period

The kettle had barely finished boiling when there was a rap at the door. Everyone's bloodshot eyes swivelled towards my grandmother's porch to see who had come already. They must have heard the news about my grandfather's death.

"We have to let them in, but we really need to get everything ready afterwards, before others come," said my grandmother, wiping her eyes on her saree. Little did I know that those few minutes when we had just returned from the hospital after saying goodbye to Dada were the only time we'd get to ourselves.

When my grandfather died unexpectedly in July 2017, and my uncle of terminal cancer in November, I wasn't prepared for the tumultuous experience that comes with "traditional" mourning. Or should I say "days of mourning", because if you are a Hindu – a Brahmin, to be specific – you observe 13 days of mourning. I had no idea what this meant, but I was about to learn very quickly that slipping back to London to pretend it was one long nightmare I'd wake up from was not it.

From that first knock on the door, it was like an electrical surge had jolted the family into action. My grandmother said we had to clear out the living room and put white sheets on the floor so people could come and sit down. We had to get a picture enlarged of my grandfather and place it at the front of the room with a garland of flowers around it and make sure the lit candle in front of it never went out.

Then the people came. Neighbours, community members, friends of friends, close friends and family who wanted to pay their respects made their way over. It's tradition to do so in those first few days. Some had walked from nearby, others drove for four hours just to spend an hour with us. It was like a surreal Indian wedding, without the rich food and devoid of laughter. Cars filled the cul-de-sac daily and the house was packed out until the evening. My immense sadness was mingled with curiosity at the sheer number of people visiting and often accompanied by wondering who half of them even were.

I couldn't understand why everyone would descend on us the way they did when our heads were still reeling. Just when we would manage to persuade my grandmother to eat something, the doorbell would ring and she'd rush off again, her plate untouched. It unnerved me. I was hardly feeling sociable, and looking presentable was completely unattainable. Didn't they think we needed some time to even register what had happened? Weren't we allowed any space?

There were so many rules and so much to do within those 13 days. Each evening we had to do prayers for half an hour. By day 13, a few days after the funeral, there was an event you had to organise at the local temple, a sort of wake a few days after the funeral that is separate from the wake itself. It was overwhelming.

But somewhere within those few days, my irritation at it all abated. The sleepless nights and constant hosting had taken its toll and I was drained. But that's when I realised I needed these people. When the first of my grandmother's friends walked through the door, gave me a hug and forcibly sat me down for breakfast, it was more welcome than ever before. Because, in that moment and from then on, I needed the help.

Each evening, when they would all read out passages of religious text and nudge us to eat khichri that they'd brought over in Tupperware, I was grateful. They'd talk about their own experiences, how it's part of our reincarnation cycle, and fleetingly it made me feel like it was a universal experience rather than an isolating one. I watched as they held my grandmother's hand and, although they couldn't take away her pain, the words gave us all strength at a time when we couldn't muster the energy to find it ourselves.

What I learnt from this extended version of mourning was that averting your gaze from death is the Western way. You don't really know which of your friends are going to be comfortable with how you (literally) cried over two dead bodies within a few months of each other. Or if they'll understand why you want to cancel plans. And discussing it with colleagues was a definite no-no, it's business as usual.

But 13 days of mourning the way my elders did made me stronger. It's painful, awkward and startles you – but facing both deaths square in the face helped. The funerals were open casket, and I watched my cousins, not even teenagers yet, bravely holding my grandfather and uncle's hands in their coffins before they were taken away. I learnt, in time, that it felt far more complete to be with them each step of the way than walk away from the hospital and never see their faces again. It felt better to see them dressed up in their finest one last time.

My friends thought it was “full on”, and they weren't wrong. But what happened by the time those days were over was that I'd mourned. I'd mourned hard, without any complication. It doesn't take away the pain of losing a person, but it shows you a lot of things, like how it's OK to take time out to try to come to terms with it, rather than launching back into normality like it never happened. Even if keeping busy is your method, it reminded me that it's OK not to be functioning at the usual speed.

I deeply resented it all at first, but now I appreciate what our culture bestows on us, despite the discomfort. Grieving this way showed me a fearless and no-nonsense side of the community, which is an invaluable, powerful force for good and truly life-changing. And I'll always be grateful we did it the way we did.

“The sleepless nights and constant hosting had taken its toll and I was drained. But that's when I realised I needed these people”

Coming to terms with death — why do we have to die?

“There are only two days with fewer than 24 hours in each lifetime, sitting like bookmarks astride our lives; one is celebrated every year, yet it is the other that makes us see living as precious”

Dr Kathryn Mannix, *With the End in Mind: Dying, Death and Wisdom in an Age of Denial*

We aren't great at dealing with death. Deep down, we all know that the end of life is on the horizon — whether it's our own or that of someone we love. But until death is right in front of us, we've seemingly been conditioned to ignore it.

The average age that someone first loses someone close to them is 20, according to the survey *Making Peace with Death: National Attitudes to Death, Dying and Bereavement*. Its results also show that 91% of us have thought about our own mortality, some on a weekly basis, although almost 18 million people are reported to be uncomfortable about discussing death.

Why? On the face of it, dying is a scary, sad subject. The thought of no longer existing takes a certain amount of adjustment: will it be painful? Will I know what's happening? How will people cope without me? Moreover, British culture hides grief and death behind a veil of privacy, so we aren't aware of the logistical and emotional complexities — how to arrange a funeral, what happens to your body, how to apply for probate — until we have to address these issues for real, which comes at the exact moment we are grieving.

A combined lack of information and familiarity can mean we remain awkward and ill at ease when confronted with our own mortality or someone else's grief. These are universal experiences, but many bereaved people, or those facing the end of life, feel isolated because their friends simply don't know what to say.

It's up to us to make grief more of a collective process. There's a lot of power in grieving together — openly sharing stories about the dead and speaking about what grief feels like can be a huge relief for all involved. It helps to reduce the overwhelming nature of grief, the stigma surrounding it and, ultimately, the fear of our own deaths.

We can't predict what anyone's death will be like, but practitioners observe that those at the end of their lives often peacefully embrace the inevitable. Many people's deathbed reflections follow similar themes: being grateful for what they've had, the time they've spent with loved ones, and the opportunity to do what made them happy.

It's human nature to desire life, and yet knowing we die is how we fully appreciate that life. As the Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld put it: “Do not seek death. Death will find you. But seek the road which makes death a fulfilment.”



Why is your grief different?

“Grief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life [...] Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it”

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

For some, grief is wholly outward and hard to suppress. But for others, grief is internal, secretive and hidden. You might feel totally numb, wildly angry, or relatively happy and assume there’s something wrong with you. In fact, all of these reactions are normal, valid and natural.

Grief doesn’t look any specific way, because it’s a uniquely individual response. Our bodies and brains need time to adjust to the new state of our world without this person in it.

In 1969, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross defined five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – that people commonly experience when faced with dying or bereavement. More recently, David Kessler suggested a sixth stage – that of “finding meaning” as we grapple with a suitable explanation for why this loss has happened and try to stay connected to the person we’ve lost.

But grief isn’t linear, so these stages don’t appear neatly in order, and the appearance of one doesn’t negate the return of another. Grief doesn’t follow the “rules” of other emotions, either. It has no definable end point (although we often wish it did!) but it does seem to have two phases: an acute phase and an integrated one. During the former, it can be helpful to name some types of grief you might feel.

Anticipatory grief

When you’re expecting a death, it’s easy for your mind to try to prepare itself by pre-empting how the loss might affect you. This can provoke feelings of guilt for treating someone like they’ve already died, along with feelings of anxiety about what’s to come.

Complicated grief

For some, the acute grief phase lasts for years and years, or seems to deepen in intensity as time goes on. This is known as complicated grief. More than 10% of people suffering a loss after the death of a partner or sudden death of a loved one find themselves in complicated grief.

Cumulative grief

Grief overload happens when a previous loss comes into focus while you’re experiencing a current loss.

Delayed grief

Not reacting to a death at first is really common. You’re subconsciously suppressing emotions in an attempt to avoid feeling the full reality of what’s happened.

There are countless stories about grieverers being criticised for moving on “too quickly”, behaving “too normally” or crying “too much” about their loss. Some people may also question their own emotional response to a loss or fear the judgment of others. How we grieve, though, isn’t a choice! It’s a set of involuntary coping mechanisms.

So be sure not to inadvertently “grief shame” yourself. Remember: it’s OK to cry without warning, it’s OK to feel exhausted or anxious or guilty or numb. Everyone’s grief looks different. Everyone reacts in their own way. Whatever you’re feeling is completely valid.

Understanding grief

There are plenty of models for approaching and understanding grief in addition to the five stages outlined by the late Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. One of these is Dr Lois Tonkin’s concept of “growing around grief”, which suggests that while we never truly “get over” the loss of a loved one, our negative feelings will become easier to manage over time. Another is Dr Therese Rando’s action-based theory, the Six Rs, which outlines tasks that will push you through different milestones in your grieving process.



Sharing bereavement

“A loss can be life-changing, and while it sadly can’t be fixed with kind words or actions, there are still ways you can help to share the burden”

Supporting someone who’s grieving can be tough. Their behaviours may change – someone who’s usually very talkative may clam up, and someone who loves their friends dropping by unannounced might really want their privacy now. A loss can be life-changing, and while it sadly can’t be fixed with kind words or actions, there are still ways you can help to share the burden:

- Daily tasks can be a good place to start. Drop off some cooked food and offer to help with difficult phone calls or paperwork.
- Be specific with your offers of help. Saying “Is there anything I can do?” places the burden of specificity on the griever. Saying “I can drive you to X if you like” invites a simple yes or no answer – much easier to handle!
- Don’t say you’ll provide something if you’re not 100% certain you’ll be able to do it. When a person has just lost a loved one, the last thing they want is to feel abandoned again.
- Let them lead the time frame of their grief. Don’t push them into conversations or activities you think they’re ready for.
- Basically, just *be there*. Sometimes talking isn’t needed – physical companionship is enough.

Although friends and family members have the best intentions, sometimes the most relief can be found from support systems that involve people who personally understand the nature of grief. During the past decade there’s been a rise in groups, clubs and meet-ups called Death Cafes, where people can gather to discuss their thoughts and feelings – both online and in the real world. You can read more about them on pages 147-148.

Bereavement Room is a podcast hosted by Callsuma Ali, in which she explores the effects of grief from a non-white perspective.

Let’s Talk About Loss runs group meet-ups in 20 locations in the UK for people aged 18 to 35, along with online events, such as its monthly Bereavement Book Club.

Shapes of Grief is a blog and podcast hosted by Liz Gleeson, an Irish bereavement therapist who specialises in complicated grief. Episodes include bereavement from suicide and how to manage grief and anxiety due to COVID-19.

Siblings Grieve Too is an online community for those who have lost a sibling, helping people to find comfort, support and useful resources.

The Dead Parent Club podcast, aimed at grieving young adults, was launched by friends Kathryn Hooker and Sam Vidler, who bonded at university through talking about their own losses. The podcast’s intention is to normalise the grief conversation by speaking to numerous guests.

The Griefcast podcast is hosted by the comedian Cariad Lloyd, who lost her dad when she was 15 and now interviews writers, comics and actors about their experiences of grief.

The Griefcase is a monthly meet-up run by illustrator Poppy Chancellor that allows attendees to share the ways their grief has influenced their creativity.

Attitudes to grief are undoubtedly shifting, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. We know that avoidance and grief simply don’t mix. And although it can hurt like hell to face the pain of it, repressing our feelings will only make things worse in the long run. The growing online grief community has allowed people all over the world to connect through blogs, podcasts and social media hashtags, and discover that their feelings and emotions about grief are shared by many others. Finding allies, swapping stories and learning coping strategies are all hugely beneficial to shaping our long-term response to grief and truly honouring the person we’ve lost.

Social media can help you open up about death

Recent research suggests that posting about the loss of a loved one on Facebook can help with expressing and externalising feelings of grief to a greater degree than in face-to-face conversations, where individuals may be more likely to self-censor.

How do your beliefs affect the way you grieve?

If you practise a particular religion, the chances are your faith will bring you a good deal of comfort while grieving. The belief in a higher power might mean that you see death as an extension of physical life, just in a different state, or perhaps that your loved one is watching over you and eventually you'll be reunited. People with a strong spiritual or religious affinity often seem to be able to resolve their grief more rapidly – although a significant loss can also cause people to find that their belief in God and the afterlife has been shaken.

Buddhism

Since the faith focuses on rebirth, death is considered the most important event in your life. There are different types of Buddhism around the world, but three days of continuous worship usually follow a death, and then a cremation or burial. Memorial services are traditionally held on the third, seventh, 49th and 100th day after the death, the final one marking when family members recognise the person's soul has gone on to its next life.

Christianity

Grieving can include tending to a person's grave, visiting church more often in the year following the death and lighting candles in remembrance. In Catholicism especially, many choose to turn to the psalms of lament, which help to provide words for the pain of loss.

Is religion the key to a longer life?

A US study, published in 2018 in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, suggests that the religious may live an extra 5.64 years compared to atheists, based on analysing the details of more than 1,500 obituaries.

Hinduism

Ashes are often scattered in a river or taken to India. Following cremation, there are no prayers or rituals for 13 days because the soul is still connected to the body. Close family won't enter religious spaces during this time either. On the 13th day, a celebration marks the departure of the soul as it finds a new body to inhabit, and the family reintegrates into society. In the days that follow, as well as one year later, on the anniversary of the death, the family holds a Sradha, a ceremony that memorialises the dead.

Humanism

The humanist approach is to accept death as a natural part of life. Without the lingering hope of reunion, humanists focus on the here and now and confront their resulting grief with what they deem to be rational compassion.

Islam

Many Islamic communities advocate a mourning period of 40 days, but depending on circumstance and custom, it could be longer; widows mourn for four months and 10 days. After this period, mourners can begin to live normally again.

Judaism

Ritual is important for the Jewish faith: the grieving process includes ritual washing of the body and allowing the grave to be filled with earth by family and friends. After the funeral, the community cares for the family while they sit Shiva – seven days of formal mourning – providing them with meals, prayer and comfort. The anniversary of the death and the religious holiday Yom Kippur are also reserved for remembering loved ones.



Collective grief

The background of the page features a light beige color with a subtle illustration of birds. Several birds are perched on horizontal lines that represent power lines or wires, spaced across the middle section. At the bottom, there are larger, stylized silhouettes of birds in flight, their wings spread wide, set against a slightly darker beige background that suggests a horizon or a sky.

“Collective grieving is being able to connect with other people who share some of the same horror you do [...] It’s experiencing grief even if you didn’t lose a loved one. It’s experiencing grief along with, or in honour of, people who have lost a loved one”

Camille Wortman, professor of Social and Health Psychology at Stony Brook University and an expert on grief and bereavement

Grief isn’t just confined to personal losses. When a public figure dies – Princess Diana, David Bowie, Chadwick Boseman – the outpouring of collective grief is a way to share our pain. And when we experience natural disasters, terrorist attacks, wars and national tragedies, we collectively grieve the loss of our sense of safety and our trust in the world around us.

Our approach to grief has changed a lot over the past century. In the Victorian era, public mourning was pretty well established: people wore black clothes and jewellery containing the deceased’s hair. But both world wars brought too many horrific deaths to mourn. Carrying on with a stiff upper lip became a point of pride, and it’s only recently that we’ve begun to recognise the importance of being vulnerable with our grief instead of suppressing it.

It couldn’t have come at a more necessary time, either. As the world heats up and climate change affects every aspect of our reality, we’re collectively grieving the melting of glaciers, wildfire-ravaged land and the extinction of wildlife species. And within the turbulence of COVID-19, we’re seeing what happens when the entire globe has to process a singular trauma of enormous proportions. Quite aside from the death toll, the implementation of lockdowns and social distancing has meant people haven’t been able to gather together at deathbeds and funerals. It goes against every natural human impulse to not be there for each other in times of difficulty. COVID-19 is forcing us to change how we mourn.

It may feel like an overwhelming pill to swallow, but all this collective grief is actually a chance to get to grips with loss as part of the natural cycle of all things. The psychologist William Worden provides us with four tasks of mourning: to accept the reality of the loss; to work through and experience the pain and grief; to adjust to the new environment; and to find enduring connection with the deceased while moving forward with life. Perhaps COVID-19 will bring more of the world’s population to view itself as a collective “us”. Regardless, as we mourn a way of life that may never fully go “back to normal”, it’s crucial that we learn how to grieve well. Supporting each other and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable amid such uncertainty is how we prepare for whatever comes next.

“It goes against every natural human impulse to not be there for each other in times of difficulty. COVID-19 is forcing us to change how we mourn”



A grief reading list

Reading about grief can be a deeply cathartic process. When you see your own grief mirrored by authors in memoirs, essays and thoughtful reflections, it's a reminder that so many others have felt the same way you have. It also provides a vocabulary with which you can describe your own grief. Writing out your feelings can help you sort through difficult emotions, find clarity and closure, and even solidify the grief story you feel comfortable about sharing with others – and many bereaved people find themselves penning these stories for publication.

A Manual for Heartache by Cathy Rentzenbrink

Written after the death of her brother, Rentzenbrink describes how she learnt to live with loss in a beautifully honest and uplifting way.

Chase the Rainbow by Poorna Bell

A woman's deeply personal account of her husband's suicide, and how she found her way through the resulting grief.

I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes with Death by Maggie O'Farrell

An inspirational series of essays about the author's near-death experiences throughout her life and how this plays into her understanding of her own mortality.

It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand by Megan Devine

Grief is treated as the uncomfortable thing it is by Devine. With fiercely honest writing, she guides readers towards a place where they can live alongside their grief and even honour it.

Modern Loss: Candid Conversation About Grief by Rebecca Soffer and Gabrielle Birkner

A series of personal essays written by young adults about grieving, allowing them a space to express themselves with warmth, humour and intelligence. This book is particularly useful for teenage readers.

The Hot Young Widows Club: Lessons on Survival from the Front Lines of Grief by Nora McNerny

This memoir explores the author's response to losing her father, husband and unborn child within just a few weeks. As with her popular podcast, *Terrible, Thanks for Asking*, McNerny treats the topic of grief with humour, kindness and accessibility.

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion

A classic memoir of grief that follows acclaimed writer Didion's attempts to deal with the sudden loss of her husband.

When Breath Becomes Air by Paul Kalanithi

A physician at the end of his life reflects on what it's like to face mortality and consider what life is really lived for.

With the End in Mind: Dying, Death and Wisdom in an Age of Denial by Dr Kathryn Mannix

A palliative care practitioner for many years, Mannix seeks to open up the conversation surrounding death through a number of short stories about the end of life.

Put your feelings on page

While reading is a common coping strategy when it comes to grief, with 16% of grieving individuals in the US turning to books to process their feelings, research reports that writing is equally popular among the recently bereaved – proof that there's some truth to the notion that art can provide emotional catharsis.

What happens to the brain during grief?

Anyone who has experienced grief knows that it can be overwhelming. In order to help people to understand what they're going through, counsellors often conceptualise grief as unfolding across seven stages – but what if there's another way to think about it? Mental health experts are increasingly interested in the impact that losing a loved one can have on the brain, drawing parallels between neurological changes and the ways that many individuals act and feel when in mourning.



1
The prefrontal cortex
Controls decision making
Becomes underactive

2
Anterior cingulate cortex
Emotional regulator
Becomes underactive

3
The limbic system
Survival instincts
Becomes more dominant

4
The amygdala
Controls fear and sleep
Becomes overactive

People suffering from grief don't just report feelings of sadness but also of disorientation and confusion. This is proof that bereavement isn't just emotional – it affects your brain and body at a deeper level. The loss of a loved one has been compared to a brain injury, with the emotional trauma resulting in serious, possibly enduring, changes to its functionality.

Grief, and the changes to the brain that accompany it, are a protective evolutionary adaptation, allowing humans to survive when faced with this trauma. When a person is grieving, hormones are released that imitate the fight, flight or freeze response, because the body interprets the loss as an intense form of stress.

A study published in *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* claims that those in mourning experience heightened anxiety and an impaired ability to form logical thoughts.

Experts advise that, rather than fearing the way the brain changes during grief, you should embrace it, as it's a natural response. In the raw grief state, which lasts 90 days or more, a hormone is released by the pituitary gland. Named adrenocorticotrophin (ACTH), it instigates a chemical reaction, sending a signal to the adrenal glands to trigger the release of the stress hormone cortisol. During this period, the body is flooded with cortisol and the immune system may become run-down due to being in such a high state of physical alert. This is why it's common for individuals to become ill themselves upon their loved one's passing.

Bereavement can also lead to a process called neuroplasticity, where the brain rewires itself: the pathways typically relied upon take detours that shift the brain upside down to prioritise primitive functions. Due to the way your brain circuits change, the prefrontal cortex, which controls decision making, is underactive and the limbic system, which presides over survival instincts, becomes more dominant.

Other areas of the brain that are affected are the anterior cingulate cortex – the emotional regulator – which becomes underactive, and the amygdala, the determiner of how the brain responds to fear, which becomes overactive. This accounts for the sudden waves of emotion and heightened anxiety or fear that can accompany grief.

The amygdala also regulates sleep, meaning that the bereaved may find that they're sleeping too little or too much. This disruption to sleeping patterns can lead to grogginess and difficulty making decisions, commonly referred to as "brain fog".

As so much of the brain is occupied with managing emotional trauma and stress, grieving individuals find that they don't have as much cognitive flexibility as they did before the event. This means that it's difficult to be as organised or attentive as usual.

While the brain does act in specific ways when confronted with grief, each individual experiences bereavement in a different manner. The emotive response often differs depending on the intensity of the trauma and the relational patterns that have been established since childhood.

When we grieve, the parts of our brain mediating our right and left hemispheres – the areas responsible for thinking and feeling – are impaired, but these alterations aren't necessarily permanent. To overcome grief and restore neural pathways, it's important to encourage your brain to integrate thoughts and feelings. A way to do this is by connecting the loss you're experiencing with activities or specific actions. You can set your mind on the path to healing by engaging in behaviours that elicit a feel-good response.

Grief experts also believe that, in addition to restoring neural pathways, it's important to treat the effects of chronic stress (long-lasting stress that can have serious implications on an individual's health) – hence the recommendation to take time off from work or study when grieving. Treatment for chronic stress includes identifying triggers, exercising regularly, speaking with family members or friends and making sure you're getting enough sleep.

Memory box

Whether it's a family heirloom or favourite mug, everyone has special items that mean a lot. Perhaps you want your treasured possessions handed down to relatives, or maybe you have artefacts of historical significance that you would like to give to a museum or art gallery. Your memory box is a place to write down or illustrate some of the items that matter most to you, and what you want to be done with them when you're gone.



Draw or list your special objects and belongings

A large white rectangular area intended for drawing or listing special objects and belongings, with a small red dot in the top left corner.



Interview with *Flora Baker* Writer

The British author reflects on losing both parents in her twenties and the comfort she found in sharing her experience of grief with an online community of adult orphans

Flora Baker lost her mother when she was 20 years old, and her father when she was 28. When an article she wrote about her experience of being an adult orphan went viral, Baker, a travel writer at the time, realised there was potential for a book. The result is *The Adult Orphan Club: How I Learned to Grieve the Loss of My Parents*, which tackles the specific feelings of adult orphanhood through a mix of heartfelt personal essays and honest, practical advice.

Q *The Adult Orphan Club* is part memoir and part guidebook. Did you start writing the book with that format in mind?

A I wrote an article a year after my dad died about how I'd lost both my parents before I turned 30 and how I dealt with the grief. Hands down, it's been the most popular thing I've ever written. I still get comments and messages about it. So I realised how much it resonated with people, particularly how I'd structured it with headers and sections the whole way through. Then, when I was writing the book, I was quite conscious of whether I should make it about grief in general or about losing your parents. Then I thought, "Screw that, it's about both." I already knew there weren't many resources on the topic, particularly for the kind of age I was. When I lost my parents, I didn't have a family of my own, a husband or anything. I was arranging [my dad's] funeral by myself and that was really shit and hard. You don't know any of the stuff you're supposed to do.

Q What are some of the practical things you wish you'd known about before losing your parents?

A A lot of stuff. There's a lot of fear about getting things wrong, from an emotional, logistical and legal standpoint. I mean, I never want to hear the word probate again. It makes my blood run cold. I still don't know if I even did it right. You suddenly have to hire a lawyer to prove stuff. Funeral arranging can be hellish. Funeral directors can prey on you like vultures. They show you a brochure of coffins and you have to spend more money to seem caring. I had a really shit funeral director. I had a call from them the day before my dad's funeral, saying, "You know there aren't going to be any flowers in the church?" I didn't know I had to order them. When I showed up with a bag of clothes for my dad to be dressed in, they sat behind the reception desk and told me to list everything in there – to itemise it! I thought I could just hand over the bag and leave. It's the most vulnerable time and you have no knowledge of what's going on or what funerals are supposed to look like. I could rant about this all day. The difficulty is that people aren't likely to read about this stuff until they're already in it. Because it's not very nice. But it's quite important.

Q Tell us about the online community of adult orphans you're part of now.

A I'm in a WhatsApp group with about 80 people across the world who've lost both their parents. We found each other on Twitter. The group is called Young Orphans and our profile picture is Orphan Annie. I met up with a few of them for the first time about a month ago and it was incredible. I forget that it started solely from being online. Some of the messages I've received on Instagram have led to friendships – I check in on [the senders] and they check in on me. It's also really emblematic of why I wrote a book specifically about losing both my parents, because it's a very specific type of grief – in exactly the way that it's a specific type of grief if you lose someone to a crime, or lose a sibling. There are so many things that are universal about the grief experience, but there are so many things that are very specific.

Q What are some of the things that are specific to the adult orphan grief experience compared to other types of grief?

A I think the biggest one for me, which I've tried to work through quite a lot, is this feeling of being unmoored or unanchored. It's grief on grief on grief. You revisit the first parent's death when you deal with the second, and then you deal with the entire loss of everyone. I have no siblings as well, so that's a biggun. Particularly if you're younger, because you haven't set up the next stage of your life – such as kids or a partner. That makes it really tough and makes you kind of rootless and anchorless. And, in my case, you then try to grab an anchor any way you can. That loss of anchor is a big thing to deal with. The loss of everything to do with family – my parents aren't here to remind me of stuff I did as a kid. I don't have anyone else saving those memories, it's just me. I'm scared I'll lose stuff. Because I can't get that information back. That's why I tell people to record their parents talking as much as they can – for their voices but also for stories. It can feel very artificial to prompt it, but I recorded every conversation I had with my dad during his last six months.

Q Is writing an important part of the therapeutic process for you?

A When I first realised something really bad was happening to my mum, I immediately started writing stuff down. I didn't think, "Oh, I want to write this down." It was automatic – "I have to keep track, I have to record it, it's happening so quickly and I'm so scared." It's a very intense, internal thing. The same thing happened when my dad became ill – I wrote a lot then. For me, the cathartic and therapeutic essence of it comes from being able to put borders around what's happening. Grief is such a formless and shapeless thing, and writing gives me a chance to kind of put a frame around it and hold it in a bit.

Q Are there any books or writers on grief that have inspired you?

A You can't beat Joan Didion. Emily Dean's book *Everybody Died, So I Got a Dog* is great, too, because she describes grief with humour! I read that book in awe.

“Grief is such a formless and shapeless thing, and writing gives me a chance to kind of put a frame around it and hold it in a bit”

“For me the world became very noisy — the birds singing, cars going past. It was just so loud. The physical feeling inside was what really surprised me, not that I’d lost a limb, but I felt like there was a physical part of me missing”

*Sarah Abernethy-Hope,
co-founder of Billy Chip,
a charity that supports the
homeless, from an interview
as part of Lost for Words,
Royal London’s 2020
exhibition in collaboration
with RANKIN*

Interview with *Noel Conway*

Assisted dying campaigner

The activist discusses his campaign to change the law in the UK to give the terminally ill the choice to end life on their own terms

Heavily involved with trade unionism throughout his life, Noel Conway – a former lecturer and previously a local councillor in Blackburn, now living in Shropshire – has always fought passionately for what he believes in. When diagnosed with terminal motor neurone disease (MND) in 2014, he was confronted with the legal impossibility of procuring a medically assisted death in the UK – something he describes as a “complete distortion of human rights”. Joining forces with the organisation Dignity in Dying, he set out to challenge the law and, despite numerous setbacks along the way, is still applying political pressure for the right to have an assisted death.

Q Before we talk about your campaigning work, let’s rewind a little bit. What have been some of the highlights of your life so far?

A That’s one of those questions that kind of throws you. When you’re 70 years of age and someone asks you, “What are the highlights of your life?”, it [needs] really rather more than just a few minutes or moments to think about that. I got married at 20 or 21, my first wife was a similar age to me, and we met at church. After finishing university, I went into the further-education sector, where I remained for 36 years. I became a senior manager, running various courses and organising as well as teaching. That’s been a very important part of my life, as has politics. I was quite heavily involved in politics. I became a member of the Labour Party at 14 and a local borough councillor at the age of 21, which was the youngest you could be.

Q MND is a degenerative condition – how have your physical symptoms progressed in the years since your diagnosis in 2014?

A I was told when I was diagnosed that I probably had between 6 and 18 months to live, which was quite a shock. Coming to terms with that was difficult for my wife and me. [Shortly after my diagnosis] I found it difficult walking more than 100 yards, and it wasn’t long before I was having to rely on a wheelchair. From then on it was just a series of declining steps to where I am now – six years later, mind you, and still alive. I’ve now reached a stage where I’m paraplegic. I can move my head a little, I can eat, I can drink and I can talk, so in that respect I’m fairly atypical of many MND sufferers, many of whom lose their voices early on.

Q What led you to start contemplating assisted dying?

A After my diagnosis I started to think quite bleakly about doing away with myself, but not in the way that many people do, with a lot of pills. I don't know why, but I read a lot into it and came across groups like Exit [International] and I thought, "Oh, OK." Then I got to know of Dignitas [a Swiss autonomy and dignity group for assisted dying] and I thought that was much more civilised, so I joined and I've been a member ever since.

Q Under the 1961 Suicide Act, it's illegal to assist a suicide, and anyone found doing so can be jailed for up to 14 years – something you've been fighting to change. Why did you decide to campaign for assisted dying in the UK?

A When I discovered what the law was, though I already knew it in broad terms, I found this to be a complete distortion of human rights. At more or less the same time I became aware of the organisation Dignity in Dying. I liked what I read and could see that they were trying to change the law in the UK. I thought, "This has got to be the way forward." I came to the conclusion that it was very important to try to change things. They called for volunteers to disclose their story, so I sent my details off, not expecting to hear any more about it. They ended up taking it further and eventually I became the lead case in asking for a judicial review from the British Supreme Court.

Q There's been a lot of opposition to changing the law on assisted dying from disability groups who see it as potentially setting a precedent for euthanasia. How would you respond to their arguments?

A It's quite clear from some of the places that do have assisted dying, like Oregon, that it's not a slippery slope to euthanasia. Jurisdictions like the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg that have euthanasia have had it right at the beginning, they made no bones about it. Assisted dying is not euthanasia, euthanasia is not on the table for the UK. I also don't think these groups speak for the vast majority of disabled people, most of whom want a choice. When you look at the polls, you find that most of the population in the UK is in favour of some change in the law to allow assisted dying – it's around 80%. When you narrow it down to disabled groups, an even greater number support terminally ill people being given this choice. I'm disabled myself and I have been for the past six years.

Q After 18 months, your request for a judicial review was rejected by the British Supreme Court in 2018. We can imagine this was very frustrating – what impact did it have on your campaigning approach?

A I was very disillusioned at the end of that. Besides that cul-de-sac, I was always sympathetic to the position that you need to go down the parliamentary route. [Dignity in Dying] is now pursuing a parliamentary strategy and I'm actively involved in supporting the campaign. We recently did a Zoom meeting for MPs and [earlier last year] I won over my local MP, Daniel Kawczynski, who was fervently against assisted dying when I first met him. I wrote to him and we had a long correspondence until he eventually met with me and has since come out publicly on social media to say he supports me and the campaign, and will continue to support the campaign, which is at least something. We've still got quite a way to go [in the UK] – so many other countries, like New Zealand and Australia, as well as some states in the US, are well ahead of us.

“Assisted dying is not euthanasia, euthanasia is not on the table for the UK”

*Ben Brooks-Dutton, author
of It's Not Raining, Daddy,
It's Happy, from an interview
as part of Lost for Words, Royal
London's 2020 exhibition in
collaboration with RANKIN*

*“If you’re trying to do something for
someone who has lost someone they
love, there’s actually a million things
you can do. Just don’t ignore them,
because they still need to eat, drink
and laugh”*

Interview with *Eimear McBride*

Author

The acclaimed writer, whose father and brother died when they were young men, speaks about Irish funerary traditions and how they helped her come to terms with her loss

Having spent her childhood between County Sligo and County Mayo in Ireland, Eimear McBride moved to London in the 1990s. She initially trained as an actor before changing lanes to become a writer, and in her late twenties wrote her first book, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, and realised her true calling in life. First published in 2013, her debut novel explores the relationship between a young woman and her brother who has a brain tumour; it earned her the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction and the Goldsmiths Prize, and cemented her standing as one of Ireland's most exciting new writers. The book was dedicated to her brother, Donagh McBride, who died from a brain tumour when he was just 28. She has since released *The Lesser Bohemians*, which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and *Strange Hotel*, which was received with great acclaim in 2020.

Q Tell us a bit about your background.

A I grew up in the west of Ireland. My parents were both nurses – my father was a psychiatric nurse. I had three brothers. When I was 17, I moved to London for drama school and then, when I was 27, I wrote *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, which took me nine years to get published. Since then I've written two more novels. I live in London and have done for pretty much all of my adult life, apart from a couple of years back in Cork.

Q You mentioned you came to London for drama school. Before your writing career, did you aspire to be an actor?

A After my father died when I was eight, my mother sent me to drama classes because she thought it would be good for me, and it was. I enjoyed showing off very much. That was my thing when I was a teenager.

Q That must have been hard to process at that age. Did you find that your early experience of loss changed your perception of death?

A It changes everything, because suddenly the world is finite. He died at home in our house, I watched him die. It wasn't something that was sanitised and away in a hospital, I saw him suffer and, in the Irish tradition, when he died he was laid out in the house. I saw and touched the dead body. It really changed my attitude to the body and the life of the body. You really know that it comes to an end – there's no sense of that feeling of being invincible that people seem to have when they're young, that somehow death doesn't touch them. When you lose someone young you don't have that protection.

Q What are some of the Irish traditions around death and mourning?

A It was very much that if you could die at home, you would die at home. At that point, in the mid-1980s, I don't know if there was any hospice care, especially not in rural Ireland. Because my mother was a nurse, she was able to do a lot of the care herself. [My father] died in the house, and, slightly macabre, his sister prepared the body herself, rather than a funeral director. All of that was done in the house, and then the funeral guys came and brought the coffin and he was laid out in the front room for two days. Everyone in the village came to pay their respects and offer their condolences. Everyone was brought in to have a look at him and have a cup of tea and a slice of cake, and talk about him. That was completely normal.

Q How much is that still practised?

A It's less common than it used to be. One of my brothers died 20 years ago, and he was also laid out in the house, but I think that, since then, it's become less common. It still does happen, though, and when the body is about to be taken to the church, they come and close the coffin and people carry it out of the house and walk with it before putting it into the hearse, and it goes to the church and stays there overnight for mass the next day.

Q Do you think that the Irish approach to death is helpful for family and friends of the deceased?

A I think it's very beneficial for the community at large and for the family if there's a public acknowledgement of your grief. Everyone knows what's happened and it's been acknowledged – that life has been spoken about and celebrated – so I think it's a really important thing.

Certainly, when I came [to England], I found it very odd how people die and then the relative disappears for a while and then comes back and no one really says anything about it. I do think that acknowledgement of the passing is a really important thing. After my brother died, I came back to England, as I had spent time nursing him in Ireland, and the number of people who never mentioned it at all was very, very odd.

Q Your first book tells the story of a pair of siblings where the brother has a brain tumour. Was that intentionally biographical and did the process of writing about it help you come to terms with your own loss?

A When I started to write the book, I was like, “I’ll definitely not write about a girl losing her brother as that would be terrible and sentimental,” and then of course found myself writing exactly that. While it isn’t a memoir and it’s not my brother’s story, and that girl isn’t me, it’s a memorial, in a way, to that experience of having loved him and having gone through the loss of him, so that is truthful. I’m a bit anti the whole art and catharsis [thing]. I think it can be that for other people, but it certainly didn’t feel like that for me.

Q Did you adopt any coping mechanisms for your loss?

A It was odd because I came back to London and I didn’t have a job, so I was working as a temp. My first temp job was writing thank you cards to people [whose] family members had died from cancer and they had given donations rather than flowers, so that was very bizarre, but I was just so poor. I really needed that £6 an hour. My partner was working away and wasn’t there, so I was alone a lot that first year. It was very hard, but in some ways useful, because it forced me through, there was no way around what was happening. I felt like I owed it to [my brother] to suffer the loss and go through it. He was 28 and he was dead, and the least I could do was mourn him, to go through that experience.

Q You’ve experienced a lot of loss in your life. Can you ever be fully prepared for it?

A I don’t think so. Even when my brother died, I knew that he was dying so it wasn’t a shock in the way that my father’s death had been. I was 21, so I really knew what was happening, but when it happened, it still shattered me. It’s really hard when it’s someone who is young who hasn’t really had a life, or a chance, someone who leaves nothing behind. The thing I found very hard was that there were

no children, he didn’t have a house, there was no job that he left behind where he had made something. It was like he had just disappeared, and I think that is a harder type of grief than when someone old dies.

Q It is sometimes easier when someone has a legacy.

A I think that’s why people are so obsessed with launching charities in people’s names, because they want to create something lasting to memorialise that person’s life. I dedicated *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* to my brother and I felt very strongly that it had to be his full name. It was pre-internet, so that name didn’t exist anywhere except on his gravestone.

Q How do you think that we can break the taboos surrounding death and loss?

A In a way I think that we have to start a step further back and acknowledge the importance of life and the body [we’re in]. I think the unhelpful thing about the Irish experience is the legacy of Catholicism, which is always so geared to, “Oh, we will meet again in the afterlife, everything’s going to be great next time around.” And I think it’s really important to acknowledge that, OK, maybe there is an afterlife, but we definitely know there is this life and we don’t know anyone who has gone to the afterlife and come back. People are so set outside their own bodies but that doesn’t help with the culture that we live in, which is obsessed with making women uncomfortable with their bodies and making them have impossible expectations. People don’t feel like the life in their body is something to enjoy and celebrate unless they’re a size 2. I think that separation between the body and the soul is really sad.

Q Lastly, do you think about your own death?

A All the time! Plus, I’m a hypochondriac so I really think about it a lot. I’m in my mid-forties now and it’s on my mind more now that I’m probably at the halfway point, if I’m lucky. My husband and I have discussed it and we both know what the general plan is if one goes before the other, and obviously when you have a child you have to make plans. I don’t find those practical things particularly difficult. I think that the [COVID-19 pandemic] has been quite interesting because people are being confronted with [mortality] a lot more than they ever have. I think the anti-mask brigade think they exist in some kind of fantasy world where death doesn’t really happen, which is the problem with postmodernism generally – we think we can just argue our way out of anything, apparently. But you can’t argue yourself out of death, and that’s that!

“I felt like I owed it to [my brother] to suffer the loss and go through it. He was 28 and he was dead, and the least I could do was mourn him, to go through that experience”

Further resources

The grief that follows the loss of a loved one can often feel like a deeply personal and lonely journey, but sharing bereavement can lighten the load. Here is a list of information, guidance and support helplines that can help you to cope with bereavement

General information and guidance

Bereavement and counselling support in Ireland

Information on dealing with the death of a loved one can be found on Ireland's government advice portal. citizensinformation.ie/en/death/bereavement_counselling_and_support/bereavement_counselling_and_support_services.html

Grief after bereavement

This NHS guide to grief talks through the common symptoms and offers advice on grief management, as well as contacts for professional support. nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/coping-with-bereavement

Charities and support services

Bereavement Advice Centre

Offers practical information, advice and signposting on the many issues that people face after the death of a loved one. Helpline (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm; closed on bank holidays): 0800 634 9494. bereavementadvice.org

Care for the Family

A charity providing help for those living with loss to deal with their grief and rebuild their lives. careforthefamily.org.uk/family-life/bereavement-support

Cruse Bereavement Care

The UK's leading bereavement charity, which offers a support helpline and website with advice on coping with grief. Helpline (Mon and Fri, 9.30am-5pm; Tue-Thu, 9.30am-8pm; weekends, 10am-2pm): 0808 808 1677. cruse.org.uk

GriefChat

A free online messaging service for bereaved people to share their story with a qualified bereavement counsellor. griefchat.co.uk

Irish Hospice Foundation

A charity that provides information and support for those dealing with the death of a loved one in Ireland. Offers a free bereavement support line. Helpline (Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm): 1800 807077. hospicefoundation.ie/bereavement-2-2

Marie Curie

Care, guidance and support for people living with and affected by terminal illnesses is provided by the charity. It provides a free helpline and online chat service to connect with others dealing with loss. Helpline (Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm; Sat, 10-4pm): 0800 090 2309. mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/bereaved-family-friends
Free online chat service: community.mariecurie.org.uk

National Grief Awareness Week

Organised by The Good Grief Trust, this is an annual campaign in the UK to raise awareness about grief and the support available. nationalgriefawarenessweek.org

Samaritans

A 24-hour helpline that offers support for anyone going through a difficult time. Helpline: 116123. samaritans.org

The Good Grief Trust

A charity offering advice and support for all those affected by grief in the UK. thegoodgrieftrust.org

Widowed & Young (WAY)

A national charity that provides bereavement support for people who are aged 50 or under when they lose their partner. widowedandyoung.org.uk

Grief support for children

A list of organisations offering support for children and young people in the UK and Ireland who are dealing with the loss of a loved one.

Child Bereavement Network

A hub for those working with bereaved children, young people and their families across the UK to improve bereavement care for children.

childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK

Support for children and young people up to the age of 25, and their families, who are facing bereavement, as well as support for parents dealing with the loss of a child.

Helpline: 0800 028 8840.

childbereavementuk.org

Children's Grief Awareness Week

Founded by the charity Grief Encounter, this is an annual campaign that raises awareness of bereaved children and young people in the UK and the help that's available.

childrengriefawarenessweek.com

Grief Encounter

A charity providing support for bereaved children and young people.

Helpline (Mon-Fri, 9am-9pm): 0808 802 0111.

griefencounter.org.uk

Hope Again

Cruse Bereavement Care's website that helps young people cope with living after loss.

hopeagain.org.uk

The Grief Network

A community by and for young people (those in their teens, twenties and thirties) affected by the loss of a loved one. It runs meet-ups in London where bereaved young people connect and share their stories of loss.

thegrief.network

The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network

A member organisation for those working with bereaved children and young people in Ireland.

childhoodbereavement.ie

Winston's Wish

A charity supporting children and young people after the death of a parent or sibling.

Helpline (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm): 0808 802 0021.

winstonswish.org

YoungMinds Crisis Messenger

A free, 24/7 text support line for young people across the UK experiencing a mental health crisis.

Text YM to 85258 to access the service.

Support for dealing with traumatic loss

A list of resources providing specific information, guidance and support for those who have lost a loved one through death from a traumatic situation, suicide, drug or alcohol use or accident.

Assist Trauma Care

A charity offering assistance, support and self-help for those dealing with traumatic loss such as death by homicide, or who have survived trauma.

assisttraumacare.org.uk/our-service/traumatic-bereavement

Bereaved through Alcohol and Drugs

A source of information and support for anyone who has lost a loved one as a result of drug or alcohol use.

beadproject.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care, traumatic loss

Information for people who have lost someone they care about in a disaster or traumatic situation.

cruse.org.uk/get-help/traumatic-bereavement/traumatic-loss

Facing the Future

Developed by the Samaritans and Cruse Bereavement Care, this is a support group for people bereaved by suicide.

facingthefuturegroups.org

Finding Your Way

Published by Ireland's PARC Road Safety Group, this is a guide for families in Ireland dealing with the loss or serious injury of a loved one through a road traffic collision.

parcroadsafety.ie/uploads/2/8/8/8/28885317/2019_edition.pdf

Help Is at Hand

An NHS guide to support people dealing with the death of a loved one by suicide.

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Suicide/Documents/Help_is_at_Hand.pdf

Support After Murder & Manslaughter

A UK charity supporting families bereaved by murder and manslaughter.

Helpline: 0121 472 2912.

samm.org.uk

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide

Support for people over the age of 18 in the UK who have lost someone to suicide.

Helpline (Mon-Fri, 9am-9pm): 0300 111 5065.

uksobs.org

On death and loss

RANKIN

“The fact is, like birth we all have to die. The taboo around it is one of our own making and, therefore, one that we can break down ourselves”

How to Die Well is a pretty crazy title for a book but it's one I think the world needs. My journey to co-creating it started 15 years ago when my mum and dad passed away. Obviously, it was a shock.

For many of us, our parents are our safety nets and our shelter in the day-to-day. Without them, you no longer have that place to go to or the protection for that part of you that will always be a child. I just wasn't ready. I wasn't ready for the grief, I wasn't ready for the loss, and I wasn't ready to deal with my life without them. On top of that, I didn't really say goodbye properly. In every way, I felt completely unprepared.

This loss has stayed with me all of that time and it still creeps up on me at the most bizarre times: passing by a reflection I think is my dad and realising it's me or remembering a piece of advice my mum gave me in an interview. Their presence and the grief just doesn't go away and for me that is OK!

My parents dying and my total lack of understanding or knowledge about the subject made me want to help other people in the same situation and the idea of a self-help book came about. Let's be honest, most people are very scared of discussing death – I know I was. I think I was probably more scared of death than anyone, I couldn't imagine confronting my own mortality in any way and ultimately facing it left me paralysed with fear.

But the truth is, talking about the most difficult things in life makes living them so much easier. Although I don't think I'll ever not be scared of death, I've come to a point where I can live with it and certainly talk about it. The paralysis I once felt has gone and, in fact, I think I almost enjoy talking about it now. The more I discuss it, the more diluted the fear becomes.

The fact is, like birth we all have to die. The taboo around it is one of our own making and, therefore, one that we can break down ourselves. That is especially true when we are discussing death and all of the complicating things that surround it. Hopefully, this book goes some way to making this subject an easier one to discuss and understand.

Royal London was set up to work against funeral poverty and, for over 150 years, they've continued to support people in extreme, life-changing situations. So, when we were approached by them, I was confident we would be able to create a project that could help people in the purest form – and that's what we've tried to do.

In these times of COVID-19, death is something that's become reduced to numbers and data. It seems we're now even further away from the humanity in death that we need. Although we started this project before the pandemic, there is no doubt that it has even more resonance now.

Even today, 15 years on, curating this book has been incredibly powerful and very helpful for me. I hope that people use it to find positivity in this difficult subject matter and, after reading, are able to perhaps see death in a slightly warmer light.

Glossary

Adrenocorticotrophin (page 179)

The hormone that's released by the pituitary gland during the body's response to grief. It triggers a chemical reaction that releases the stress hormone cortisol.

All Souls' Day (page 73)

Practised predominantly by the Catholic church, All Souls' Day, marked annually on 2 November, commemorates the dead. On this day, people visit the graves of departed family members and pray for them, believing they will be released from purgatory into heaven.

Anticipatory grief (page 165)

A type of grief that starts before the death of a loved one after a terminal diagnosis has been given.

Capital acquisitions tax (page 31)

A form of tax relating to gifts and inheritance, which are tax-free up to a certain threshold. The level of tax depends on the relationship between the individuals giving and receiving the benefit.

Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (page 64)

Often referred to as CPR, cardiopulmonary resuscitation is an emergency procedure whereby an individual administers chest compressions to someone who is in cardiac arrest in order to maintain their brain function by restoring blood circulation and breathing. Chest compressions can be given rhythmically to the tune of "Stayin' Alive" by the Bee Gees.

Celebrant (pages 101, 113)

A person who leads an official, and often secular, ceremony, such as a funeral or wedding.

Complicated grief (pages 165, 169)

Also called persistent complex bereavement disorder, complicated grief is a severe and often debilitating emotional response to a loss that doesn't subside with time.

Cumulative grief (page 165)

A build-up of grief that can happen when multiple losses are suffered by a person either at the same time or within a short time frame; or a response to a death that triggers feelings about previous losses that perhaps weren't dealt with at the time.

Death Cafe (pages 146, 147, 148, 169)

Founded by Jon Underwood, a Death Cafe is a volunteer-run support group through which people come together to talk openly about death over cake and tea.

Delayed grief (page 165)

Often described as a sudden and overwhelming sadness, delayed grief may occur a few weeks, months or even years after the death of a loved one.

Digital legacy (pages 124, 129, 151)

The digital information about a person that's left behind online after their death, including social media profiles, videos, photos, gaming profiles and any personal websites.

Dirge (page 73)

A slow song of mourning or lament for the dead, often performed at funerals.

Embalming (pages 69, 78, 142)

A process where a chemical solution is introduced inside the body of someone who has recently died in order to slow down the decomposition process and preserve the body, giving the deceased a more restful appearance.

Epitaph (page 132)

Rooted in the Greek word *epitaphios* – *epi* meaning "at" or "over", and *taphos* meaning "tomb" – an epitaph is a short text or poem in memory of somebody who has died, often inscribed on their gravestone.

Eulogy (pages 84, 113)

A eulogy is either a written passage or speech that pays homage to a person who has recently died. While a eulogy is commonly read at a funeral, it can also appear in news publications.

Executor (pages 17, 19, 20, 27, 28, 31, 151)

A named individual whose duty is to carry out the instructions written in a will.

Hospice movement (pages 32, 136, 137)

A term that applies to the evolution of end-of-life and palliative care services in the UK over the past 50 years. The modern hospice movement emerged in the late 1960s with the establishment of St Christopher's Hospice in London by Dame Cicely Saunders.

Intestate (page 28)

A term applied to those who die without making a will.

Letter of wishes (pages 17, 19)

A document that normally accompanies a will. While it's not legally binding, it provides advice on how the deceased would like their estate to be dealt with.

Living will (pages 19, 55, 114)

Also known as an advance decision, this legal document is a written statement of what medical care a person would like to receive if they're unable to express their wishes because of a terminal illness or being unconscious for an extended period.

Mevlit (page 73)

A Turkish mourning ceremony held after somebody's death and burial. Passages from the Qur'an are usually recited, and family and friends gather in a circle and share sweets and drinks while remembering their loved one.

Neuroplasticity (page 179)

A process that can be triggered by bereavement whereby the brain rewires itself, creating new pathways that prioritise primitive functions – survival instincts over decision-making.

Palliative care (pages 32, 108, 134, 135, 136, 137, 151, 152, 177, 207)

A form of care for the terminally ill that's intended to make the final years, weeks or months of life as comfortable and dignified as possible, with a focus on pain management and psychological or spiritual support.

Power of attorney (pages 19, 55, 56)

A legal document granting a trusted friend or family member the power to make decisions on your behalf, should you become incapacitated.

Probate (pages 9, 31, 51, 54, 57, 162, 185)

The financial and legal process of sorting out someone's estate after they pass away, normally settling any debts and distributing assets in accordance with the deceased's will.

Psalms of lament (page 170)

A collection of poems and hymns, found in the holy books of both Christianity and Judaism, that express sorrow in response to human struggle. They include community laments, which deal with situations of collective crisis, and individual laments, which tackle isolated problems.

Public health funeral (pages 67, 87, 141, 142)

A no-frills funeral that's organised by a person's local council if they die in poverty with no next of kin, or if the family of the individual are unable or unwilling to pay for a funeral.

Requiem Mass (page 70)

A type of Catholic funeral that involves blessing the coffin with holy water. There are recitals from the Bible by the family and priest, as well as the offering of Holy Communion.

Residence nil rate band (page 31)

Intended to make it easier to pass on the family home to children or grandchildren, the residence nil rate band applies to those whose personal estate exceeds the inheritance tax threshold. In this scenario, if you are giving your home to your descendants, you may gain an additional threshold before inheritance tax is due.

Shroud (pages 81, 83)

Also called a burial sheet, a shroud is a piece of fabric that's used to cover the body before burial.

Sraddha (page 170)

A Hindu ceremony that remembers and honours the dead. Performed by the male descendant of the deceased in the days following their death and on the death anniversary, the Sraddha rites are thought to protect the spirits of the dead and their ancestors in their journey to the higher realms. Sraddha is also performed collectively in the autumn during Pitru Paksha, the fortnight of the ancestors.

**How to Die Well: A Practical Guide to Death,
Dying and Loss, spearheaded by Royal London
and published by RANKIN**

First published in the UK in 2021
Rankin Publishing Ltd
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Thanks to

The Abernethy-Hope family, Ahmed Alsisi, Malin
Andersson, Jeff Brazier, Ben Brooks-Dutton, Ellie
Brown, Noel Conway, Laura Cooper, Divina De Campo,
Samantha Dixon, Amy Downes, Maks Fus-Mickiewicz,
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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-9955741-7-5

Spearheaded by Royal London and published by RANKIN, *How to Die Well* is a practical guide to death, dying and loss. Leaving taboo at the door, it has been written with experts in the field alongside cultural figures to start a conversation that empowers us in life and beyond.

In easily digestible terms, with moments of humour, *How to Die Well* provides a comprehensive guide to emotional, logistical and financial issues around death such as end-of-life planning, arranging a funeral, saying goodbye to loved ones, settling estates and processing grief.

Over 208 pages, *How to Die Well* features essays by leading journalists and writers on a range of subjects, alongside more than 10 interviews with experts in the field of death, as well as notable figures in wider culture. The book also includes 27 original illustrations by renowned illustrator Andrea Ucini.

The aim? To lift the veil, to get us talking, to help prepare individuals at all points of life and, eventually, to empower. While dying may be the end of life as we know it, the conversation around death is just beginning.